Checklist

Do you often:

1. "hear" every word clearly in your head, even when you read silently?

2. read everything in the same way, at the same speed (i.e., slowly and carefully) whether you need to or not?

3. read an article or story so slowly that by the time you reach the end, you can't remember the beginning?

4. avoid courses in literature or any subject that requires much outside reading?

5. own several good books you have "never had time to finish" (the ones with bookmarks stuck in them)?

If you checked one or more of these symptoms, you need to learn how to read more rapidly. But you are also apparently the typical compulsive reader. You are still reading everything slowly, correctly, "orally," just as you did in grade school. The problem is, nowadays you're supposed to be reading silently, not orally. Also, as an adult your reading tasks vary tremendously, both in what you are reading and why you are reading it. So it is inappropriate for you to use only one reading style and rate.

The old word-by-word method is especially inefficient for the mass of general reading that you do, or should do (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and light books). These are fairly easy and do not require study reading. You don't have to memorize today's newspaper or take a test on this week's Time magazine!

So why do most of us tend to read light materials so slowly? First, because that is how we first learned to read. Second, because it's now a comfortable habit. Third, because we're afraid we'll "miss something" or "lose comprehension" if we skip a few words.

These old habits can slow us down unnecessarily. The paradoxical truth is that when reading matter is fairly easy, our comprehension actually drops if we read it too slowly. For one thing, we can miss the flow of the writer's story line or argument. For another, our minds wander if we don't feed them information at an optimum speed; that is, we "lose concentration." Many studies have shown that average readers can often double their rate in general reading with no loss of basic comprehension. Many even increase their comprehension because they concentrate better at the higher speeds.

However, let us offer just one note of caution. Common sense tells you not to push your speed if you have serious vision or perception problems. You also should not push to increase your rates if you do not already have good basic skills and at least an average vocabulary and a ninth-grade-level comprehension.

Now for the good news. If you have none of those problems, you are ready to venture into rapid reading. Just remember these two things:

- Make sure your material (the What) is fairly easy for you. You should know something about the subject matter and have no major problems with the vocabulary, style, or ideas. Don't expect to read Scientific American or Spinoza's philosophy rapidly and with full comprehension the first time through, unless you are a scientist or philosopher.

- Make sure your purpose for reading (the Why) is appropriate for rapid reading. Do you need to memorize the contents of the material? Discuss it in detail? Savor the style? Are you aiming at 100 percent understanding of new, difficult principles, as when you study-read a textbook? If so, don't expect a fast, once-through reading to be sufficient. Your purpose should not be study or analysis (although a single rapid reading prior to study or analysis is often very useful). Your purpose when you decide to rapid read should be general information and enjoyment.

How to Read More Rapidly

For best results, don't start right in by forcing yourself to read at 800 wpm, especially if you have been a habitually slow reader. Instead, as you become more fluent at reading easy materials rapidly, you will find that Tips 1, 2, and 3 will become part of your new reading habits. Then you can concentrate on increasing your rate with no loss of basic literal comprehension.

- **TIP 1.** Approach rapid reading with a relaxed, confident mind-set. First, forget any 100 percent compulsion you may have built up over the years. Remind yourself that in the future, no one is going to test you on your leisure reading! Second, leave the slow rates (100-300 wpm) to talk-ing or reading aloud. Your eyes can see all the words on a page at speeds up to 800 wpm, and your brain can operate at thousands of words per minute. So feed yourself printed words at a more challenging pace--400-800 wpm.

- **TIP 2.** Trust your sense of closure. All adult readers know enough about English words, sen-tence patterns, and common logic to understand most of the contents of a page even if they do not clearly see every word. ("Function words"--those not essential to literal comprehension--may easily be omitted. "Key words," however, are important to comprehension.) Depending on how concise a writer's style is, we can omit 10-50 percent of the words in ordinary prose with-out losing any basic literal comprehension.

- **TIP 3.** Use your eyes efficiently. A slow reader tends to fixate (focus) on every single word across the line. Yet the average eye span on the printed page is about 11/2 inches in diameter. Two popular speed-reading techniques will help you increase your visual efficiency:

    o Use soft focus as you read. Don't peer tensely at the words. Relax your eye muscles and face muscles. Let your peripheral vision do more of the work. Look slightly above the line of print, and let your eyes "float" down the page. Try to read the lines, not each letter and word.

    o Use shortened margins. That is, don't fixate on the first or the last word on each line. Rather, fixate about a half inch in from each margin, letting your peripheral vision pick up the words to the side. Like the soft-focus technique, this one takes time and prac-tice.

    A note of caution: The best eye span and soft focus in the world will not, by themselves, make a good or a fast reader. Ninety-nine percent of all reading takes place in the brain, not in the eyes. As you concentrate on the ideas on a page rather than on each word, and as you increase your rate in easy materials, your brain will become more alert and active, and you can forget what your eyes are doing.

- **TIP 4.** Use all the Essential Reading Skills. This means that you must first preview skim your material for the main ideas and overall structure. Since previewing helps with basic comprehen-sion, scanning, and study reading, it is an absolute necessity in rapid reading. You will never in-crease your speed if you do not begin with a "map of the territory." Besides previewing, re-member the other essential skills. You will need to pay attention to important transitions and other signals, and notice organizational patterns--all keys to the "writer's path." Even when we read rapidly, our goal is to grasp the writer's message as accurately as possible.

- **TIP 5.** Use time pressure. This is an outgrowth of Tip 1. Be confident that your brain can handle print faster than you can talk or read aloud. To rapid read, you should be physically relaxed but mentally active! Most people find that some tension, some pressure, helps them concentrate on their reading. In fact, skilled rapid readers are not passive and comfortable. In rapid reading as in scanning, you must be conscious of time passing. So time yourself, or have someone else time you, or work up a little competition with class members.

    One tried-and-true way to apply time pressure is to chart your reading rate. As usual, choose a fairly easy book and make sure your purpose is enjoyment. Keeping an objective record (e.g.,list, chart, or graph) is important, since we seldom know just how fast we are reading.

    Rate charts, whether handmade or commercial, operate the same way: graphic records or your ups-and-downs that will spur you to faster and more consistent speeds. Even a simple time-block record is helpful. With this, you read for a fixed time, then stop, count the pages read, and list or graph the number.

    Another easy way to keep your rate over 400 wpm, on your own, is to time your reading of a paperback book page by page. Since the average paperback contains 350-450 words per page, your speed will fall into the lower range of "rapid reading" if you can read at least one page per minute. To help maintain a steady, rapid pace, try using your finger as a pacing device down each page.

- **TIP 6.** Use a crutch, until you can read rapidly without one. If you try the first five tips and still continue to read easy materials at a grade-school rate, the following may help you concentrate and speed up:

o Use your finger as a pacing device. You can move the finger rapidly from left to right under each line. This technique is effective if you intend to read every line, but it will hold you back if you wish to skip.

  Or you can use one or more fingers vertically. Place your finger(s) under the center of the first line of page, then move your finger straight down the page. (A slight left-right wiggle is permissible.) Keep your finger one or two lines below your eyes.

o Use an index card as your own portable shutter. Like commercial gadgets, the card prevents you from regressing to previous lines of print. Also, because you use your arm and hand to move the card down the page, you are physically more focused on the reading. Unlike other gadgets, an index card is cheap, is easy to carry with you, and can double as a bookmark! Do not forget to use soft focus and shortened margins as you read.

These crutches help keep your attention on the page and pressure you to read faster. Some readers continue to use their favorite crutch for years, especially when they feel distracted. Eventually, though, it's best if you can really change your old habits of unnecessary slow reading, "throw away your crutch," and read general materials at 400-800 wpm, simply by using your eyes and brain. A good slogan to keep in mind: "Read the ideas on the page, not the words."

Using the reader of SilentIdeas 4.0

In SilentIdeas, we have a tool that helps the reader to train his capacity to fix attention in groups of words rather than just one word at a time as is the common habit. This tool allows the user to eliminate the habit of regress to the words already read, an habit that leads to retard the reading.

To access this tool, click on the "Rapid reading" menu in the main window of the SilentIdeas. Next, choose the "Train your reading speed ..." option. The following window will appear.
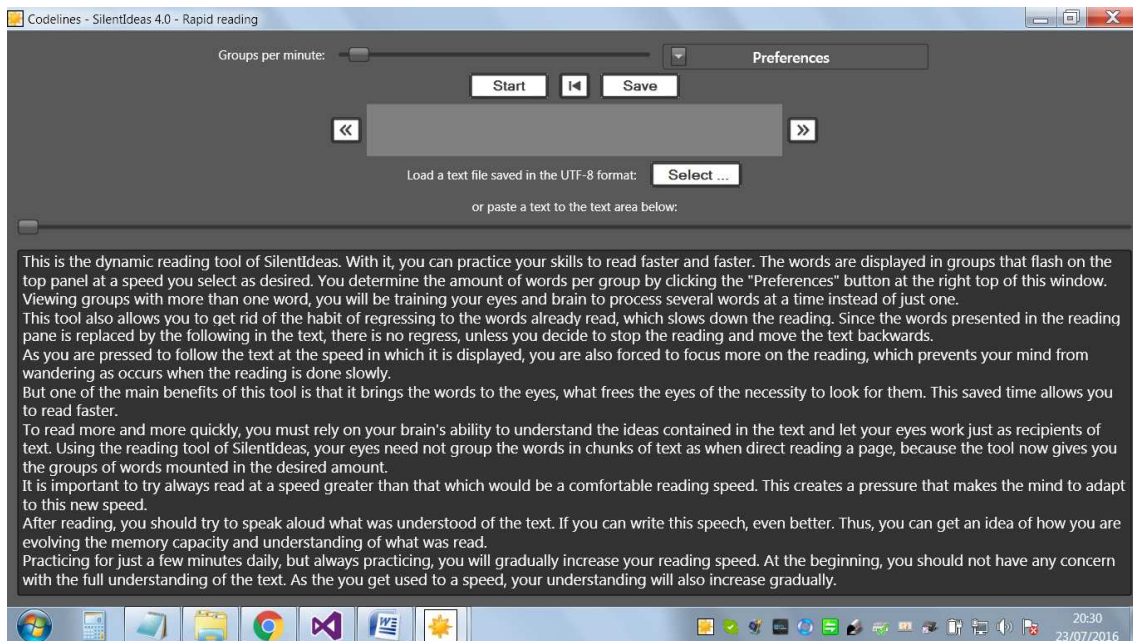
In this window, we have two panels. The top panel is where are displayed the words of the text to be read that you will paste in the bottom panel. Unlike normal reading, this rapid reading assistant frees the eyes from the work to move along the text, because it brings the words to the eyes. This is done by groups of words which may have from one to eight words.

The number of words per group, the speed at which the groups are displayed, the font and the background color of the reading panel can be chosen by clicking the "Preferences" button at the right top corner of this window. Clicking that button, the text exhibition is stopped if it is active and a small panel expands with the settings options. See below.
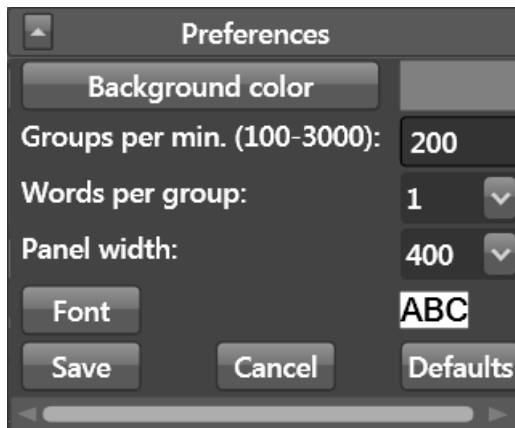
Here, you can choose the background color of the reading panel, the number of groups per minute which can range from 100 to 3000, how many words per group will be displayed at a time (one to eight), the panel width and the font used to display the groups. After changing these options, you will see the effect immediately, but they will not be saved for future sessions of use. To save them, you must click the "Save" button. In case you want to cancel the changes and restore the previous state without saving them, click on the "Cancel" button. Clicking on "Defaults", the initial reading assistant settings are loaded, but are not saved.

One detail to note about the settings is that if you want to read at a certain speed, do not forget that the increased number of words per group will cause your mind to be exposed to a greater number of words at a time and this will be increasing the speed with which the words will be displayed.

To start reading, there must be a text loaded in the bottom panel. This can be done in two ways: pasting text directly on the panel or choosing a file containing the text. To load text from a file, click the "Select" button at the top of the panel. It is important that the text has been saved in UTF-8 format if your language has accents. Simple programs like Notepad, which comes with Windows, allow you to save the text file in UTF-8 format.

Beyond the control of the number of groups per minute that you have in the settings panel above, we can also increase or decrease the number of groups by moving the slider at the top of the window.

Above the top panel where the groups of words are displayed, we have the buttons "Start" and the left arrow button which let you start the words exhibition and reset it respectively.

In case you want to stop reading and move groups of words forward or backward, there are two buttons pointing to the right and to the left on either sides of the reading panel. By clicking these buttons, the displaying of words stops and the text is displayed one block at a time. If the button clicked is pointing to the right, the text moves forward; if the button clicked is pointing to the left, the text regresses.

Above the panel containing the full text, there is another slider that allows the user to position the text so that the reading is done from the point where the slider is positioned.

Unlike other readers that display groups of words, the assistant of SilentIdeas respect the logic of the termination of sentences and does not create groups containing sentence terminations followed by the beginning of a new sentence, which gives a better meaning to the groups and facilitates understanding.

In the registered version of SilentIdeas, you can stop reading and to click on the "Save" button to save the text that is being read plus the position where the reading was interrupted to restart the reading later from that position. The display present settings are also saved. If you are not a registered user, you will have saved only the display settings