

# Reading Less, More—and Twice as Fast

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 [str.org/w/reading-less-more-and-twice-as-fast](http://str.org/w/reading-less-more-and-twice-as-fast)

## Tactics and Tools



If you're like a lot of people, you want to read more effectively, but you don't know how and can't find the time. Solomon wrote, "The writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body" (Eccl. 12:12). I get it. Just looking at the stacks of unopened volumes in my own library wearies me.

To make matters worse, even the good books we read often do little good in our lives because we forget the details almost immediately. Usually, our goal is to finish the book, not feast on its contents and master its material, so we read inefficiently.

I want to suggest a plan that will change that for you. I would like to show you how you can read less, more—and twice as fast. It's based on one simple idea: It's better to thoroughly read and absorb one or two good books than "finish" five or ten by reading them cover to cover and then moving on.

The idea raises two practical problems. First, how do we know if a book is worth investing time in? Second, what techniques will allow us to read thoroughly, yet quickly, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the author's ideas?

## Four Pages a Day

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Don't think you have to read 50, 25, or even 10 books a year to stay educated, informed, and equipped. Instead, I want you to think about carefully reading just six books during the next twelve months.

For some of you, even that number may seem overwhelming. It isn't. It's 60 days per book, or four pages per day for a 200-page title. Even a person who reads casually can accomplish this, especially using the techniques I'll show you.

I want you to consider devoting two months to one worthwhile title. The object is not simply to read from beginning to end, though. The goal is to have a thorough understanding of the book's ideas and arguments. I'm going to show you how to read a book in such a way that at the end of two months you can say, "I own this book."

For that, you need a system. Starting at the beginning and reading through word by word to the end is a system, of sorts, but it's not a very good one.[1] The key to effective reading is going through a book more than once at different levels. I'm going to show you how. Follow these four steps for non-fiction books: overview, preview, read, and post-view.[2]

## Overview the Book

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Not every book deserves a good reading. The initial overview allows you to determine whether a title merits your attention. It gives you a sense of the main thrust of the book in 10 to 20 minutes.

Start by reading the jacket cover. Read some of the endorsements (if any) and note their sources. Check the publisher and the date of publication. Read the table of contents. Skim the book's preface and introduction. Browse through the index in the back.

If you don't like what you see, abandon the effort and look for a better book. You've only lost a few minutes and possibly saved hours of fruitless reading.

If the work looks promising, though, page through the entire book at the rate of two to three seconds per page. Don't try to "speed read." This first step is a casual one. Let your eyes stroll over the material as your gaze falls on the text and enjoy the process of serendipitous discovery, pausing if you want to take in more detail.

An overview like this takes less than 20 minutes and can be done while you're browsing in the bookstore. If you like what you see, buy the book to read more thoroughly later.

The overview is *always* the first step of thorough reading. Even if you already own the book and have decided to read it (or it's been assigned to you for a class), don't skip this step. It provides you with a quick glimpse of the general structure of the work.

When you know the author's general flow of thought in advance, that makes the book more interesting when you slow down for a more detailed read. It also helps you better understand and remember the material since the book's soil has already been tilled a bit for you.

## **Preview the Book**

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Next, go through the book a second time. Sit down and read it at a slower rate, but still not word for word. I suggest you skim at the rate of five to ten seconds per page. Force yourself to move quickly.

Obviously, you're not reading all the words. You're skimming. I read the headings and the first sentence of some of the paragraphs. I try to get a feel for the author's main case and his flow of thought.

This is more aggressive reading than you did in the overview but still casual. Don't linger, though. Force yourself to push ahead, turning the page every five to ten seconds. You might even break the book in as you go if it's a new one, gently pressing each page back as you move forward.

You will be amazed at how much you'll absorb during this quick preview phase. When I interview authors on my show, I often "read" their book this way, at least initially—though I linger longer over passages of special interest as I take notes for our conversation together. I don't have time to cover everything—in my preparation or on the air. This step gives me a thorough grasp of the contents, though, in a brief amount of time.

When you're done with your preview, write a brief summary on the title page capturing what you take to be the main thrust of the book. Finish the sentence "This book is about..." or "The author is trying to accomplish...." Use pencil because you may want to change the summary after you've read the book more thoroughly.

This second step of our approach will take 20 to 40 minutes at four to ten seconds per page, depending on the book—though it's fine to take longer if you choose to linger over sections that grab your attention. Remember, this system significantly improves your grasp of the content, but it also makes reading more fun.

When you're done, you'll have gone through the entire book twice—overlooking and previewing—in less than an hour (depending on how long you linger over good parts). You'll also have a summary statement that captures the book's central idea.

This "layering" method fixes the author's basic ideas in your mind in a way that won't happen if you simply start at the first page and read through to the end. The first layer—the overview—gives you a general sense of the material and allows you to decide whether the

book is worth reading or not. The preview clarifies the basic content and organization of the book and gives you the author's approach to the material and the book's main thrust.

## **Read the Book**

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Now it's time to actually read the book the ordinary way. This can be done in multiple sessions, as you like, maybe reading one chapter per sitting.

When you start a chapter, begin by quickly previewing that chapter once again, five to ten seconds per page. This is important. It takes only a few minutes, but it reacquaints you with the material you're about to focus on and reminds you of its structure.

Then read the text word for word, as quickly as possible.

Don't linger and don't regress (don't reread what you've just been over). Don't stop to underline, either. It slows you down. Instead, use a pencil and make a vertical line in the margin to mark those things worthy of note. You'll come back to those passages later. You don't want to lag here, even though you're reading carefully.

Complete this phase by writing, *in pencil*, a summary in a few sentences in the big white space above the title at the beginning of each chapter (or maybe the facing page of the chapter if it's blank). Use pencil because you may want to make refinements later. Try to capture the main point of the thrust of the chapter.

I have found this practice to be one of the most useful exercises of this reading plan. You cannot summarize an author's ideas unless you've thought a bit about exactly what he is trying to say. Further, your summaries will serve as quick reminders of each chapter's contents when you review the book in the future. Reading these chapter summaries quickly in sequence gives you a fast synopsis of the book in your own words.

## **Post-View the Chapter Immediately**

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Finally, go back over the chapter one more time right after you've read it word for word, focusing on the marks you made in the margin. Review the material, interacting with the author's ideas and, if you like, making notations in the margins and underlining key sentences. Look at the summary you wrote earlier at the beginning of the chapter to see if it's accurate and precise. Refine it if you need to. You might also want to sketch a quick outline for the chapter.

Go through each chapter in the same way. Preview it, skimming quickly, then read it carefully but at a good clip, making your notations during the post-view. If you take a break and resume your reading a day or more later, review your summaries at the beginning of the book and each preceding chapter before you pick up where you left off. This will take only a few short minutes but will set the stage for your next session.

This is aggressive reading. It is also aggressive learning. When you're done, you will have gone through the book at least four times in a fairly short period of time—working from the whole, to the parts, then back to the whole again. You'll have brief chapter summaries and an outline—handy tools for quick review in the future—and a solid grasp of the material.

In the future, when you simply skim through the book again, all the information will come back to you. You'll be able to state who the author is, his main point, the structure (development) of his thought, if you think his views are correct (why or why not) and what difference it makes to you. You will have mastered the book, not just read it. I think you might also discover something else: Going through a book four times in this way will actually feel faster than reading it the “old” way.

## **Double Your Reading Speed Instantly**

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Let me give you an additional tip that has the potential to double your reading speed in one step. Use your finger as a pointer and move it along underneath the sentences at the fastest comfortable speed you can read. You can read above your finger, ahead of it, or behind it, whichever is most comfortable for you.

You might substitute a pencil or pen as your pointer, as long as you don't give in to the temptation to underline during your main reading. Instead, make short vertical lines in the margin next to sections you want to focus on in the post-view. Don't do any underlining until that stage.

Using a pointer to keep you moving forward forces you to read more aggressively, with more concentration. Don't be afraid to push yourself a little bit. Go as fast as you can while still grasping the material. Don't stop, pause, or reread portions of what you've just covered (regressing). Keep up with your moving pointer, just like following the bouncing ball.

Again, this is not speed reading—taking in whole paragraphs or pages in a glance. You're still reading every word just as you normally would, but you're using your pointer as a pacer, increasing your speed and keeping your eyes from wandering.

If you take this simple step, you'll be surprised at how dramatically your reading speed increases. If you're reading 150 words a minute (a relatively slow rate), you can jump to 300 words per minute simply by consistently using your finger as a guide. Just move it underneath the words and follow along. Your comprehension and retention will improve too, even though you're reading faster.

## **Finding the Time**

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I am convinced that anyone is fully capable of mastering six books a year, but I also know it will not happen by itself. It takes a plan (which I've just given you) and the will to apply a modest amount of time to your goal. Thirty minutes three or four times a week is all you'll

need. But how do you find the time? It's easier than you think.

The first thing you can do is turn off the TV. I'm not kidding. Unplug it if you have to. The average person watches two to three hours of television a day. Even the slowest readers can read 50 books a year in that time. Devote some of that TV time to reading. Skip the nightly news. It's the worst possible source of information and will almost always put you in a sour mood. Instead, use that half hour to read. You'll be amazed at how much you'll get done and how civilized you'll feel as a result.

Here are some other ways to redeem pockets of useful time for reading. Try getting up half an hour earlier in the morning. Go into a quiet room and read before the household gets up. Or redeem the time you spend sitting in the bathroom. Just ten minutes a day will get even slow readers 150 pages a month. That's six books a year. I also take a book with me in the car so I can read while waiting for an appointment or when I'm stuck in line.

## Action Beats Intention

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Now it's time for action. You have the plan. You only need to do two more things.

First, think about which six books you'd like to have mastered a year from now. Check STR's bookstore for titles we think are worth your time. For starters, consider *Mere Christianity*, the classic by C.S. Lewis, or Gregory Ganssle's *Thinking about God*, or my own *The Story of Reality*. Each is a useful little tome that's accessible to the average reader.

Second, decide how you're going to redeem 10 to 20 minutes per day for your personal reading time. Opportunities abound—if you look for them. Carve out the time and then protect it.

This is something anyone can do. One year from now, you will be a deeper, better-informed person as a result. Just choose your titles carefully, then apply the plan. This may be one of the most rewarding habits you'll ever develop. I hope you start today.

Just remember that—like so many things—if you don't do it, it doesn't work.

## Overview

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- Get a sense of the book in 10–20 minutes.
- Read jacket copy and table of contents, skim preface and introduction, read endorsements, and skim the index. Note publisher and date of publication.
- Quickly page through the entire book at the rate of 2–3 seconds per page.
- Determine if you want to read the book more thoroughly, give it away, or file it for future reference.

## Preview

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- Skim entire book at a slower rate (5–10 seconds per page), breaking the book in as you go.
- Look for structure, outline, key facts and concepts.
- Write a quick summary for the book *in pencil* on the title page.

## Read

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- Preview each chapter again to get the structure before you read it (5–10 seconds per page).
- Read every word at the fastest comfortable speed, using a pointer so you don't wander, hesitate, regress, or lose your place. Mark the margin, but don't underline the text.
- Write a 1–4 sentence summary *in pencil* at the beginning of the chapter. This serves as a quick overview of the content of the chapter.
- Sketch a quick outline.

## Post-View Immediately

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- Re-read the chapter quickly, focusing on marked sections, interacting with the text.
- Refine your 1–4 sentence summary at the beginning of the chapter if necessary.
- Review at regular intervals, looking over chapter outlines and summary material.

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[1] Reading fiction for fun is different. Read any way that brings you the most enjoyment.

[2] I've taken many of my cues for this article from Mortimer J. Adler's and Charles Van Doren's wonderful classic, *How to Read a Book* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1940).