

Reading Methods & RSVP

Amolith

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Reading methods

Today, I learned that there are three primary ways people read. The first and most common is *mental reading* and this is when you “say” the words in your head as if you were speaking them.¹ I find this useful when writing because it’s as if I’m *actually* speaking them; picking out sentences and phrases that don’t sound quite right is easier. In writing courses, the instructor’s advice is often to read your work aloud and see how it sounds as mistakes, word choices, and grammatical errors are typically much more prominent. Personally, I find doing it in my head sufficient though. Mental reading is the slowest method but also where your comprehension is at its peak; you are forced to slow down and that gives your brain more time to process the information it’s being fed. The average speed is 250 WPM.²

The second method is called *auditory reading* and it’s just listening to words spoken by a person or a TTS³ engine. Because listening is generally more passive, it’s much easier to completely miss individual words while still understanding the meaning of the phrase or passage. This is significantly faster than mental reading at an average of around 450 WPM. However, comprehension takes a hit because you have less time to process the information.

Visual reading is the last and fastest. The concept may be kind of hard to grasp at first but the next paragraph about Stutter will hopefully make it clearer. Visual reading is understanding the meaning of the word without having to hear it or say it in your head, recognising it based on its shape and the letters it’s comprised of. Comprehension is at its lowest here but speed peaks. The *average* reader who uses this method can consume 700 words per minute. To put that in perspective, it’s 2.8x faster than mental reading. While comprehension is low, it is not nonexistent. The best way to understand what I mean is to try it for yourself.

Note: [Some sources](#) say that, with practise and when done correctly, there is no difference in comprehension, rather the opposite; you retain information *signif-*

¹The technical term is [subvocalisation](#)

²Words per minute

³[Text-to-speech](#)

icantly better when speed reading properly. This is where I would recommend actually doing it and deciding for yourself.

Stutter

[Stutter](#) is a Firefox and Chrome extension that brings RSVP⁴ to your browser and lets you develop visual reading skills. It specifically makes use of *peripheral reading* and displays a single word at time but moves through them at rapid pace. It highlights a single character of the current word just to the left of the centre. This is because a word can usually be recognised by its first few characters; the rest aren't as important. The highlight remains in a fixed position so you never have to move your eyes. Because of that, Stutter is able to display new words much more quickly; the average reader can usually comfortably start at 500 WPM but it is possible to reach speeds of over 1200 WPM with regular practise. I haven't gotten that far yet :wink:

For more information on speed reading, the [Wikipedia page](#) (where I got most of my information) is really interesting and well-worth a read.

Edits

- [@caltgin](#) recommended [firldr](#), a TUI tool for reading with RSVP

⁴*Rapid serial visual presentation*