

## **The History of Speed Reading**

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People have been concerned with systematically increasing reading speeds since 1925. This is when the very first formal Speed Reading course was conducted at Syracuse University in the United States. But at many times in writing history, literate people have considered how to speed up the reading process. For example, in the mid-1600s, a man named Antonio di Marco Magliabechi was reportedly able to read and comprehend and memorize entire volumes at a rapid rate. But while 1925 appears to be the first formal presentation of a Speed Reading course, much research in the area was being conducted before that date.

It was a French ophthalmologist, Emile Javal, who unknowingly laid the foundations of Speed Reading with his eye-movement experiments in 1878. Javal discovered that the eyes move in a series of jumps (saccades) and pauses (fixations), stopping on average three or four times, while reading a line of text. It is only during these fixations, when the eyes are steady, that word recognition can occur. Prior to Javal's work, it had been believed that the eyes would stop on each letter, or at least each word, while reading.

His discovery was foundational because it demonstrated that our field of focus (number of characters that the eyes can recognize per glance) is wider than previously imagined. If our eyes can fixate on a number of words at a time 'naturally', then perhaps we are capable of reading faster than commonly believed. It did not take people long to challenge the knowledge of the day and ask how reading rates could be improved upon. As early as 1894, articles were being published in magazines, such as *The Educational Review*, about the advantages and methods of Speed Reading.

Coupled with the increased interest and desire to improve reading speeds was the mass public education of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time, literacy rates were rapidly increasing in the United States, which in turn prompted more people to read - for business, for learning and for pleasure. These increases not only generated a great demand for printed materials, but also prompted research interest in the area of text legibility.

Legibility, for conventional print, denotes how physical characteristics of written text affect factors such as visual fatigue, reading speed and comprehension. While publishers were interested in the quality and appearance aspects of printed materials, reading researchers focused on the relationship between physical characteristics of text and its effect on the outcome (visual fatigue, speed and comprehension). The concept of Speed Reading at that time focused very little on visual or perceptual elements, but focused more on sheer effort on the reader's part in order to improve.

Further advancements in Speed Reading were made by an unlikely group, the United States Air Force. Their discoveries represent the first large-scale usage and acceptance of Speed Reading as a phenomenon, and stemmed from the life-and-death experiences of their pilots. Tacticians noticed that some pilots had difficulty identifying aircraft from long distances. The goal of the tacticians and the United States Air Force was to improve the visual acuity of their pilots.

The psychologists and educational specialists working on the visual acuity question devised what was later to become the icon of early Speed Reading courses, the tachistoscope. The tachistoscope is a machine designed to flash images at varying rates on a screen. The experiment started with large pictures of aircraft being displayed for participants. The images were gradually reduced in size and the flashing-rate was increased. They found that, with training, an average person could identify minute images of different planes when flashed on the screen for only one-five-hundredth of a second.

The results had obvious implications for reading, and thus began the research into the area of reading improvement, using the tachistoscope. Using the same methodology as in the aircraft example, the Air Force soon discovered that they could flash four words simultaneously on the screen at rates of one five-hundredth of a second, with full recognition by the reader.

This training demonstrated clearly that, with some work, reading speeds could be increased. Not only could they be increased but the improvements were made by improving visual processing. Therefore, the next step was to train eye-movements by means of a variety of pacing techniques in an attempt to improve reading.

The reading courses that followed used the tachistoscope to increase reading speeds, and discovered that readers were able to increase their speeds from 200 to 400 words per minute using the machine. The drawback to the tachistoscope was that post-course timings showed that, without the machine, speed increases rapidly diminished.

Following the tachistoscope discoveries, Harvard University Business School produced the first film-aided course, designed to widen the reader's field of focus in order to increase reading speed. Again, the focus was on visual processing as a means of improvement. Using machines to increase people's reading speeds was the trend of the 1940s. While it had been clearly established that reading speed increases of 100% were possible and had been attained, lasting results had yet to be demonstrated.

It was not until the late 1950s that a portable, reliable and 'handy' device would be discovered as a tool to promote reading speed increases. The researcher this time was a mild-mannered school-teacher with a passion for underachievers and reading, named Evelyn Wood. Not only did she revolutionize the area of Speed Reading, but she committed her life to the advancement of reading and learning development.

Her revolutionary discovery came about somewhat by accident. She had been committed to understanding why some people were natural speed readers, and was trying to force herself to read very quickly. While brushing off the pages of the book she had thrown down in despair, she discovered, quite accidentally, that the sweeping motion of her hand across the page caught the attention of her eyes, and helped them move more smoothly across the page. That was the day she discovered the hand as a pacer, and called it the Wood Method.

Not only did Mrs. Wood use her hand-pacing method, but she combined it with all of the other knowledge she had discovered from her research about reading and learning, and she introduced a revolutionary new method of learning, called Reading Dynamics in 1958.

It made its debut in 'Speech 21' at the University of Utah. It was so dramatically effective that students and faculty anxiously stood in line for hours waiting for an open desk.

Mrs. Wood introduced Reading Dynamics to the public in 1959, having piloted the program at the University of Utah for a year. She moved to Washington DC and opened the first Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics Institute. Soon, her Institutes were all over the world. Evelyn Wood's name became synonymous with Speed Reading. She sold the business in 1967, but continued to teach. Mrs. Wood died in 1995 at the age of 86.

In viewing the various trends of the history of speed reading, it stands out quite clearly that one method used consistently throughout is the training of the eyes to move more effectively. Whether it is a tachistoscope, a film-aided approach, or the hand as a natural pacer, this element remains today to help increase a reader's speed.

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by Abby Marks-Beale*