

# Is ‘Speed Reading’ For Real?

When I was a boy, “speed reading” was all the rage among the adults I knew—the ones who read books, that is.

I envied them. Learning to read had been hard enough, but I couldn’t seem to read fast enough to allow time for other things I also wanted to do.

If, as I now realize, the books the grownups read were mostly trashy genre fiction, so what? Using the speed-reading techniques then in vogue—mostly from [the Evelyn Wood “Reading Dynamics” course, still with us](#)—one could get through a lot and pronounce oneself a “voracious reader.” A few people even read encyclopedias that way.

And that was in the days before the Internet, when reading an encyclopedia meant handling heavy, costly volumes. But now that many people do *most* of their reading online—including encyclopedias, when there’s research to be done—it seems they rarely have the time or even the patience to read much of anything for more than five minutes. Attention spans have grown shorter and shorter throughout my lifetime. So why not learn to speed-read?

Maybe there’s a good reason why not. Writer, veteran speed-reader, and former [First Things](#) editor Joseph Bottum [argues](#) in a recent article that you can’t speed-read much of anything that’s actually *worth* reading:

*“...maybe that’s the best way to think of the skimming technique that speed-reading courses offer: It’s a great way to get through text—if all you want to do is get through text. A great way to read words if, you know, the words don’t actually matter.”*

That sounds like the way to read texts that you read only

because you think you must, while knowing you aren't going to be tested on your knowledge of their contents: reports, employee manuals, terms-of-service agreements—anything you need to be able to say you've read but don't really care about. That's why Bottum also writes:

*“Still, these days, I find myself surprisingly grateful to Evelyn Wood. Her Reading Dynamics course ruined a few years of reading, but eventually I learned to have different speeds, like the different gears of a car, as I read. There's a low gear for poetry, a medium gear for serious prose, and a high gear for running through most genre fiction. Plus, of course, the highest gear, still maybe at 1,200 words a minute, for most committee reports, blog posts, and New York Times stories: anything where the way things are phrased isn't particularly significant.”*

The upshot: Speed reading is worth it only when what you're reading isn't very significant or worth savoring. Since there seems to be an irreducible minimum of that sort of reading in contemporary life, it wouldn't hurt to learn the old speed-reading techniques. But passing on that opportunity is no obstacle to knowledge or happiness.

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