

QUICK Reading

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illustrations by Kishore Vij

The late President Kennedy, it is reported, took a programme in quick reading. The programme enabled him to raise his reading score from 250 to 1200 words per minute. He took this programme long before he became President, perhaps by way of preparing himself for such a position. He knew that the higher a man climbs up the executive ladder, the more he has to read; he knew also that *how* to cope with this added load would be one of the executive's continuing problems.

But this is not merely the problem of an executive; it is common to everyone, whether one is a scientist, a doctor, an engineer or an accountant. The

professional is living today in a world of knowledge explosion. Each day he returns to his desk to find it more and more inundated with reading matter — memos, reports, correspondence, journals and publications that come in ever increasing numbers. The flood is drowning the boss.

The professional faces two grim realities. One is that it is unsafe to be uninformed. The other is that there is so much to read and so little time. The options are: a.) dump it all into the wastepaper basket, b.) take it home hoping to read it, or c.) find out a quicker way of attacking the printed word.

Many are tempted to choose the first option! Some choose the second but not with much

success — they bring it all back unread! More and more are considering the third option, namely, develop the skill of quick or rapid reading. They start with reservations, though. They ask: Is it possible? Is it safe?

Quick reading training started in USA during the second World War — the executives that came to government from industry found that there was so much to read on a governmental job that to survive they had to augment their reading skill. Industry took to it and rapid reading courses became freely available. They spread to UK; they did not however, get acceptance in the American form. British Leyland Motor Training School modified it for British conditions and came



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DUMP IT ALL INTO THE WASTEPAPER BASKET.

up with a quick reading programme. And so did many European countries.

A modified version of the reading course to suit Indian conditions was first offered in 1959. When the course was first announced, skeptics understandably remarked: "What we need is not a programme in rapid reading; we need a programme in just plain reading — people just don't read."

Basic questions like "Why read?", "Why read faster?" "Is fast reading possible?" and so on deserve to be addressed first, if only briefly.

Why read? An earlier day thinker observed: "Reading is the key that unlocks the doors to all other subjects and to other

doors beyond and throughout life." A more recent one said: "One cannot become an educated person today just by spending four years at college. One can no longer even become educated by studying for many years more, because knowledge is doubling every ten years. Therefore, even after one has completed formal education, he must devote at least one-tenth of his time in keeping up with new knowledge being developed. If he doesn't do at least this much, he will fall behind."

Is quick reading possible?
It is possible to double or treble our reading effectiveness. The logic is this.

Firstly, most of us are currently utilising 20% or less of our capacities to read swiftly and intelligently. Secondly, some of our current reading habits are hindering our possible rate of reading. Thirdly, we have not followed research findings and applied them to our day-to-day work.

The uninitiated do have fears, among them: *Won't I understand*



TAKE IT HOME, HOPING TO READ IT.



FIND A QUICKER WAY OF ATTACKING THE PRINTED WORD.

less if I read faster? Can I read technical matter faster?

Scientific studies have shown that understanding usually increases as reading speed increases!

These studies show that the slow reader is often so concerned with the words that he often misses the main ideas.

It is true that we can't expect to zip through a scientific text book as we would through a mystery novel. Our reading rate will vary from material to material. The point is that the rise in speed will be *proportional*. If the reading rate on light material improves from 250 to 500 word per minute, the reading rate on technical material will improve from 150 to 300, say.

In our rapid reading skill development programmes since 1959, we noted that the great bulk of the participants — numbering some 9000 — read at approximately 150 words per minute with 70% comprehension — the normal reading rate of a tenth grade pupil. This may sound shocking. The grim fact is that most adults considerably cut

down their reading — especially their serious and professional reading — after leaving school or college, and for that reason, among others, their speed drops back from the college level of 200 to a high school level of 150 or less.

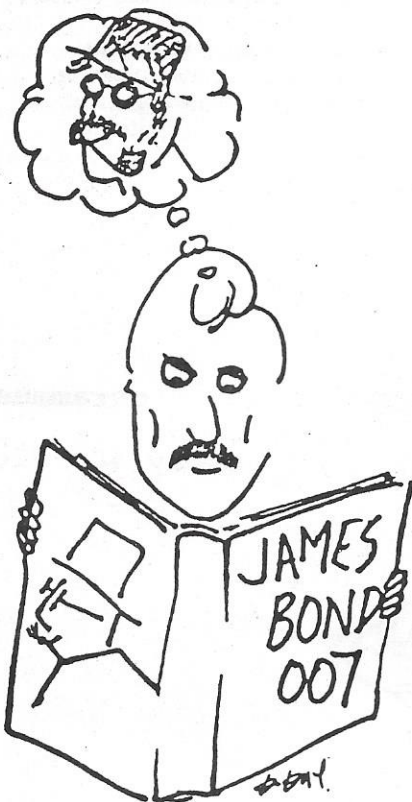
Slow reading leads to no reading! Slow reading is awkward, unsatisfying reading. Tortoise readers see their friends — especially younger friends — cover the same ground in half the time and with more enjoyment and better retention. They rationalise their limitation, saying: What is the big use of reading and knowing more? They thus restrict their reading to the daily newspaper, light journals and the office correspondence.

Research at a number of reading clinics all over the USA reveals the same startling fact: three out of five Americans are "reading cripples" — they are woefully inefficient readers who jog across the printed page at a "horse and buggy" rate.

Realising that reading skill directly influences the size of their

income, the pleasures they enjoy, and often the degree of their social success, students, teachers, professionals and even housewives in countries like USA take up one of the reading skill development programmes. It is not uncommon to find 200 people in a class held by the Harvard Reading Clinic.

Such enthusiasm for acquiring this skill is yet to be seen in India. Also, the training facilities are few and far between, in part due to prejudices in academic circles. The defence establishments have, however, taken the lead. The Military Engineering, College, Pune, has been giving a course in quick reading for nearly two



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decades now. The various defence training centres provide, from time to time, facilities for acquiring or augmenting this skill. MMC School of Management and Indo-American Society organise in-company and public programmes. While self instruction books help, a course taken with a specialist has added value.

A typical rapid reading training programme starts with a 'test'. A passage on a general subject of approximately 1000 words is given and the 'student' is asked to read it at his normal speed, remembering he will be called upon to answer ten questions on that text. The pre-programme reading score is ascertained. This consists of a) the number of words per minute read; b) the percentage comprehension calculated by the number of questions answered correctly out of the ten; c) the reading index which is the product of (a) and (b). Thus, if a reader's words per minute (or w.p.m.) is 150 and he has answered 8 out of 10 questions correctly, his reading index will be 150 multiplied by 80% and that is 120.

A comparable passage on the same subject is given and the post-programme reading score calculated. This gives a rough measure of the progress made.

In a 10-day programme given to a group of 30 managers and

professionals, the reading index on the first day, ranged from 31 to 320; and on the last day, the range was 76 to 666. The person whose reading index score was 31 on the first day raised it to 153, and the person whose score was 320 on the first day raised it to 666.

Where it is given in schools — the one school that has been giving it for many years now is Jnana Prabodhini, Pune — the score is calculated at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. One group of 25 students in the 5th standard (Marathi medium) had an average reading index of 165.75 as the initial score and the final score was 321.93. When the training continued in the next year, namely the sixth standard, it was noted the initial reading index at the beginning of the year was 415.60 and at the end of the year the score was 491.70.

After the initial pre-test, the principles are explained. The best part of the training goes in guided practice to master the key techniques of rapid reading. Some of these techniques are phrase reading, span stretching and paragraph reading.

In the phrase reading, the 'student' is trained to look at printed matter in terms of logical groups of words or phrases, instead of single words. In the span stretching, he/she is trained to increase his/her eye span or "eye bite". In paragraph reading, the focus is on looking at reading material in terms of key words, key

phrases, or key sentences.

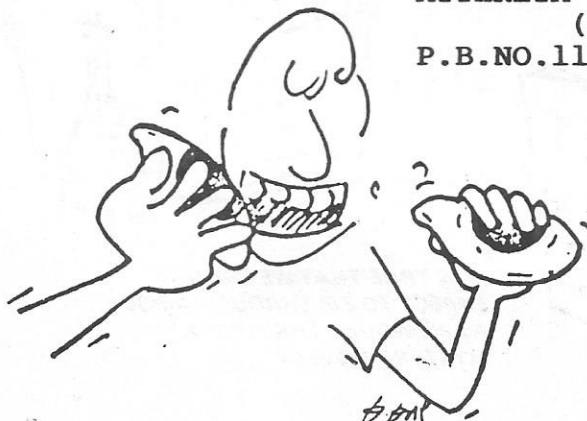
These techniques are taught sometimes with instruments like tachistoscope or reading films. They can be almost as effectively taught with the help of exercise manuals.

The 'home work' is usually for about 30 minutes per day for about 3 months. What is practised with conscious effort during the practice period becomes in due time automatic and welcome reading habits.

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that you now read 10 books a year. If you could finish 20 or more books without spending one extra minute on your reading, if you could learn to whip through your daily newspaper or favourite journal in half the time or less without missing anything of importance, and if, as a result, you are to discover added pleasure in rewarding reading, would a few months of serious effort be worth it?

Such an effort will not guarantee that you can compete with the Filipino teenager who, it is reported, read at 6000 words per minute (yes, with comprehension) but it does promise your reading pleasure doubled and/or reading time halved. And that is quite something!

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IN THE SPAN STRETCHING...
EYE SPAN OR 'EYE BITE'.