

How to get the MOST from reading in a SHORT amount of time?

A simple five-step formula to unleash the power of your mind

Good reading technique is crucial to your career development, as well as your education. This is one of the most sought after techniques in today's world of rapid information development and exchange. Unfortunately our traditional education system does not formally train us in this area. In particular, we are not taught how to properly manage and digest a large amount of material in a short amount of time.

In our technological era, getting access to enough information is the least of our worries. By hopping on the Internet, we can locate as much relevant information as we need in a minute. In fact, if you visit <http://www.google.com> and type in the phrase "how to study", in 0.08 seconds, you are provided 317 million possible information sources to explore this topic.

Instead, what we need now is to know how to effectively and efficiently digest and comprehend the large amount of information we have access to daily.

What is knowledge?

Before we go further on this topic, let's take a look at the definition of knowledge.

Plato defined *knowledge* as *justified true belief*.

Belief is to be counted as knowledge only if it has been justified. This is sometimes referred to as the theory of justification.

In other words, information you have acquired and learned only becomes knowledge after you have analyzed and confidently applied it in your everyday life.

Therefore the process of developing knowledge not only includes the step of acquiring information, but also those of incorporating and applying the information. So to improve our learning ability, we have to look at each of the steps that make up the overall process.

The first step is information acquisition. We gain information by reading, listening and watching demonstration. Among these, reading is still the most commonly used and valued channel. Therefore we need to focus on your reading technique as the key to enhancing your learning ability.

The second step is assimilation. The information we obtain must be analyzed and incorporated into our existing knowledge base. Studies show that we are not likely to learn by heart a particular piece of new information if we are unable to correlate it to our existing knowledge and experience. (We'll talk more about the reasons behind this later.)

The third step is application, or recalling and utilizing the information in our lives, work, or environment. Information, no matter how well you have mastered it, does not truly become knowledge if you fail to retrieve and use it at appropriate time and places.

The magic to achieving maximum benefit from reading materials is to incorporate these three steps AT THE SAME TIME as you are reading. If you consistently practice the skills I'm going to introduce, you'll soon find yourself better able to digest, comprehend and apply the massive amount of information you receive, thereby building your knowledge base almost exponentially! Is it magic? Actually, it is not. Is it difficult? Not really – with practice, we all can do it!

Un-do old reading habits

But to do so, we must “un-do” our old reading habits. More than 90% of people read in a passive, linear manner – whether they're reading work-related or educational materials. This approach guides us to simply read materials from the beginning -- word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph -- until we reach the end. Indeed, if I ask you to read a stack of 50 pages, packed full of words from the first page to the last, even if you've found the topic interesting, you probably will need to spend at least 40 minutes to one hour to plow through the over 17,000 words. Of course, that's assuming you don't retrace and take breaks while reading.

Worst of all, after you have invested all this time reading, you might find it difficult to recall most of the information you just received.

So the first thing is we have to abandon this old, passive reading habit and adopt a new, active reading process.

How our brains process knowledge

To do this, it is helpful to understand how the brain processes knowledge. Our brain consists of on average 10 to 100 billion of neurons (brain cells). Each neuron consists of 1,000 to 10,000 synapses. Synapses of a neuron are used to connect to synapses of another neuron to form our internal “knowledge network.” We memorize and understand new knowledge by building connections to this existing network.

The different combinations of these synapses among this large number of neurons make our brain the most complex processing machine, rivaling any computer on the market. We all have enormous power to acquire and process knowledge, but we are unable to utilize most of the power of our brain because just as we have been taught to read linearly, we have been taught to learn linearly. But the reality is that our brains don’t work that way; they work more like tree branches, fanning out in a variety of directions.

How to break this habit?

So the key is for you to develop a new habit of reading. And over the next several paragraphs, I’m going to introduce you to a new reading concept called “layered reading”.

Layered reading is an ACTIVE form of reading that allows you to process a certain amount of information in layers. It is broken down into five simple steps:

1. Initial Material Scanning.
2. Initial Material Pre-reading
3. Detailed Material Reading
4. Post Material Reading
5. Post Material Scanning

Step 1: Initial Material Scanning

This step involves quickly looking over the material on hand, jotting down your thoughts and questions as you go. The jotting down is important and should not be brushed aside – it is the active element of the process that enhances your reading. Do not stop at difficult points or ideas. Just scan the material. For 50 pages of material, you should spend at most 3 to 5 minutes to do so. This is probably about eight times your normal reading speed. You can scan forward and backward the material freely. Focus on grasping just some ideas about the material. Don't worry about comprehension. Let your mind flow freely. Look for pictures and graphs. Try to relate the material with your existing knowledge. What is the general theme of the material? What interests you? What bores you? Jot these down..

Believe it or not, after this step, you have already obtained 20 to 30% of the material you are going to comprehend.

Step 2: Initial material pre-reading

With the notes you have jotted down, go back and read the material sequentially from the beginning to the end at four times your normal reading speed. You probably will spend about 10 to 15 minutes to read through a 50 page document. Don't retrace – continue forward. Look for the places that can answer the questions and comments in your notes from Step 1. Write down other important ideas, as well as follow-ups to your previous questions and thoughts.

When you have finished this step, you will have mastered nearly 50% of the material before you.

Step 3: Detailed Material Reading

In this step, you apply almost the same reading habit you have in the past, but at a faster speed, while realizing approximately 50% of the material comprehension. Spend about 20 minutes to finish reading the material at two times your normal

reading speed. Again write down any points you have missed in the previous steps.

This step requires you to read slower than you did in the previous ones (although it is still doubling your normal speed) to get the opportunity to fill in the gaps in your previous two reading steps.

After this step, you will have almost 80% of the material comprehension. If you don't believe that, you can ask someone to read the material and ask you questions about that. You'll be amazed by how well you know the material.

How is this possible? Because you have read the material three times at different speeds of absorption and, most importantly, you have practiced analyzing and incorporating the information along the way..

Step 4: Post Material Reading

This time, speed up your reading speed a bit (4X reading speed) ,like you did in step 2. Look for the missing pieces that you were unable to answer in the past three steps. Jot down your own evolving ideas and criticism to the material. You should spend at most 5 to 10 minutes on this step.

With the completion of this, you will have approached about 95% of the material comprehension. It is amazing!

Step 5: Post Material Scanning.

Scan your material freely to look for anything you might have overlooked. Focus on developing counterarguments to the ideas in the material. You should spend at most 5 minutes on this step, reading at about 8 times your normal reading speed.

Completing this step, you will have achieved **110%** of the material you're going to learned. Why 110%? Because now you not only have mastered the material but, in the last two steps, you have also acquired your own viewpoints and criticism about the material.

Let's review and compare...

For 50 pages of material, you will spend about 55 minutes maximum to digest and comprehend the material using the layered reading process. This is about the same time you have spent using the traditional linear reading habit.

BUT this is the only thing that will be the same. You now have a totally different level of comprehension of the material because:

- 1) You have considered, processed and sorted the material you have just digested in your mind.
- 2) You have already finished your own notes about the material you have just read.
- 3) You have raised sensible questions and issues about the material through this process. And you have identified relevant information to answer those questions and criticism.

You can vary and modify the reading steps as needed. For example, if you are reading a newspaper, you can combine first and second steps and skip step 4 in your reading. The more you practice the skills, the more you can vary and adapt this layered reading method to different reading situations.

A word about note taking habit

We all have developed our own personal styles of taking notes, but generally we follow the same linear method we used in reading – going word by word, line by line and paragraph by paragraph. This is the old note taking method we acquired in our early school years.

However, this note-taking method works counter to the way our brain processes information and, therefore, is not an efficient way to aid our study.

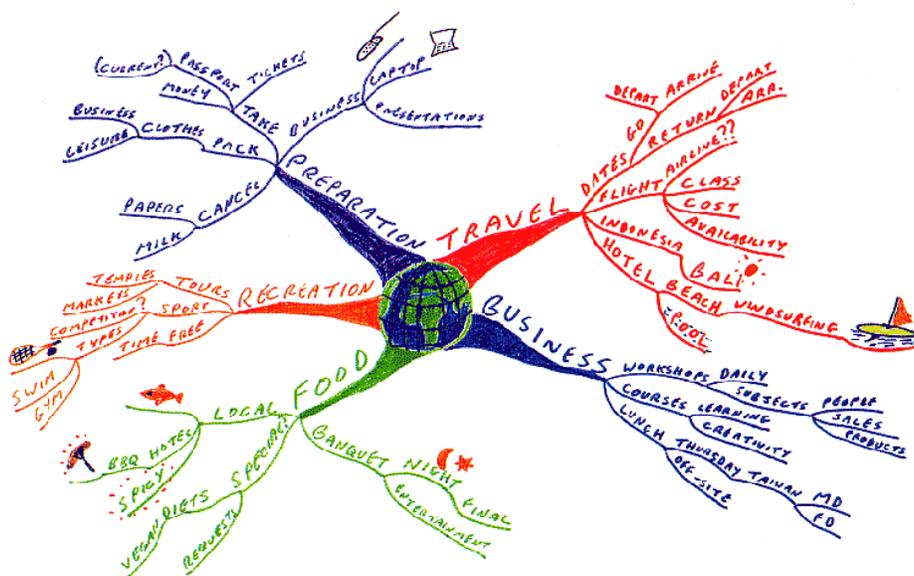
As I mentioned earlier, neurons work in the brain by building new “circuits” through

their synapses or branches. As we acquire new information, it is processed along these branches, relating it to our existing knowledge. Therefore, linear note taking is contrary to our brain structure and the way to acquire knowledge

However, there is a new revolutionary note taking method that does apply what we know about the way the brain processes information and this method is called *mind mapping*. It involves using single words and pictures in a radial pattern to take notes. You can find examples in these hyperlinks:

<http://www.mind-map.com/EN/mindmaps/gallery.html>

<http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk/mind-maps-examples.htm>



Source: <http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk/images/large/MM---Bus-Trip.gif>

An example of a well structured Mind Map prepared for planning a business trip.

Mind maps were developed in the late 60s by Tony Buzan as a way of helping students make notes that used only key words and images. They are much quicker to make and, because of their visual quality, much easier to remember and review.

In mind mapping, you start note taking with a central idea on paper and gradually add your points, questions, etc. radiantly out from this central theme.

In this way of note taking, you are not limited to your original ideas. And you can add and amend the ideas throughout your note taking process. This note taking technique works well with the layered reading process because you can always add and amend your ideas in different steps of the process.

Mind mapping also can help you to think “outside the box” because you are no longer limited to thinking linearly. It allows and even stimulates you to make cross-linkages that you might not otherwise make with traditional note taking, because it imitates how the brain interlinks knowledge and information to one another as they are processed.

In mind mapping, you will use single words instead of long sentences when writing down ideas and points.. Studies have shown that on average more than 50% of the words in a sentence are not directly contributing to the writer’s messages. While this is in part the basis of the layered reading process, it is also key to mind mapping which encourages you to focus on the single, key words instead of long sentences. You can also enhance mind mapping by using colors and drawing pictures in the process.

When using mind mapping to take notes, you have already laid down the good foundation for recalling the material later. When you review the notes later, the colors, pictures and the single words all help you quickly and more easily re-visit those circuits of synapses established in your brain – much more so than you would reading back through long, boring sentences.

Congratulations! You are almost there!

You are now armed with two powerful techniques of learning – the linear reading process and the mind mapping technique for taking notes. Make use of them and take yourself to the next step of learning horizon. The only thing you need to do is to practice them consistently and regularly. You have to make these your habit before you fully unleash the magic power within them.

By combining the layered reading method and the mind mapping note taking technique, you are now incorporating the three learning steps at the same time when you are reading, i.e. acquiring, assimilating, and recalling/utilizing the information so that it becomes part of your knowledge base.

Once you try this, you'll actually find yourself drawn to practice this new concept of reading, an active reading approach that requires you to more effectively utilize the processing power of your brain.

Why is this method so powerful? Because it is based on a simple principle of human behaviour – that of behaviour conditioning. Its essence is the belief that the more you practice, the more easily and likely you are to repeat the same behaviour.

Layered reading process requires you not only to “absorb” the material you are reading, but to consistently “spit back out” or regurgitate the material you have just grasped onto notes and to practice rearranging the information in your brain throughout the whole process.

This regurgitation will enable you to recall and utilize the knowledge you have learned more easily and quickly simply because, by virtue of taking the notes, your brain has already begun the process of incorporating the knowledge.

Will you remember this knowledge forever?

We all know that our memory fades with the passage of time. However, you are more likely to recall the material you have learned longer if you go through the layered reading process in your learning. Combining this with mind mapping in your note taking, you also should be able to recall material in much shorter time.

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There are thousands of grains of information out there waiting for you. Apply the layered reading and mind mapping techniques and your brain can be your oyster, turning these grains into pearls of knowledge.

Reference Reading:

The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential

By *Tony Buzan, Barry Buzan*

Use Your Head

By *Tony Buzan*

Breakthrough Rapid Reading

By *Peter Kump*

Remember Everything You Read: The Evelyn Wood 7-Day Speed Reading & Learning Program

By *Stanley D. Frank*

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