

Appendix I: This is Your Brain on Reading

Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.
~ Groucho Marx

You've probably noticed that the SAT is 'reading heavy'. Even the math sections require us to read – much, much more than most of us would like. So, if reading in general is a burden for you, you could be going into this test with a 200-point handicap (or more).

In order to take a high-stakes test like the SAT well, we have to be confident and skillful in any manner of reading: quick or slow, deep or cursory. This goes beyond just knowing that the reading requirement doesn't worry you too much. It's about being able to attack every section of this test with every bit of our attention – instead of squandering it reading with more effort than we need.

Reading well in this way is a matter of training ourselves to a particular consistency of focus. It's an ability to move your attention quickly down and across pages, to track the flow and structure of ideas without too much distraction; to read what you need, disregard what you don't and feel confident with it all. Reading well, in this regard, is an ideal practice for watching the mind and using the mind well.

To draw an analogy from sports (and doing general yard-work!), this chapter is about knowing when to let the mind "lift with its legs" – because when most of us read, we do much more work than we have to. When you learn to do *less* work when you read, you'll read that much more effectively – and be able to pay that much more attention to actually solving the problems on a test like the SAT. Reading will become your ally, a tool you can use however you best need.

10 minutes a day, every day or so for two to three weeks, is all that you need to transform your reading for the test, for the rest of high school, for college and for life.

Practice the exercises in this chapter, as instructed, and soon you'll be reading at least twice as fast as you read now, with better comprehension in everything. You'll be able to read dense material more easily and easier material effortlessly, and everything more enjoyably. If you now read slowly or struggle with your reading in general, these 10 minutes a day for the next few weeks will, without exaggeration, change your life.

And you'll be able to get through the rest of this book without working too hard.

In this chapter:

- Why "speed reading" approaches cost you comprehension
- How to read more **fluently** and **effectively** by changing where you put your **attention** when you read
- Exercises for **re-training the eyes** and attention to **fluency**

This section has been influenced to some degree by a conversation I had with David Butler, author of *Reading With the Right Brain*. He called me out of the blue some months ago, having heard about my program from a student of his in California. It turned out that David and I were looking at reading from a similar perspective. More on his work a little later in this chapter.

PART I: Reading on the Right Side of the Brain

Reading is, at heart, our ability to take in information and understand patterns, whether in language, or math, or music, or in any of an infinite number of human pursuits. If we read well, we can understand where we are on a trip (*reading* a map), or how we fit into a situation (*reading* a room) or see a clear path to the hole (*reading* the green).

Of course, a lot of people mark the time they learned to read from when they could sound out words – but that skill is, more properly, *decoding*. Decoding words is what we do when we are first introduced to an alphabet and discover how letters form patterns and words. Reading is what we do when we are constructing meaning.

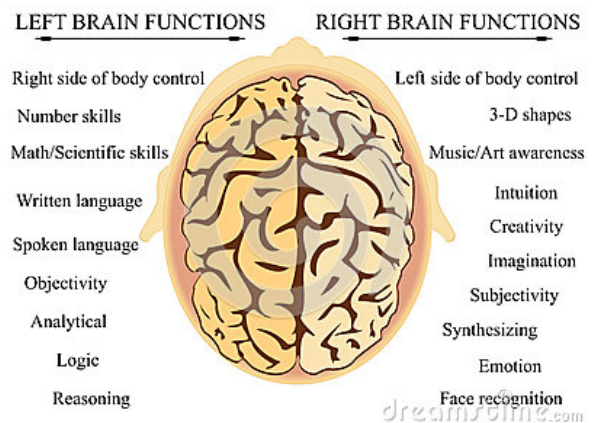
Reading is what we do when we are constructing meaning.

Or, to bring this more into the realm of the brain and mind, decoding is what we do with the *left* side of the brain; following ideas is what we do with the *right*.

Neurologically speaking, it's not all so cut and dried, of course. There is a lot of debate and research that goes into something upon which a plurality of brain scientists can agree. But the significant point for us in this discussion about reading is that the left (or usually *dominant*) side of the brain traffics in words and details; the right side, pictures, ideas, feelings, context.

Or, to use a computer-processing analogy, we might think of the left side of the brain as a serial processor: it handles one thing at a time, and moves on to the next thing to handle. It can do this blindingly fast, one thing at a time – and was the star of the show when we were first learning how to read.

But when it comes time to seeing how things work together, how they 'fit' together, it's the parallel processing of the right hemisphere that brings patterns into view. While the left hemisphere tends to do a lot of the heavy lifting in detail work, the right hemisphere brings us the light of understanding. The right side of the brain gives us the experience of **fluency**; it gives us *wordless comprehension* at the heart of effective reading.



"I took a speed-reading course and read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. It involves Russia."
-- Woody Allen

That's not to say that you can't learn to read faster and perhaps better by staying in the left hemisphere's lane on your neural highway, but that nearly every "speed-reading" tactic is bounded by the same speed limit. At some point (around 300 words a minute), our ability to focus and process from one word to the next breaks down.

Trying to move our eyes more quickly, we inevitably trip our way through paragraphs and **skip words**. Maybe we've tried using our **finger to pace our reading**, like we've seen people do on TV when they speed-read. We keep our attention moving, but we end up missing so much that it's largely a waste of effort – even if we have our eyes open for **'important' or 'key' words**.

None of these 'techniques' do too much good, because they're rooted in the same basic difficulty: we're just trying to decode faster!

The real trick – and the evolution in reading – is making the shift to fluency. To the **RIGHT** side of the brain.

Transforming your reading is about a radical (but natural) shift in focus: from **words to ideas**, from **the left side of the brain to the right**. The shift to **FLUENCY**.

Reading Fluently: Shifting the Spotlight of Attention

Ironically enough, with enough experience to bring *fluency*, the ‘wordless’ right side of the brain begins to run the show in language. When we begin to see patterns, understand context and build comprehension – when we become *fluent* – we’re naturally starting to approach things from the right side of our brains.

Fluency, in this sense as in most, is no more or less than being able to follow and generate a flow of ideas, and let the words of the language be at its service.

So, when you speak to someone, you don’t think (generally) about the words you’ll utter, one at a time. Instead, fluent in the language, you say what you mean and the words come to help out and help you to express – with flow*. Once in a while we’re stuck for a word and stutter a bit, but fluency means that we can put our attention on the level of *ideas*. When you listen to someone speak, or watch a movie, it’s the same principle.

Learning to read more effectively is
learning to access our **natural fluency** in the language.

In general, this fluency is a natural development for the mind to make in reading, just like it’s done with every other aspect of the language. But for most of us, the left-brained focus on words is a powerful habit, particularly if we were taught the skill before we were emotionally or cognitively ready. Because our neurological ‘muscles’ were literally trained to the movement of decoding word by word – and never altered – we stuck with it.

That’s not to say that all word by word reading is bad. Poetry is best read word by word. As is a letter from a loved one, or a novel that you’d like to savor. When the sound of the language is front and center, when the best way to pay attention to our material IS word by word, then this approach is appropriate.

But for most reading material (including novels, magazines, *this book*, et al), and for situations like high-stakes tests and school and work, we need to pay our attention to decoding words when reading as much as we need to put our attention on our feet when walking. That is, we don’t (or we really would have a great deal of difficulty keeping our attention on where we’re going). Granted that there may be some therapeutic uses to putting one’s attention on one’s feet when walking, but in general, after we’ve learned how to walk fluently (after the age of 2 or so) it’s the *destination* that motivates our ambulation. Our aim.

Break the Word Habit and Speed Your Reading: Learn to Phrase Read

We call this kind of fluent reading **phrase reading** because of this shift of attention. It doesn’t keep us from reading word by word any more than reading words keeps us from recognizing individual letters. But learning to phrase read is a development that adds multiple gears to your reading, and a new dimension of experience.

Funny enough, many readers experience this spontaneously when reading something *enjoyable* – and (usually quite unconsciously) following the flow of ideas on the page. That enjoyment, as we’ll explore in our next chapter, reflects our experience of the *flow* of our attention. Comprehension and enjoyment drive our reading across and down pages. We trust our ability to decode the words on the page and we put the spotlight of our attention on meaning, ideas and context. We allow fluency to run the show, and we might even find ourselves reading just as fast as we think.

* The word, ‘fluent’ actually means “with flow”.

But most of the time, we are simply habituated to the same neurological and physiological movement when we 'try' to read faster. The spotlight of our attention goes where it is trained. The decoding movement from word to word – deliberate step by deliberate step – essentially and practically, has driven our reading from the beginning. A left-brained activity if there ever was one.

For instance, read the line below, just like you normally would:

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again, and looking anxiously about as it went

Reading normally and word by word, we'd stop and focus our eyes at least 16 times in that sentence, once for each word. This doesn't include the extra *saccades* – the jumps our eyes make – from letter to letter and sometimes even backwards within the same sentence.

For some readers, these extra saccades slow reading rate down by orders of magnitude. It takes time and attention for all those eye movements. The more 'targets' for our attention, the more saccades. And the more opportunity for our mind to wander away from the content of our reading. Even if our focus were disciplined.

But if our attention were set on *phrases* instead of words, ideas and meaning rather than decoding, we would jump to each of these 'chunks' in turn and minimize our saccades – most especially the extra-curricular ones. We would, in effect, move our eyes just seven times in that same sentence, once for each one of the phrases in the line:

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again and looking anxiously about as it went

Our eye movement would look (crudely) like this, hopping (no pun intended) from one phrase to the next, with fewer saccades or backtracks:

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again, and looking anxiously about as it went

Just the mathematics of that ought to persuade you to learn this skill: if we make *seven* movements of our eyes instead of (at least) *sixteen*, we've more than doubled our reading rate. In practice, we phrase read material about three or four times more quickly, with better comprehension, than we ever could reading word by word.

Much more than this, however, our attention and our eyes move in concert with the way that we most naturally process the language. Forced into the unnatural pace of reading word by word, it's like we've been forced to roll too slowly on a bicycle – and we all know how difficult it is to keep the balance without rolling fluently. The same is true for reading.

SPOTLIGHT OF ATTENTION: ON IDEAS!

Everything at which we look takes up essentially the same amount of processing space in our minds. That is, when you look at a tree, or at a branch, or at a leaf, you similarly and completely fill the spotlight of your attention. Attention is attention – and we pay attention to what we know and recognize.

So, before you could be said to have learned how to read (if you can remember that far back), what did you see when you saw this – to what did you pay your attention?

C A T

You didn't see 'cat', although you might have seen 'C' and 'A' and 'T'. You hadn't learned yet to recognize the *pattern* of the word! Once you did, there was just no stopping you, but at this point, you could only be said to "read" letter by letter. Letters filled the spotlight of your attention.

Once you learned to see the letters in the context of their words, however, you started to see these patterns everywhere – and you took your attention off the letters, even if they were part of what you could see. You read STOP signs (though you might have had a little trouble with YIELD) you read street signs and cereal boxes.

But you didn't really read and *comprehend* until you learned to read those words in the context of the sentence or phrase. Notice a pattern here? This is how we learn and remember nearly anything: we begin to recognize greater and greater patterns and context.

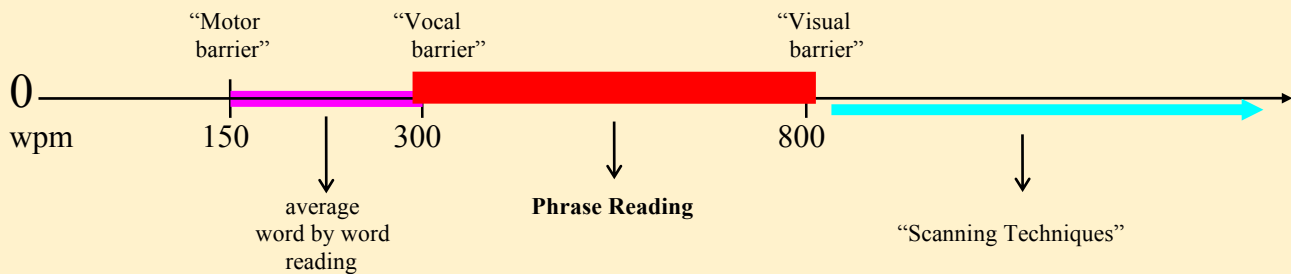
When you learn to play basketball, you learn to see the pattern in the offensives and defenses, you learn to read cues and anticipate passes and shots; when you learn about dance, you begin to see flows and rhymes, and appreciate the performance. Our attention moves from the trees to the forest. The more experience we have, the more the patterns emerge. The more we *comprehend*.

Reading, perhaps unsurprisingly, is no different than any other skill in this respect. The more patterns we recognize in what we read, the more we can include what we see into the greater context and into the spotlight of our attention. We are said to be *good* readers when we can follow the flow of ideas. Until then, all we've learned how to do is decode words – a notable achievement, but not reading in its fullest sense, and not the fluent way we practically experience the language.

The difficulty for most people in trying to read faster (with better comprehension) is that wherever go our eyes – so goes our attention. Our habituation to decoding words effectively keeps us from making a jump to *fluency* – to the right side of the brain – that good reading requires.

Enter the exercises in this chapter.

Determining Your Reading Rate



How fast can you read with good comprehension? Take 10 minutes to determine what your reading rate is right now. This number will change – dramatically, most likely – as you practice the exercises in this chapter.

For this exercise, you should choose reading material (like a novel) that you think you might *enjoy* -- and haven't read before, or at least not recently. All the reading exercises from this chapter can be done in this same "light-reading" novel, so make sure that you don't mind writing in it with pen. We'll outline those exercises later in this chapter – look ahead if you're curious.

Reading Rate is a good indicator of how effectively we process written material. But rather than a gauge of potential or intelligence, poor reading is often a reflection of a poor (i.e. overtaxed) approach. When we change our approach, our ability to process information increases significantly.

So, if we can only read by reading words aloud – or only by moving our lips – only with great difficulty will we surmount the *motor barrier* at 150 words per minute (wpm). After that, we simply lose comprehension. Likewise, if we read silently but our attention still hops from word to word, our reading rate and ability to process information ends around the 300 words per minute mark. We're still essentially processing the same way, but without the burden of having to move our mouths.

If we are to process information any faster than 300 words per minute, the attention, like an airplane taxiing at full speed along the runway, must begin to lift off the words to saccade across phrases, concepts and ideas. This Phrase Reading approach allows us to read upwards of 800 words a minute(!). Focus, comprehension, and enjoyment all improve because we are now reading the language the way we *think* and *express* it.

800 wpm, the *visual barrier*, marks the limit for most of us to read every word on a page, even with phrases. Beyond 800 words a minute lie *scanning techniques*, for effective skimming for context, structure and specific information. We'll get to these techniques below.

Finding your Reading Rate:

1. Mark your starting point, at any place in your book
2. Read for 10 minutes, and mark your ending point
3. Count the pages you have read, including fractions of pages. Multiply this by the average words per page (wpp*) for that book
4. Divide this number by 10 (because you read for 10 minutes), and you've got your *reading rate*.

1. Count the total number of words in 5 full lines of text. Use the middle of a paragraph, so that your count goes from edge to edge. Count **all** the words, including "a" and "the", etc.
2. Divide this count by 5, calculating the average number of *words per line*.
3. Count the total number of lines in a *full page*, making sure to go from edge (top) to edge (bottom). Beginnings of chapters are not good places to do this counting, since the entire page is not usually used. Make sure you count a full "printer's page".
4. Multiply Step #3 by Step #2 (# of lines per page X average # of words per line). This shouldn't be more than about 500wpp, or less than about 200wpp.

PART II. Learning to Phrase Read: Exercises and Drills

We call fluent reading, **Phrase Reading**, since that's really where the point of our attention is – on phrases, rather than words. Phrases are phrases because they trigger a feeling, an experience, an *image with meaning* to engage the right side of your brain.

The operative word here is 'meaning'. Good reading is something of an information exchange in this way between neural hemispheres, and meaning is the common currency. So, the point of effective training for phrase reading is to make phrases with meaning the center of our attention.

Phrase – a group of words that go together to *mean something*.
A phrase is a **concept**

Phrase Reading is a shift of conceptual attention *and* a shift of physical habit: our eyes have to be *trained*, muscularly, to focus in a different place, even if we understand the concept of where they should move. You can't learn to phrase read just by understanding how it works any more than you can suddenly play tennis because you've learned the rules of the game.

The *clustering* exercises in this chapter are similar to the way a lot of us learned automatic word decoding when we were first introduced to reading. Our teachers would flash simple and then increasingly complex words at us, helping to build our skill of *automatic recognition*. We also began to 'build' (spell) words ourselves. Unsurprisingly, our eye movement soon began to reflect our attention – word to word – on the page.

In the practice of *clustering*, we similarly find and note, and then *focus* on phrases. Just 10 minutes a day for a week or so of this exercise is usually sufficient to achieve the flash-recognition with phrases that we achieved with our word-flashcards. Once we begin to recognize phrases automatically, we've begun to establish a new movement of our eyes from phrase to phrase, reflecting our shifting attention. Add in a couple of exercises like *Reading Sprints*, and in just three weeks, we become phrase readers for life.

THE EXERCISES: CLUSTERING AND READING SPRINTS

In effect, we practice four essential things in the *clustering* and *sprint* exercises below:

1. **Recognizing** what a good phrase is. When we first learned how to decode, the targets for our attention (words) were clearly marked – with spaces between them. But where are the markings to help us distinguish phrases?? That's something we need to recognize automatically, the same way we learned to automatically recognize words.
2. Practicing **the physical movement** from phrase to phrase. Just like learning a new backhand in tennis, learning to phrase read is something that simply takes practice. The eye muscles have to move without effort against – and through – old habits of saccading to every word.
3. **Attending** in our minds to *images* and *meaning* when we read; deliberately constructing meaning.
4. **Moving fluently** from one phrase to the next, establishing a distinctly different reading **pace**.

Clustering: Training Your Eyes (And Attention) to Focus on Phrases

Clustering Stages: One Week Each, 10 Minutes a Day

Stage 1: Circles and dots

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again and looking anxiously about as it went

Stage 2: Slashes and Dots

It was the White Rabbit/trotting slowly/back again/and looking/anxiously about/as it went

Stage 3: Just Dots

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again, and looking anxiously about as it went

Clustering is the core exercise in learning to phrase read. It's easy to do, and can be done at anytime, anywhere, with nearly any reading material. Typically, students practice the three (3) stages below for about a week each, and add in other exercises as needed.

Clustering, Week #1: Circles and Dots for 10 minutes a day

- 'Cluster' the Phrases
- Practicing Reading Phrases
- Read On

In this stage (Week 1), the **circles** separate the phrases. The **focal dots** – slightly above the physical center of each phrase – mark where we land our eyes and our attention².

In practice, cluster about 5 lines in your book, and then practice the movement of your eyes and attention four (4) times, hopping from dot to dot and 'reading' each phrase.

The whole exercise looks like this (from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*):

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again and looking anxiously about as it went,
as if it had lost something and she heard it muttering to itself The Duchess! The Duchess!
Oh my dear paws! Oh my fur and whiskers! She'll get me executed as sure as ferrets are ferrets!
Where CAN have dropped them, I wonder? Alice guessed in a moment that it was looking
for the fan and the pair of white kid gloves and she very good-naturedly began hunting about
for them but they were nowhere to be seen – everything seemed to have changed since her swim
in the pool and the great hall with the glass table and the little door had vanished completely.

Perhaps needless to say, but this is just an exercise. We only do this physical exercise in a book for a few minutes a day, training the eyes and attention. After about 2 or 3 weeks of clustering – in successive stages –

² *Use a pen for these clustering exercises. Because it's darker than a pencil, a pen will unambiguously identify the distinctions between phrases.

for 10 minutes a day, the exercise and movement of eye and attention ‘take’. You’ll begin phrase reading whenever you want and need – without circles, dots or any other guides.

After you’ve clustered five lines or so, you’re ready to read them over:

Clustering Guidelines: How to Read-Through

Read-through #1: Focus: This is the pass to **find your focus**. Land your eyes only on the dot directly above the phrase and let your vision go ‘soft’ (just relax your focus a bit, rather than staring intently). The dot is in the center of your field. Let your focus widen to include (and recognize) the words. That is, let your **peripheral vision** open up to fill the oval. If you’re like most people, you’ll notice that your eyes drop down to the words almost immediately – but this exercise is designed to keep them from doing that. Every time they drop down and look around, gently but surely bring them back to center on the dot.

This will most likely be experienced like the automatic lens of a camera trying to find the center of its picture. Within a second or two, everything within the oval “brightens” and becomes the center of your attention as a whole. The optical focus has widened ever so slightly to include the whole phrase. Let yourself see it (without moving your lips – that will keep your attention focused on the words!).

Now move on to the next phrase, and repeat the process with each successive phrase. Simply bring your attention to the dot, and let your eyes see the phrase.

This pass is done VERY deliberately – for process, rather than speed. It should feel “all chopped up”, if done correctly. You may hear the words in your mind as you read. Eventually, the sound of the words fades into the background and away.

Read-through #2: Rhythm: In this pass, you’re going to establish a **rhythm** moving through the phrases. Your emphasis shouldn’t be on the imagined product – “speed” reading – but rather on the *process* of moving from one dot to the next, steadily. Let the words inside each oval enter into your perception as you hop from one dot to the next, on a pace of about one hop every second. Hop, one-thousand, hop, one-thousand, hop, one-thousand, etc. The experience should be like a slide-show, each phrase ‘flashing’ at you. If not, repeat the pass.

If you find that a quicker or slower pace is more appropriate for you, then by all means move comfortably – but take care to maintain the ‘slide-show’ experience. You’ll most likely notice your pace increasing slightly each time you do this exercise, as the muscles of the eyes get more practiced at automatically focusing on phrases, rather than words.

Read-through #3: Image: On this pass, move your eyes from dot to dot, from phrase to phrase, with the same rhythm as #2 – **and imagine in your mind’s eye what this scene might look like for each phrase**. Imagine, if you can, either in images or feelings or both, the scene playing out on the screen of the mind as your eyes hop rhythmically from one dot to the next. Remember that the eye only needs to hop – you don’t need to look around at any of these phrases to discover what they mean. You’ve essentially memorized them by this time!

Read-through #4: Speed: This pass is about developing a different **pace** for reading. Let your eyes *bounce* from one dot to the next like a stone skipping across the water. The target experience for this pass is that each phrase seems to blink into your field of attention like a slide in a presentation. (David Butler has an excellent site, readspeeder.com, simulating this experience.) In this pass, you’ll lean on the now practiced ability to automatically recognize each phrase, now linked to meaning in your mind. Bouncing from dot to dot, the work is to allow each phrase to stand out like a “blink of meaning”.

Read the Phrases: Practice Eye Movement

When you ‘read’ back the passage, be as conscious of economical eye movement as possible. Each phrase acts as the **focal center** of your attention, and you ‘hop’ your eyes and attention from dot to dot. You still ‘read’ every word (so no need to worry!) – you just don’t *stop* your eyes on each word.

Instead, let your focus go ‘soft’ to encompass all the words within the circle. The phrase *subsumes* the word (if we’re fluent in the language) just as the word subsumes the letters.

‘Hop’ your eyes from phrase to phrase.

Be aware of – and try to avoid -- moving your lips or ‘sub-vocalizing’ (saying words under your breath to yourself) while doing these exercises. We often developed these habits as ways of coping with poor decoding and comprehension.

At this point, they only serve to draw our attention to the words themselves – minimizing the effects of practice. If you have one of these habits, try holding a pen or pencil in your teeth when you practice reading drills.

Another key to training the eyes and attention quickly is to move from dot to dot as deliberately as we can, similar to striking the keys on a piano. The point here is economy of movement – *accuracy*. Speed will come as your accuracy improves. Follow the guidelines below when you read/hop through your clustered lines.

Read On

Once you’ve read through your short group of clustered lines in each of the four ways above, continue reading, beyond your clustering, in that same novel or magazine. Reading on helps us to integrate the practice. We’re exercising new pathways and habits right away.

It also gives an opportunity to notice any differences in experience, bringing a mindful multiplier to our practice. How is your focus? What do you notice about your pace? Are you **backtracking**³ the way you usually do? Are you **fixating**⁴? How is your **comprehension**?

After only a few minutes of doing this exercise even your first time, you’ll most likely experience a taste of what phrase reading makes possible, albeit only a taste. Chances are, you’ll read more consistently and directly, with better focus and comprehension (if either were lacking). Many students notice that the ongoing dialogue in their heads, usually distracting them from their reading, is non-existent. *Can you imagine what your reading would be like if you did this exercise every day for a few weeks?*

Once you begin your practice, there’s never any need to ‘try’ to phrase read in other material. Bit by bit, as you do these exercises each day, phrase reading will become an increasingly more natural part of your skill as a reader. Eventually – usually after about a week or two of practice for most students – you’ll notice yourself beginning to phrase read in most things. The typical report from a student is that s/he was reading as usual – and before a short time had read about three times as much material as usual, with better focus and comprehension.

Most importantly, the skill of reading becomes a tool you can use in multiple ways with a number of different gears after about three weeks of practice. Once Phrase Reading, if you need to focus on letters in order to decode a difficult word, you can; if you’d like to read word by word to truly appreciate a poem, you can; if you want to read through a novel at a comfortable, enjoyably fluent pace, you can; if you want to sprint accurately through research or texts, you can. All it takes is practice.

Practice Guidelines: Finding Phrases and Clustering Stages

Clustering “Rules” and “Guidelines”

Mainly, we should **follow** the **grammar** of our passage.

Here are some examples:

Adjectives + nouns (cloying feeling...)

Adverbs + verbs (very quickly...)

Auxiliary + verb (had thinned...)

Prepositions + the rest of their phrases (in the bedroom...)



Conjunctions + the rest of their phrases (and stood...)

Negatives + anything (not helping, no money...)

³ “Backtracking” is something that most of us do when we’ve read through a sentence, or paragraph or more – but realize that we’ve gotten absolutely nothing from it! So we *backtrack* with our eyes to the place we recognize, and begin reading again. For many readers, this constitutes the bulk of time wasted when they ‘read’.

⁴ “Fixating” is what we all do when the mind is elsewhere – but we are still going through the motions of “reading”. Typically, our attention circles around one or two words a few times before we shake ourselves out of the reverie.

Our Romantic languages break concepts into *grammatical phrases* as the main units of conveying ideas – so, the grammar of your written text is a solid guideline for finding phrases. In general, if it doesn't make sense, it isn't a phrase.

So,  IS a phrase...but  is not a phrase.

**Keep Your Phrases
Short and Meaningful**

After you've practiced clustering just a couple of times, you will begin to notice that nearly every writer has a rhythm to his or her prose. Try to find that rhythm as you cluster.

NON- Phrases – Avoid these potholes!!

Incomplete, overly-long or meaningless phrases not only will be difficult to read back in your read-throughs – they actually hinder your progress.

It's not a phrase if it's too long, too short, or without simple meaning. For instance:



(too long, and without meaning – notice that your eye has to stop more than once on it)

or



(too short, and without meaning – there's no 'meat' in the phrase)

The sole exception to this rule is at the ends of lines. Practically speaking, any phrase in this exercise must end at the end of the line, whether or not it is grammatically complete, since there really is no easy way to focus on both sides of the line at the same time.

And since the point of this exercise is to recognize and read the full phrases, **neatness** is quite important for this exercise as well. If any of your circles or lines overlap these words, or parts of the words, you'll have a difficult time in the next part of the exercise: reading them back to yourself, training the muscles of the eyes to 'hop', and your attention to flash-recognition.

Clustering: Weeks Two and Three

Weeks 2 and 3 of clustering practice are about weaning yourself from the crutch of clustering. After practicing Week 1 clustering, circles and dots, for 10-minutes each day, you will most likely be ready to move on to the next stage in clustering: **slashes and dots**.

You'll know that you're ready for this stage when the eyes have largely stopped fighting the movement from dot to dot. While your eyes may still drop down to the words themselves on long or uneven phrases, each phrase should consistently 'blink' at you in your read-throughs, without difficulty. Your final "speed" read-through should feel like the phrases are flashing at you, slide-show style.

You'll also know you're ready when you're pretty much sick of circles and dots.

Clustering, Week #2: Slashes and Dots for 10 minutes a day

- 'Cluster' the Phrases with Slashes between phrases rather than circles
- Practicing Reading Phrases
- Read On

This stage is different from the first primarily in the way each phrase is distinguished on the page. Otherwise, the practice is largely the same: five (5) lines clustered, then read back four (4) times, as deliberately and rhythmically as possible. The eyes still move from dot to dot, and you'll still aim to catch each phrase in a single saccade.

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again and looking anxiously about as it went

With slashes, there will be more of an expectation that our eyes and minds will be able to distinguish the phrases more automatically on their own. We are, in essence, practicing ourselves away from needing any "crutches" or marks of any kind to direct our eyes and attention.

Avoid moving your lips or 'sub-vocalizing' (saying words under your breath to yourself) while doing these exercises. We often developed these habits as ways of coping with poor decoding and comprehension. At this point, they only serve to draw our attention to the words themselves – minimizing the effects of practice. If you have one of these habits, try holding a pen or pencil in your teeth when you practice reading drills.

Clustering with slashes and dots should be done for about 10 minutes a day, like Stage 1, for a week, until you are ready for Stage 3. The way you know that you're ready to move on is similar to the previous transition: your attention moves automatically and rhythmically from phrase to phrase, and each phrase flashes at you as a unit. With slashes and dots you'll also notice that you get more comprehension, earlier in the exercise. It won't feel quite so 'chopped up'.

Clustering, Week #3: Just Dots for 10 minutes a day

- 'Cluster' the Phrases with just a dot over the center of each phrase
- Practicing Reading Phrases
- Read On

This stage leaves only the focal dots to keep our eyes moving in the same deliberate way from phrase to phrase. The point of attention, as always, is above each phrase, minimizing our saccades.

It was the White Rabbit trotting slowly back again, and looking anxiously about as it went

You'll find that it takes much less time to do your clustering with just dots than it has for either of the two previous stages. Your 10-minute practice might stretch for a page or more.

By the time you're ready for just marking dots, you should find your phrases automatically – the focal dot above each one effectively emphasizes the point (pun entirely intended) for your neurology and your attention in the read-through.

Reading back the clustered lines with only dots to guide you may be a bit tricky at first, but if you've been through each of the other two stages, it should come much more easily and automatically after only a couple of practice sessions.

Clustering Variations

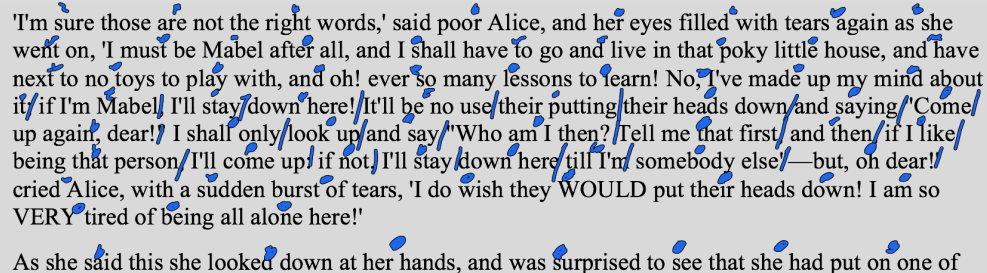
At the end of about three (3) weeks of daily clustering practice – perhaps once a day for 10 minutes, or twice daily for about 5 minutes for each practice -- you will have gone through each of these the three clustering stages.

Most likely, you will notice an increasing impact on both your rate and comprehension over those three weeks. After week one, you'll most likely notice that your focus is better in everything, and your rate might even double – even if only due to you no longer 'backtracking' or 'fixating' so much. After the second week, you'll most likely notice yourself phrase reading periodically, with better comprehension in everything; and after three weeks, you'll most likely be phrase reading consistently. Chances are, you'll be reading with much more confidence, effect and speed in every subject and every kind of material.

But for some students, further exercises are necessary to make the transition to right-brain phrase-reading more complete and the skill more automatic. The exercises below represent what might be thought of as cross-training. The aim is the same: minimal eye movement from phrase to phrase – and a break away from the habit of stopping the attention and eye on each individual word.

"Staged" Clustering

The transitions between clustering stages can be difficult for some students. If you've been able to complete one stage without a problem but have perhaps too much effort with the next, you can cluster in this way, alternating stages for an easier transition:



'I'm sure those are not the right words,' said poor Alice, and her eyes filled with tears again as she went on, 'I must be Mabel after all, and I shall have to go and live in that poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with, and oh! ever so many lessons to learn! No, I've made up my mind about it; if I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here! It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying, 'Come up again, dear!' I shall only look up and say, 'Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like, being that person, I'll come up; if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else'—but, oh dear!' cried Alice, with a sudden burst of tears, 'I do wish they WOULD put their heads down! I am so VERY tired of being all alone here!'

As she said this she looked down at her hands, and was surprised to see that she had put on one of

Reading over this clustering is again an exercise in awareness – you are training your eyes and overall attention to hop from phrase to phrase.

"Block" Clustering

Another variation on the clustering exercise is to cluster for a 'block' of lines, leave a similar block free from clustering, and then cluster the next 'block'. I often assign this to students having trouble weaning from the need for the dots to focus their eyes. Reading over your clustering is an exercise in keeping the eyes moving into the same space, onto the same focal point. It looks like this:

'I'm sure those are not the right words,' said poor Alice, and her eyes filled with tears again as she went on, 'I must be Mabel after all, and I shall have to go and live in that poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with, and oh! ever so many lessons to learn! No, I've made up my mind about it; if I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here! It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying "Come up again, dear!" I shall only look up and say "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else"—but, oh dear!' cried Alice, with a sudden burst of tears, 'I do wish they WOULD put their heads down! I am so VERY tired of being all alone here!'

As she said this she looked down at her hands, and was surprised to see that she had put on one of the Rabbit's little white kid gloves while she was talking. 'How CAN I have done that?' she thought. 'I must be growing small again.' She got up and went to the table to measure herself by it, and found that, as nearly as she could guess, she was now about two feet high, and was going on shrinking rapidly: she soon found out that the cause of this was the fan she was holding, and she dropped it hastily, just in time to avoid shrinking away altogether.

PART III: Supplemental Drills and Practice

Electronic Media Practice (Thank you, David Butler)

Another way to practice these same skills came to me via reading master David Butler. Some time ago, he called to ask about my reading program. It seems that a student of his in California reported that I was teaching a similar approach in North Carolina. As it turns out, we had discovered the same gold mine from different perspectives.

David's approach relies on technology. Specifically, he's designed two websites dedicated to helping the user learn and practice phrase reading. Rather than expecting the student to find phrases (like clustering does), these sites do it for you – and then drill your attention. Although I've found that the student's discovery of phrases is often quite important, these sites offer a great supplement for most students. For other students, they can replace clustering drills entirely.

David's first site, readspeeder.com, is designed to improve your flash recognition of phrases. He has uploaded three novels into his site, and built them to 'flash' at you in succession. For years, I've had students ask me if I had books with the phrases already clustered – David's site does something similar for everyone, in a very powerful way. (I've taken the idea of using *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* from this site). He's also built in a number of games and drills.

His second site is phrasereader.com. He's built it around an algorithm he developed to parse text into phrases – and his site will do just that for anything you type into it, and then present the text to you, phrase by phrase. Again, he's designed it as a powerful practice tool.

You might also check out his excellent book, *Reading With the Right Brain*.

Comprehension: Your First Look

Every time we read, watch or listen, and pay attention on our way to complete comprehension, we put pieces of a puzzle together with the right side of our brain. The context of our material grows and blossoms.

What we usually call "not paying attention" is really paying our attention to a space *irrelevant* to the material. We are, in effect, paying our attention elsewhere.

As we explored in Chapter X, the trick to minimizing 'distraction' is to engage in deliberate action. When you are reading, try keeping this *dialogue for concentration* in your mind. Although we do not necessarily engage in an internal "conversation" when we read in general, the structure of a deliberate focus can 'scaffold' the building of right-brained context:

Internal Dialogue for Concentration and Comprehension:

- What is the main idea of this paragraph?
- What is the support for this idea?
- How will the next paragraph continue this idea?

Such a dialogue with our material prompts us to move our attention to deliberate, consistent spaces within each paragraph. To find the main idea of any paragraph, we swing our attention through the **topic sentence**; as we look for support, our eyes will dart through the **body of the paragraph**.

Finally, the last question forces us to engage in **inference** about our material. Even small **inferences** engage us in contextual attention, actually bringing neurological systems online to compare, contrast and digest. Try to put the idea of concentration as a *conversation with your material* into practice in the next drill.

Reading Sprints (Pacing Drills)

Although the above exercises are designed to refocus the eyes and attention, most students will still find that the pace at which they read is at the mercy of old habit. Having read at a certain speed for a number of years, a good number of us will have a difficult time establishing a new pace with our new skills.

Reading Springs are a good way to do on the written page what David's sites can do electronically. The exercise is to move outside of your 'comfort' zone in reading – a comfort zone that often includes a lot of unnecessary backtracking and other excursionist saccades.

In this exercise, you should follow the instructions strictly for each step, moving your eyes as quickly as you need to complete the requisite number of pages within the time frame. This will often feel much too quick, especially the third step. But try to glean as much as you can from the page – particularly and deliberately engaging the above *internal dialogue for comprehension* – and you'll most likely notice the effects on your reading pace after doing this exercise only once.

READING SPRINTS:

1. Read for 5 minutes. How many pages did you read? _____

In each of the next two steps, you're going to read the same amount of material, moving on from your place each time.

2. (Moving on from where you just left off..) **Read for 2 1/2 minutes -- read the same amount of material as you did in Step#1.** As you will no doubt notice, it will be more difficult to get through the same amount of material in *half the time*. The point of this exercise is to put you under the gun, so to speak – and force the eyes and attention to gather in phrases as they pace so quickly down the page.

3. (Moving on from where you just left off..) **Read for 1 1/4 minutes. Again, make sure that you read the same amount of material as you did in Step#1** – even though you now must read through it at four (4) times your normal pace! Notice (again) that it is more difficult to understand what you read, and that you must force your eyes to move much more quickly – and differently – than usual.

This step is going to be VERY uncomfortable for most students. You may only catch the outline of what you read, without much detail. Reading four times as quickly as your normal pace will force you to tear your eyes away from the words and recognize whatever ideas you can. Your practice with clustering should help you take in *phrases* when your eyes and attention take 'chunks' out of the material.

The exercise is to finish the requisite distance in the given time, however much you can't catch reading. If you find that you miss a lot the first time you try this step, try it again with the same material.

4. Read for 5 minutes. Now read 'normally' again. Most students find that they read more material, with better focus and comprehension, than they did in Step #1. Why do you think that is?

I highly recommend this exercise anytime you feel your reading starting to sag a bit. It's done in a light-reading novel, preferably the same one you've used for the other exercises.

Again, this exercise is most useful after you've been practicing the clustering exercises for at least a week, or once you're able to move your eyes and attention from phrase to phrase consistently and automatically. Forcing the eyes to move so quickly in Reading Springs will force the attention to 'snatch' for whatever it can. Your clustering practice trains in the targets: *phrases*.

Get Yourself to the Practice Mat

If you're human, you most likely have trouble with procrastination. 10 minutes a day may not seem like a great deal of time, but it can seem like an overwhelming commitment. Even if the result might be a transformation in your reading. The hard truth is that without consistent practice for at least a week or two, learning to phrase read is quite difficult – again, even if you understand the principle.

The easiest and most powerful way to confront procrastination is to just show up to practice. Even if you only show up for a single minute. The idea is frequency rather than duration, for clustering as in most things.

But the truth also is that our practice often develops some momentum of its own. Once you've shown up, practice has a way of involving you. Tell yourself that you're just going to practice for one minute – and you might just end up making it ten.

The muscle most crucial muscle to build is the one that breaks us out of our inertia.

Having a set time to practice can be quite helpful for some of us. It not only keeps us from having to remember something out of the ordinary in the midst of so many things we inevitably juggle. Having a set time

can also lend our practice a consistency we're hard-pressed to find any other way.

Or, you might just devise a **creative strategy** to get your clustering in each day. Maybe do a bit before classes, or in between homework. I've had students do their clustering in between assignments. Just pull out your book, your pen, and cluster five lines.

Learning *any* skill takes time. You've most probably been reading the same way for a number of years, and now must change some relatively settled habits. So be patient with yourself.

As you continue your practice, you'll start to notice some changes in your general reading, regardless of whether or not you "try" to phrase read. As a matter of fact, "trying", in this case, might actually do more harm than good, since your muscles simply need to be developed and coordinated. All the "thinking and trying" should be taken care of during practice. Otherwise, just read and let the exercises have their effect.

Your New Gears

After only a few weeks or less of consistent practice, you'll notice that you have a number of new 'gears' available to you when you read. That is, you'll have an immense amount of flexibility in how you apply your skills, whether trying to read quickly to digest a lot of information, or leisurely to enjoy fiction, or more closely, like you might when reading poetry.

How you apply your gears is up to you. Reading is like touring the country in this way. If you're driving through the desert, feel free to drive 80 mph and you won't miss much. Or if you're just looking for big road signs. But if you want to pay attention to the details of the land around you, slow down and let yourself look at them more deliberately.

Just how to use your gears on the SAT will be the subject of Chapters 2 and 3.

"The goal in fluency instruction is not fast reading, although that happens to be a by-product of the instruction, but fluent meaning-filled reading." – International Reading Association