

# Phrase Reading

## A more efficient use of the eyes

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What determines our reading rate?  
What do we do when we “read”?  
How can we read faster, and still comprehend?

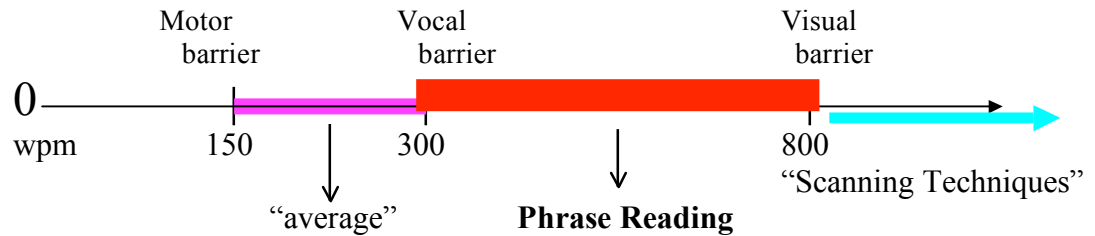
Reading well is a skill. Since it is a skill, we can break it into certain “sub-skills.” Among these are:

1. the *movement* of the eyes
2. *focus* of our attention, and
3. the *storage* of information

The main objective in this section is the development of the first and second of these.

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## Determining Your Reading Rate



**How fast can you read with good comprehension? Take 10 minutes to determine your reading rate. Since textbooks vary widely in their “readability,” you should choose reading material that you think you might *enjoy* -- and haven’t read before, or at least not recently. All your reading exercises will be done in this (“light-reading”) novel, so make sure that you don’t mind writing in it in pen (We’ll outline those exercises later in this chapter – look ahead if you’re curious.)**

**Here are the steps:**

- 1. Determine the (average) words per page (wpp)\***
- 2. Mark your starting point**
- 3. Read for 10 minutes, and mark your ending point**
- 4. Count the pages you have read and multiply times the average words per page (step #1)**
- 5. Divide this number by 10 (you did read for 10 minutes, did you not?), and through the magic of mathematics – you’ve got your *reading rate!!!***

- Here’s a fairly easy way to do it for most non-fiction novels:
  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. Also 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.

## What determines your reading rate? How long it takes to move the material into your field of vision.

The eyes actually work like cameras – or rather, a camera works like the eyes: In order to *focus* on an object, our eyes must *stop* on that object.



Eye movement might look a bit like this (above) in simply “looking” at these leaves. *Where* the eyes land is largely determined by our **attention**. Neither the eyes (nor our minds, as we shall see in later chapters) are usually very still for very long. Even when we are looking directly at an object, we are usually looking at all the different parts, with brief glances, in order to construct a conceptual *image* in our mind’s eye. The main point is that eye movements scatter about the objects of our **attention**.

### Word-by-word Reading

Since we have been taught to recognize *words* as individual units of meaning (“**monads**”), that’s what we tend to pay most of our attention to. Typical “word-by-word” reading might look something like this, in terms of eye movement\*

I left Will in the bedroom and stood on the verandah.

Our reading rate is (largely) determined by how fast we can move from object of attention (“word”) to object of attention (“word”). While our objects of attention remain *words*, we can never read any faster than about 300wpm – and still read every word. This is, most psychologists believe, a limitation of the eye itself (physiologically speaking), and the processing capacity of the brain.

Our eyes would have to move a *minimum* of eleven times, in order to read the above sentence, if we were to read word-by-word.†

\* From a study presented at MIT in 1992. Eye movement was tracked in subjects reading different types of materials.

† Our overall reading rate would also be determined by our ability to put the above words into context, into *meaning*. As every student knows, re-reading is (usually)

## Solutions

One solution to the problem of how to read faster involves techniques of skipping words, and so increase **rate**. Of course, we lose some information, however careful we are, so it might not be a *preferred* option for most kinds of reading.

Another technique, and not coincidentally the one we will be learning in this class, is to put our attention on *larger* bits of information, in order to gather more information every time we stop our eyes. This way, we do not have to skip any information.

**Chunking** is a psychological term for gathering smaller bits of information into larger groups in order to comprehend and remember. In written and spoken language, “chunks” are concepts, or **phrases**.

Empirically (what we find when we actually do this), if we move our eyes just as fast, and pick up 3 - 4 times (or more) with them, we end up reading 3 - 4 times (or more) as fast -- with better comprehension. The question: How is this done? How can we learn to read so much faster than we already do now?

By practicing two *sub-skills* involved in reading:

1. Eye movement
2. **focus** of attention

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## Phrase Reading

There are, most likely, as many ways to learn both of the above sub-skills as there are people who have mastered them. There are most certainly many people who have learned to do this on their own, who did not need to take a class or read a book, most likely because they *love to read*.\*

We call our method, **Phrase Reading**, since that's really where it all begins – focusing our attention on phrases.

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

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a fact of life, when we do not pay enough attention to how words fit together into concepts, and complete ideas.

\* As you've probably noticed, we tend to do our best in those areas which arouse the most passion in us, the most *interest*. As we'll see in the following classes, there are **mental cues** we can use to *create interest*. These have some pretty amazing effects on our study habits and ability to learn. As always, look ahead if you're curious.

**Clustering** is one very powerful – and simple – exercise designed to help develop the necessary skills to Phrase Read.

**Clustering**

The muscles of the eyes, as it turns out, are relatively quickly and easily trained to Phrase Read. I have heard of a number of methods, but **clustering** seems to be the best for our purposes. It matches all the criteria for a good exercise – it’s simple, powerful and effective. If you have the discipline (a pretty big “if” – I’ve found that this is really the **most** difficult aspect of school, or *anything*, for that matter) to correctly practice for about 10 - 20 minutes a day, you will most likely learn the skill of **Phrase Reading** in about 3 weeks!\*

**Clustering** is an exercise designed to literally *refocus* our eyes and attention when we read. In the above example:

I left WilO in the bedroom and stood on the verandah.

It could be “chunked” like this into phrases.

Our Romantic languages break concepts into *grammatical phrases*, into rhythmic patterns of thought. Once we’ve had some practice writing, or speaking, or listening to a language, we begin to understand how our thoughts are communicated through words – and in *concepts*. The crucial point here, is that in order for a word to truly *mean* something in a communication, it needs to be part of a larger concept.

in the

is not a complete concept, while,

in the bedroom

is. This is, simply enough, the way we think, and write and learn in the language. When we **phrase read**, we move from phrase to phrase (from concept to concept) with our eyes, so that eye movement looks (crudely) like this:

I left WilO in the bedroom and stood on the verandah.

We train our eyes to go from **focal point** to **focal point** by **clustering**. The exercise looks like this, when we do it in a novel:

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\* If you practice regularly, you should see such results. Irregular practice usually yields sporadic and unpredictable results.

I left Will in the bedroom and stood on the verandah. The mist had thinned to show a faint, diffused cold light from a half-obscurd sky. Paul was standing a few paces off looking at me. I couldn't help but wonder at the straightness of his hair, the stiffness of his shoulders in a characteristic hunch – like he was about to ward off a blow unseen by any save himself. As always when I looked at him, the pit of my stomach warmed, almost cloying. It rose until it enveloped my heart, beating faster.

In practice, you should cluster about 5 lines, and then read them over 3 - 4 times. Try to stay aware of where your eye lands. It *should* land on the dot, and allow you to recognize each phrase on its own, with only that one major focal point. The reading of the clustered material should not be done quickly, but deliberately, and should feel “all chopped up”, if done correctly.

### **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...)

Keep your phrases as short as possible, and try to stay with the rhythm of the sentence. After you do this exercise just a couple of times, you will notice that nearly every writer has a rhythm to his or her prose, one phrase following the other. When you read back the circled phrases, you should also try to move your eyes rhythmically – just like practicing scales on an instrument. I've even had students use a metronome when they cluster!

Notice that any phrase that is difficult to read in its entirety is too long, too short, or without simple meaning, like:

help but wonder at the  
(too long, and without meaning)

or

of my  
(too short, and without meaning)

When we read back our passages, we need to be as conscious of our eye movement as possible. A real key to success is moving from dot to dot as deliberately as we can, and as *rhythmically*. We

read each 5-line section over 3 – 4 times so that we can solely practice eye movement, without worrying about comprehension at this point. This is one of the main reasons for doing these exercises in a “light-reading” book – so that we don’t have to worry that we might miss something crucial as we practice.

### **Clustering “Stages”**

After practicing this first “stage” of clustering, circles and dots, for a week, you will most likely be ready to move onto

#### **Stage 2: Slashes and Dots**

My lord but it had been a long night. I wasn’t really sure which

The exercise otherwise is identical to the first stage – 5 lines clustered, then read back 3 -4 times, as deliberately and rhythmically as possible\*. The eyes still move from dot to dot. With slashes, however, there will be more of an expectation that our eyes and minds will be able to distinguish the phrases on their own, when reading. We are, in essence, weaning ourselves away from needing any “crutches” or marks of any kind to direct our eyes and attention.

Notice that the phrase 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.

Clustering with slashes and dots should be done for 10 - 20 minutes a day, as before, for a week, until you are ready for Stage 3.

**Stage 3** is identical to the first two, except that our only guides for our reading are the focal dots, to keep our eyes moving in the same deliberate way – from phrase to phrase.

had been more surprising, the sudden conversion of such a die-

Again, keep your eye movement as deliberate and rhythmic as possible from dot to dot.

## **Practice, practice practice**

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10 - 20 minutes a day doesn’t seem like very much work, although it may seem like a real commitment. Even though this chapter is not about time-management, you can begin to apply one of our principles ahead of schedule:

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\* Of course, each time we cluster we do so with a different passage, otherwise, we’d end up memorizing 5 lines, but accomplishing very little else!

## Put First Things First!

You do not really even need to set any special time aside for this exercise, if you just use some of your “downtime” to practice. Some of my students have carried their light-reading book around, and clustered when they had class breaks. Others have used homework breaks to do their “daily 20.” Even others have done it as the last thing before sleep each night. Devise some **strategy** to get your clustering in each day.

Every day you should notice some progress in your reading, but be patient! Learning *any* skill takes time. In this case, you’ve most probably been reading the same way for a number of years, and now must change some relatively settled habits. As you continue your practice, you’ll start to notice some changes, 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 your “daily 20”; once you read, you ought only be *doing*. (For more on this, see “Reading Sprints,” below.)

I’ve often given my students the following assignment:

At the end of each week of clustering, write an essay about your experience. Include answers to all of the following questions:

- ◆ What was the most difficult part of the practice?
- ◆ Which days did you forget to cluster?
- ◆ What **strategy** worked best to ensure that you got your clustering done each day?
- ◆ What difference, if any, do you notice in your overall reading?
- ◆ How did you adjust the way that you cluster from what you learned when you read each passage back?
- ◆ How has your clustering changed from the beginning of the week?

You should spend *no more* than 20 minutes on this essay. It should be no longer than 2 pages and not less than 1 paragraph.

## Comprehension: Your First Look

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After your first couple of practice sessions, try to “see” the passages in your mind’s eye. As you read from phrase to phrase, give the meaning some room in your mind. Try to put what you read into a story, into imaginary action, even while your eyes are moving deliberately and rhythmically from phrase to phrase and dot to dot. By your 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time through each passage, this should be easier than it sounds.



Every time we read, or listen, and pay attention on our way to complete comprehension, we participate in a **conversation** *about and relevant to the material* in our minds. What is usually called “not paying attention”, is really paying attention to a conversation *irrelevant to the material*. When you are reading, try keeping this conversation for *concentration* in your mind:

- ◆ What is the main idea of this paragraph?
- ◆ What was that paragraph about?
- ◆ How will the next paragraph continue this idea?
- ◆ Am I right? Where is the material leading?

Try to put the idea of concentration as a *conversation with your material* into practice in the next drill.

## Reading Sprints (Phrase Reading Drills)

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Athletes know that practicing a drill is not the same as playing in a game – not by a long stretch. The same is true for Clustering and Phrase Reading: in order to learn how to use our skills during “game-time”, we need to simulate conditions during which we have to use our new skills. It sounds simple – and it is.

It also requires practice.

Now that we’ve practiced the sub-skills of:

1. The movement of the eyes
2. The focus of attention in movement

we can try to incorporate them into a combined, complex skill – Phrase Reading. We call the drill **Reading Sprints**.

1. Read for **5 minutes**. How many pages did you read? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Read for **2 ½ minutes**. You should move on in your novel, but make sure you 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.
3. Read for **1 ¼ minutes**. You should move on in your novel. Again, make sure that you read the *same amount* of material as you did in Step#1. Notice (again) that it is more difficult to understand what you read, but that you must force your eyes to move much more quickly, and differently than usual.
4. Read for **5 minutes**. How many pages? \_\_\_\_\_

## Questions for Reflection

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1. What did you notice about your comprehension during each step?
2. How was your comprehension in Step#4, when you could just read?
3. If you read more material than in Step#1 – why do you think you got that result?
4. Where did your eyes land during each step? On the words? Above the words? In the middle? Where the dots usually are?
5. Were you able to develop a *conversation for concentration*?
6. What (specific) questions did you ask yourself when reading?
7. Where did you find the majority of your attention?
8. What did you think was important enough to notice when you were reading?
9. Did that change with each step?