



To Increase Your Comprehension

- Try to make the act of learning sequential—comprehension is built by adding new knowledge to existing knowledge.
- Review and rethink at designated points in your reading. Test yourself to see if the importance of the material is getting through.
- If things don't add up, discard your conclusions. Go back, reread, and try to find an alternate conclusion.
- Summarize what you've read, rephrasing it in your notes in your own words.

Most importantly, read at the speed that's comfortable for you. Though I *can* read extremely fast, I *choose* to read novels much more slowly so I can appreciate the author's wordplay. Likewise, any material that I find particularly difficult to grasp slows me right down. I read newspapers, popular magazines, and the like very fast, seeking to grasp the information but not worrying about every detail.

Should you take some sort of speed reading course, especially if your current speed level is low?

Reading for speed has some merit—many people who are slow readers read as little as possible, simply because they find it so tedious and boring. But just reading faster is not the answer to becoming a good reader.

I can't see that such a course could particularly *hurt* you in any way. I can also, however, recommend that you simply keep practicing reading, which will increase your speed naturally.

Remembering What You Read



In a world where the ability to master and remember a growing explosion of data is critical for individual success, too little attention is paid to the dynamics of memory and systems for improving it. Developing your memory is probably the most effective way to increase your efficiency, in reading and virtually everything else.

There are some key factors that will help you remember more of what you read:

- **Understanding.** You will remember only what you understand. When you read something and grasp the message, you have begun the process of retention. The way to test this is to rephrase the message in your own words. Can you summarize the main idea? Unless you understand what is being said, you won't be able to decide whether to remember or discard it.
- **Desire.** You remember what you *choose* to remember. If you do not want to retain some piece of information or don't believe you *can*, then you *won't!* To remember the material, you must *want* to remember it and be convinced that you *will* remember it.
- **Overlearn.** To ensure that you retain material, you need to go beyond simply doing the assignment. To really remember what you learn, you should learn material thoroughly, or overlearn. This involves prereading the text, doing a critical read, and having some definite means of review that reinforces what you should have learned.
- **Systematize.** It's more difficult to remember random thoughts or numbers than those organized in some pattern. For example, which phone number is easier to remember: 538-6284 or 678-1234? Once you recognize the pattern in the second number, it takes much less effort to remember than the first. You should develop the ability to discern the structure that exists and recall it when you try to remember. Have a system to help you recall how information is organized and connected.
- **Association.** It's helpful to attach or associate what you are trying to recall to something you already have in your memory. Mentally link new material to existing knowledge so that you are



giving this new thought some context in your mind.

Retention

Retention is the process by which we keep imprints of past experiences in our minds, the “storage depot.” Subject to other actions of the mind, what is retained can be recalled when needed. Things are retained in the same order in which they are learned. So your studying should build one fact, one idea, and one concept upon another.

Broad concepts can be retained more easily than details. Master the generalities, and the details will fall into place.

If you think something is important, you will retain it more easily. So convincing yourself that what you are studying is something you *must* retain (and recall) *increases* your ability to add it to your long-term memory bank.

Retention is primarily a product of what you understand. It has little to do with how *fast* you read, how great an outline you can construct, or how many fluorescent colors you use to highlight your textbooks. Reading a text, grasping the message, and remembering it are the fundamentals that make for high-level retention. Reading at a 1,000-words-per-minute clip does not necessarily mean that you understand what you’ve read or will remember any of it.

As you work toward improving your reading, realize that speed is secondary to comprehension. If you can read an assignment faster than anyone in class, but can’t give a one-paragraph synopsis of what you just read, you’ve wasted your time. If you really get the author’s message—even if it takes you an hour or two longer than some of your friends—spending the time you need to actually understand what you are reading will pay huge



dividends in class and later in life.

Recall

This is the process by which we are able to bring forth those things that we have retained. Recall is subject to strengthening through the process of repetition. *Recall is least effective immediately after a first reading*, which is why periodic review is so important. The dynamics of our ability to recall are affected by several factors:

- We most easily recall those things that are of interest to us.
- Be selective in determining how much you need to recall. All information is not of equal importance—focus your attention on being able to recall the most *important* pieces of information.
- Allow yourself to react to what you’re studying. Associating new information with what you already know will make it easier to recall.
- Repeat, either aloud or in your mind, what you want to remember. Find new ways of saying those things that you want to recall.
- Try to recall broad concepts rather than isolated facts.
- Use the new data you have managed to recall in a meaningful way—it will help you recall it the next time.

Recognition

This is the ability to see new material, recognize it for what it is, and understand what it means. Familiarity is



the key aspect of recognition—you will feel that you have “met” this information before, associate it with other data or circumstances, then recall the framework in which it logically fits.

If you’ve ever envied a friend’s seemingly wondrous ability to recall facts, dates, and telephone numbers virtually at will, take solace that, in most cases, *this skill is a result of study and practice*, not something he was born with.

There are certain fundamental memory systems that, when mastered, can significantly expand your capability. It is beyond the scope of this book to teach you all of these techniques; but if you feel you need help, I recommend *Improve Your Memory*, another book in my *How to Study Program*. You’ll probably find a number of helpful titles at your library as well.

Take Notes

Do you own the book you’re reading? Do you not care about preserving it for posterity? Then use its margins for notes. Go beyond mere highlighting to assign some ranking to the facts conveyed by the text.

I used to use a little shorthand method to help me remember written materials. I’d draw vertical lines close to the text to assign levels of importance. One vertical line meant that the material should be reviewed; two indicated that the facts were very important; asterisks would signify “learn or fail” material. I’d insert question marks for material that I wanted one of my more intelligent friends or a teacher to explain to me further. I’d use circles to indicate the information I was dead sure would show up on the next test.

Interestingly, I found that the very act of assigning relative weights of importance to the text and keeping a lookout for test material helped me remember because it heightened my attention.



Become an Active Reader

I urge you to quiz yourself on written material to ascertain how well you retain it. If this doesn’t work, try asking the questions *before* you read the material.

For instance, even though I have been an avid reader throughout much of my academic life, I had some trouble with the reading comprehension sections of standardized tests the first couple of times I attempted them. Why? I think I had a tendency to rush through these sections.

Then someone suggested to me that I read the questions *before* I read the passage. Presto! Great scores in reading comprehension (765 points on my verbal SAT for all of you doubters!).

While you won’t always have such a ready-made list of questions, there are other sources—the summaries at the beginnings of chapters or the synopses in tables of contents. Pay attention to these.

This technique will train your mind to hone in on those important details when they arise in the story. It would also be a good idea to ask yourself these questions immediately after you finish the chapter. It will help you decide whether you “got” the important points of the chapter and help you retain the information longer.

Understand, Don’t Memorize

Approach any text with the intent of *understanding* it rather than memorizing it. Understanding is a key part of memorization. Don’t stop the flow of information during your reading (other than to underline and take notes). Go back and memorize later.



Organize the Material

Our minds crave order. Optical illusions work because the mind is bent on imposing order on every piece of information coming in from the senses. As you read, think of ways to organize the material to help your mind absorb it.

I always liked diagrams with single words and short phrases connected with arrows to show cause-and-effect relationships. Or I would use a special mark (a triangle) to highlight in texts the *reasons* things occurred.

Develop Good Reading Habits

It's difficult for anyone to remember what he read at 3 a.m. or while waiting to go on the biggest date of his life. Set aside quiet time when you're at your best. Are you a morning person? Then wake up early to do your reading. Do you get going at 6 p.m.? Then get your reading done before heading out to dinner.

Don't forget to use your dictionary to look up terms you don't understand.

Why We Forget

As you think about the elements of developing good memory, you can use them to address why you *forget*. The root of poor memory is usually found in one of these areas:

- We fail to make the material meaningful.

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- We did not learn prerequisite material.
- We fail to grasp what is to be remembered.
- We do not have the desire to remember.
- We allow apathy or boredom to dictate how we learn.
- We have no set habit for learning.
- We are disorganized and inefficient in our use of study time.
- We do not use the knowledge we have gained.

All of us are inundated with information every day, bombarded with facts, concepts, and opinions. We are capable of absorbing some information simply because the media drench us with it. In order to retain most information, we have to make a concerted effort to do so. We must make this same effort with the material we read.

In Case You Forgot

Each time you attempt to read something that you must recall, use this six-step process to ensure you'll remember:

- 1. Evaluate the material and define your purpose** for reading. Identify your interest level and get a sense of how difficult the material is.
- 2. Choose appropriate reading techniques** for the purpose of your reading.
- 3. Identify the important facts.** Remember what you need to. Identify associations that connect

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the details you must recall.

4. Take notes. Use your own words to write a synopsis of the main ideas. Use an outline, diagram, or concept tree to show relationships and patterns. Your notes provide an important backup to your memory. Writing down key points will further reinforce your ability to remember.

5. Review. Quiz yourself on those things you must remember. Develop some system by which you review notes at least three times before you are required to recall. The first review should be shortly after you've read the material, the second a few days later, and the final one just before you are expected to recall. This process will help you avoid cram sessions.

6. Implement. Find opportunities to *use* the knowledge you have gained. Study groups and class discussions are invaluable opportunities to implement what you've learned.

Build Your Own Library

“The reading of all good books is like conversation
with the finest men of past centuries.”

—Rene Descartes

If you are ever to become an active, avid reader, access to books will do much to cultivate the habit. I suggest you “build” your own library. Your selections can and should reflect your own tastes and interests, but try to make them wide and varied. Include some of the classics, contemporary fiction, poetry, and biography.

Save your high school and college texts—you'll be amazed at how some of the material retains its relevance.



And try to read a good newspaper every day to keep current and informed.

Your local librarian can refer you to any number of lists of the “great books,” most of which are available in inexpensive paperback editions. You may want to put some of these on your to-buy list, especially if you're planning a summer reading program. In *Improve Your Reading*, I have included my own lists of “great” authors and books. You may want to consult them as well.

Reading the classics—ancient and contemporary—will probably make you a better reader; it will certainly make you more well-read. That is the extra bonus for establishing such a reading program—an appreciation of certain authors, certain books, and certain cultural events is what separates the cultured from the merely educated and the undereducated.

Read On

Insofar as one can in a single chapter, I've tried to sum up the essentials of reading. It is not a finite science, but rather a skill and appreciation that one can develop over time. Good grade school training is essential. And for those of you who have been able to identify problem areas, there are always remedial classes.