Speed reading

In a modern world where time is money, how have our reading habits been affected? Are we reading more quickly or do we just expect the things we read to be a great deal condensed into short, manageable chunks? The answer perhaps lies in the type of text you’re reading.

When we’re reading online, we skip rapidly from site to site, from screen to screen in search of what we want. Does this mean that as readers we now have far less patience than we used to? Not necessarily. Much of this activity is actually skimming or scanning to check whether something is useful or interesting and whether we want to read on. In many ways, we spend no less time on each piece of online text than we would traditionally have done clicking through a print newspaper or magazine. In either case, it’s not until a headline captures our eye that we slow down and take a longer bit to properly read the text.

For those writing for an online environment, this means finding more creative ways of grabbing the reader’s attention before they click through to the next link. Including key information up front makes it more likely that the time-poor website visitors will realize right away that they’re in the right place. Making key information easier to locate by using bullet points and simple, descriptive headings will also help keep your audience on your page the longer bit as they scroll down and spot more useful stuff coming up.

But what about when we’re reading literature, do the same rules apply? The average reader works their way through a piece of prose at no more than nearly more than about 250–300 words per minute, which is roughly a page of text. If you try to read through a novel significantly more quickly, then you start to lose a lot of what makes literature such a pleasure. When we read for pleasure, we are almost less focused on picking out useful information or key words. Instead, the language itself and the way the writer puts words together is every bit as important as the information conveyed. The longer you spend reading a passage, the more vivid a picture you create in your mind.

Sometimes an escape from the fast-moving internet age is just what we need, so maybe it’s time to slow down and lose yourself in a good book.

Vocabulary time and speed

4 Complete the comments with phrases from the box. Make any other necessary changes.

behind the times short and sharp the last minute time and again time drags time flies time management up to speed with hindsight

I much prefer it when the shop’s busy. At the weekend, it’s non-stop and it’s on the quieter days, when there’s not much to do that and you’re constantly clock-watching and waiting for the end of the day.

When I took over as head of the HR department, they were a bit . I’ve worked hard to introduce new procedures and get everyone with the latest ideas.

Grace needs to improve her skills, then everything becomes a rush.

I think my writing style has improved. I realize my early blog posts were rather long and rambling. Now I try to keep my ideas so that readers don’t lose interest.

5 Rewrite the sentences, replacing the words in italics with phrases from exercise 4.

1 It was only when I moved to the city that I realized how my small hometown was.

2 It’s easy to see, , why the show was so successful.

3 , we hear excuses about why the scheme has been delayed.

4 Keep your message ; your audience won’t remember complicated details.

5 Due to technical issues, the show had to be cancelled just before it was due to start.

6 This course will make sure that all staff are with the latest safety requirements.

I can ...

make comparisons.

talk about time and speed.

Very well Quite well More practice

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