

Advanced Reading Skills

Techniques to getting started

by MajGen W. F. Mullen III

Reading is easily one of the most important activities that I do every single day, and it has been a lifelong habit for me. It has gotten to the point where I do not feel comfortable being without a book or article in the event I have some down time. In many ways, it is similar to how important exercise is to me, yet the dividends reading provides far outweigh anything I could ever achieve with exercise. Why is that? It is because of the wisdom that I accumulate through reading has helped me countless times throughout my career to come up with answers when faced with a challenge. It also gives me an almost *deja-vu* like experience when facing these challenges because few of them are anything truly new. Our profession is based on the competition of human wills with both sides adapting as quickly as possible to stay ahead. What I have also seen over my career are those Marines who have yet to figure out the true value of reading and, simply put, get left behind in a cul-de-sac. These same Marines disparage the value of reading and consider it to be too much work. Personally, I think they could not be more wrong as I consider it a matter of life and death. As former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis once said, and I paraphrase, the lack of competence in our profession means we fill body bags until we figure it out.

I first presented the techniques written about in this article back in 2008. When I arrived in Newport, RI, to attend the Naval War College, I was excited about the opportunity to focus only on my professional military education and not have to worry about a day job. The Naval War College has a great

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reputation firmly based on its trimester system that offers challenging courses each trimester. Of them, none is more challenging than the Strategy and Policy Course. The reading requirements at that time averaged about 600 pages a week, and I welcomed the inundation in reading, writing, and discussing strategy and policy that the course represented. I did not have much trouble with the reading load because of a previous tour. When I was on I-I duty in Milwaukee, WI, from 1996 to 1999, I enrolled in my alma mater, Marquette University, for a master's in Political Science. I was also enrolled in the Command and Staff College Course and trying to perform my duties as the I-I to the best of my ability, so organizing my time and finding a way to read more effectively was an imperative. I was able to come up with a system that worked for me and used it again at Newport. As I did so, I saw that my fellow students were having difficulty with the reading load. They either nearly killed themselves trying to keep up or did not bother with the result that they did not fare well in the seminar room discussions or exams. When I approached the school administration and asked them if they provided any advanced reading instruction to the students, they gave me a look that seemed to ask, "Why would we do that?" It was this incident that generated the article I am currently writing, which is based on the class I developed and presented not only to my

fellow students, but also many different audiences since that time. The idea is to enable people to read more effectively in general but to also apply techniques for given situations as you will see below.

The Challenge

In essence this is about modifying reading habits by breaking old ones and forming new, more effective ones over time. This is necessary because most of us were taught in elementary school in a way that has engendered bad habits. Back then, the mechanics or reading were more important than comprehension and retention. This was good for starting out, but it is not what we need for advanced-level reading skills. Since there are not many reading skills classes available, and not many people take them because they believe they read well enough already, few readers develop beyond what we were originally taught. The result is that we tend to subvocalize—meaning that we say the words in our mind as we read them because we became too embarrassed to say them aloud at some point. We also frequently re-read sentences trying to ensure that we take in every word, and if the words used are difficult, we get stuck on words or phrases. When trying to read a great deal, especially for an assignment, we have a tendency to push on from start to finish regardless of how receptive the brain is being, with the end result that we really are not taking much in. Reading can also be tiring and frustrating. Does this sound familiar to anyone?

A poor reader will become bogged down, spending a lot of time reading small blocks of words. He or she will skip back often, losing the flow and structure of the text, and confusing

his or her overall understanding of the subject. This irregular eye movement makes reading tiring. Poor readers tend to dislike reading, and they may find it harder to concentrate, and understand written information.¹

To compound the overall reading challenge, our attitude toward reading—especially in a school environment—is generally poor. We are only reading because we have to and generally resent the number of pages assigned and, in some cases, the topics. In our careers, many are frustrated because time at PME school is thought to be a “break” from the operational forces and the reading load seems too much like work. Also, as stated in the beginning, some get overwhelmed when they see the amount of reading required and just decide not to do it. I would also add that many are out of the habit of effective reading, if they ever had good reading habits to begin with. This is because there are many other more interactive forms of entertainment available which means there are too many alternatives competing for the time available for reading. Many also do not think of reading as a “leisure activity” as it is too much like work. How often have we heard the lament that we read more than enough at work? Of the alternatives to reading, TV is the biggest time killer, but Internet surfing, blogging, and email are overtaking TV. While these are certainly more intellectually engaging activities than watching TV, they are an easy way to waste a great deal of time for not a whole lot of gain. Since much of what passes online for information is of questionable validity and credibility, spending time doing these things can actually be quite counterproductive.

Overcoming the Challenge

To get to more advanced levels of skill in reading, we must first change our attitude about reading. Instead of resenting reading as too much work, or because it is required, look at it as an opportunity to get better – you are honing your intellectual edge. We all need to be in a life-long pursuit of knowledge, especially about the profession of arms, because none of us will ever be smart enough. As the “Peanuts”

cartoon character Charlie Brown said, “the more I know, the more I know how much more there is to know.” Our profession is constantly changing, and we have to fight to keep up. One way to do that is to look at what happened in the past because as Mark Twain once said, “History does not repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme a lot.” Everything we could ever want to know is available to us if we want it. This has been referred to as the 5000-year-old mind. We can take advantage of all the lessons learned throughout recorded history instead of learning them the hard way: first hand. This is even more important in our profession where the cost of a lack of competence has so much more serious consequences than any other profession in the world.

Our attitude about reading, or anything else, is a matter of *choice*. We decide every day what our attitude is going to be regarding the activities we will conduct. We need to look for the good and focus on the benefits we will receive instead of dwelling on any negative aspects. We should each also be life-long users of our brains. Like our bodies, our brains were made to be used and the more we use them, the better they are. I liken reading to PT for the brain. How often have you been drained and physically tired after you have worked your way through a particularly challenging article or section in a book? We also need to understand that studies on senior citizens found those who were still “sharp” never stopped exercising their brains. They kept participating in activities that served to maintain the synaptic connections in their brains instead of letting them atrophy by settling for easy, comfortable activities that did not challenge them. This is indeed a case of “use it or lose it!”

Another factor in overcoming the challenge to reading and learning is that we all have two different minds. One is our conscious, logical, “day” mind, while the other is our unconscious, day dreaming, or when asleep, dreaming mind. The most productive learning occurs when both minds are used together; getting ourselves interested brings both together in focus. We do this through conscious choice because

the unconscious mind does not know the difference between imagination and reality. It pretty much does what it is convinced to do through creating interest, which generates focus. Dreading the task at hand (“assigned” reading) kills interest, but this act is a choice also. Thinking is 12 percent logic and 88 percent emotion. Without engaging positive emotion, there is no real learning occurring and, if you are not learning something every day, then you are falling behind in the race of life. In other words, expect to learn and you will indeed learn.

Types of Reading

I am not sure that people realize that there are different types of reading and they are done for different reasons. Some probably unconsciously realize this, but in order to get to more effective reading, you must first know why you are reading something before you start and use the appropriate technique. The first general type is simple reading. It is slow, with every word covered and generally not too much thought involved. It is that reading done for day to day “normal” activities like newspapers or Internet articles. The next type is skimming. It is much faster and is seeking a general overview of the reading material at hand. It generally covers a lot of ground quickly and is used to check into a book you might want to read. The next type is entertainment reading. For this type, speed is irrelevant in that you are only seeking enjoyment. I refer to this type of reading as brain candy—who cares how fast you are reading. The next is power reading. It is moving fast and is more than just hitting the wave tops, but it is not in depth reading. This is used when mass reading is required for school or job-related activities. The last is analytical reading or reading for absolute understanding. It is detailed note taking with some referring to it as “owning” a book. This technique is used for professional development books or articles, technical manuals, or information you know you will be tested on in detail.

Prepare to read – READ!

One of the things that most people

miss when it comes to reading is that to become really good at it, we need to find the optimal reading time when our brain is most alert and focused. As humans, we all have different biorhythms. You can get a great deal more accomplished, and retain more, when the brain is fresh and focused rather than tired and/or distracted. We need to zero in on those optimal times and make the most of them to be effective readers. Now, some of us may not have a great deal of choice because of our schedules, but that does not mean we should not try to find and use those optimal times. When I was on I-I duty, my children were young and wanted attention when I came home from work or class. I found that the best time for me was early in the morning when no one in the house was awake. I was fresh (relatively speaking) and focused, so I was able to read much more effectively than at night after the kids went to bed.

Another consideration is to feed your brain, but do not choke it. What we eat and when makes a big difference. Reading when we are hungry can be very distracting as any little smell of food will cause our brains to divert our thinking toward how hungry we are and how good the food smells. Snacking to keep up energy and alert levels is a good practice as our brains use up a great deal of glucose when we are actively using them. Some foods contribute to better, more focused thinking, but beware of excessive amounts of sugar or caffeine as they can be distinctly unhelpful. Heavy meals with rich foods are not helpful either. Have you ever seen picture of lions after a successful hunt? They are passed out.

Something else to consider is that when the brain is not focused and begins to wander, we need to take a brain break. This may seem like common sense, but many of us get obsessive with reading and push on regardless of how much we are actually taking in. If the brain is not receptive, or is wandering, you are only going through the motions. Recognize when you are not focused and do something else, like taking a short, ten to fifteen minute break. This length is ideal for getting the brain refocused, but the break needs

to be a different activity that is short in duration like a short walk in fresh air or a brief, mindless computer game (solitaire for instance). We should avoid TV though as you can get caught up for too long and before you know it, too much time has gone by. If it is late, go to sleep and wake up early to finish because you are likely thinking more about going to sleep than what you are reading, and your brain will be more receptive once it has had some rest.

You should also focus on trying to control the environment around you. Find a quiet place so that you can concentrate. Avoid interruptions as much as possible and turn off the TV (you will look at it much more than you think you will). Music and smells can be subtly distracting also because they have a tendency to queue memories, which leads to your mind wandering. Something else that you can control is avoiding procrastination because it compresses the time available for you to conduct the type of reading you need to do. Plan ahead to avoid conflicts or things you know will distract you. Also, knocking things out before they really need to be done results in a good feeling and time available for things you would rather be doing.

The final consideration here is that you need to know *why* you are reading what you are reading. In an academic environment, the readings all have a purpose. Read through the syllabus and, in particular, the questions or learning objectives for that set of readings. Have the syllabus open to the questions or objectives while you read so you can embed potential answers in your head as you go along—or write them down for ease of reference during seminar discussion. You also need to discriminate the information you are consuming as not all of it is valuable or pertinent to what you truly need to know. This is perhaps the most difficult skill to develop, but over time your intuition will let you know whether what you are reading is valuable or not. Pre-screening what you will read and going off recommendations from people you respect will help you stay on a good path until you get to the point where you become very discriminating yourself.

More Effective Reading

One of the first aspects of reading faster and more effectively is the idea of reading at the speed of thought. How fast does the brain recognize a word? If it is familiar, it is near instantaneous. Subvocalization is forcing you to move at the speed of speech; while it is still fast, the time difference between saying the words in your head and just knowing the words as you move along accumulates over the course of an article or a book. If the brain recognizes a word instantaneously, it can recognize a series of them in very short order also, but the key is that your eyes have to be moving. You also have to find a way to keep yourself from subvocalizing because it is the habit you have grown up with and one that you are comfortable with. While some subvocalization may help with comprehension and retention, it always comes at the expense of speed. Personally, when I first started trying to break the subvocalization habit, I had to hum to myself.

One of the most important factors in being able to read faster is your vocabulary. The more words you “recognize” quickly, the faster you go. You must realize though that some reading will be tough because of the words, or the way the author uses words. Use context to discern the meaning of the words, but if you are trying to cover a lot of ground in a short amount of time, press on and avoid getting stuck in the mud. You should also not worry about reading every word since you will never remember everything in a book, even if you take detailed notes. More importantly, how many words do you need to read in a sentence to understand what the sentence is about? You are looking for the main points. What is the gist of what the author is trying to get across to you? If you can start with “recognizing” words, you can then move to recognizing blocks of words because the human eye is able to pick up a couple of words in each glance. Initially, trying to use this technique will be difficult because we originally learned to go from word to word. It will feel uncomfortable, but you can push yourself by practicing on the less pertinent course readings to enable yourself to go from block of words

to block of words. Top speed readers go sentence to sentence, line to line, paragraph to paragraph and some can go page to page, but the amount of practice required is high and I personally believe that comprehension and retention fall off sharply. This is why the value of true “speed” reading is questionable to me. It is a neat gimmick to sell an approach, but if we do not really understand and retain much of what we are reading, it is a waste of time.

As stated above, your eyes need to keep moving across the page, so you need to develop a way to keep your eyes moving constantly. Our eyes have a tendency to get “caught” on things and this tendency needs to be overcome. There are several methods available to enable this such as hand, finger or pen sweeping across the page with your eyes following along. Unfortunately, I find that I start looking at the instrument used instead of the actual words, so these methods are less helpful to me. Another method is to divide each line in a paragraph into three “blocks,” then sweep your eye across each line hitting the three block per line. Each block will take in several words or about one-third of each line. You must train yourself to move line by line, hitting three blocks on each as you progress down each page to force your eyes to keep moving and not catch on individual words. It helps to close your eyes and visualize yourself doing the three blocks per line technique with an imaginary book and use this as your practice technique to break out of the old habit of going from word to word and to build to the new habit of going from block of words to block of words.

Another consideration is that you can also vary your speed according to your need. Comprehension and retention are more important than speed, but you do not need 100 percent of either in an academic environment because the lectures and discussion in seminar aid in comprehension and retention. If you have a lot to read in limited time, speed up as some of it will sink in and it is better than not going over the material at all. If the reading is tough and you really need to know it cold, slow down to better enable understanding and reten-

tion. You can also vary your speed inside of the reading. If you already know a portion, or it is not all that pertinent to what you need to know, speed up. If you are moving fast, but hit an area that is tough or needs more attention, slow down some, but get back up to speed as quickly as possible. In essence, use whatever technique fits best but keep practicing and enforcing better reading habits overall.

Reading A LOT?

For every time someone asked me how I read as much as I do, I can say that it did not happen overnight, that is for sure. I will also say that there are many recommendations out there for how you should go about developing and implementing a personal study plan. Some encourage reading one book at a time and going in depth on it by taking notes and re-reading it if necessary. I have found that I do not have the patience for that. I also believe that one book is only one person’s view regarding the subject. I try to read as much as I can and cast my net as widely as possible to help me better understand myself and the human beings I live and work with every day. Despite saying this, my reading is not the aimless path that some take. Over time, I have developed many different reading lists—all books I need to get to that I have come across in bibliographies of books I found particularly interesting, books that have been referred to in other good books, or books that have been recommended to me by people I respect. I will look at others if they are related to a topic I am interested in, but I do not read everything I pick up as we all need to be discriminating. There is just too much out there to read to waste time on poor books or books by people who are just not credible with the subject they are writing about. Never worry about discarding a book you do not find credible or just cannot get interested in. Trying to press on and finish a book just because you started it is a waste of time. Move on to something else that interests you more. Keep that interest alive and well, not smothered because you are being obsessive compulsive about finishing a book!

As for the actual mechanics of reading, I always have between fifteen to twenty books going at one time. All are on differing topics and some are difficult. For those books I have to be in exactly the right frame of mind to continue reading them, so it takes me a long time to get through them. I find this to be particularly the case with philosophy. I want to understand this topic better, but really struggle with most of what I have read to date about philosophy. Some books are light and as I said before, I refer to them as “brain candy” because they are entertaining and easy to read. I find historical fiction is especially so for me. Of the books I am working on, several are always audio books which I get from the Navy General Library Program (both audio and e-books, all free). I listen to them while driving, exercising, or working at mundane tasks around the house. I bought a waterproof iPod shuffle and listen to books as I swim which has turned one of the most boring activities on the face of the earth into something much better.

As for actually reading books, I use every opportunity available to crack one open. My Kindle helps because I can carry so many with me in a small package, but I always have regular books going too. At work, I blocked off my lunch period to eat at my desk and read with the door closed, which I find to be a great break in the middle of the day. I am not always successful in keeping this period sacrosanct, but I do it fairly often. I also read at night before I go to sleep and on weekends around other things I am doing. At the beginning of each week, I read from all of the books I am working through as I am willing or able to do; then about Thursday, I zero in on the three I will finish that week. When I have finished them (and started new ones to replace them), I go back to reading from all I have in progress. I have been using this method for many years and it has taken me from finishing about one a week to three a week now. One key point here though, this is not about keeping score with how many books I read, it is about taking in as much information as I can to continually build my knowledge and

experience that when combined give me the wisdom I need to deal with every day challenges. It has worked very well for me to date.

Parting thought

Reading is much too important to be taken on cavalierly or ignored for the most part. As one very smart young Major passed along to me in an e-mail exchange recently:

It seems that people's paradigms about accumulating knowledge, pursuing curiosity, and seeing the utility

in personal PME changes when they notice its utility to everyday life (more adaptable to various assignments, rapid decision making from a deeper pool of knowledge, great likelihood of synthesis, better articulation when speaking, etc.).

I could not have said it better or more succinctly if I tried. Of all the forms of conditioning we put ourselves through to ensure we can answer the call when it comes, the mental aspect is the most important. Working at developing that 5,000-year-old mind is a lifelong task

and the benefits of doing so will more than pay off the amount of effort required pursuing it. You will never be sorry you did so.

Note

1. D.B. Rao, *Reading Skills for College Studies*, (New Dehli, India: Discovery Publishing House, 2009).

