

# Skillbook

# Read Smarter

Learning  
Skills



**Mindtools**

# Read Smarter

## Skillbook

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# 1. Introduction

**M**ost of us read – a lot! Conversations that used to take place face-to-face now often happen via email or messaging apps. We receive breaking news stories straight to our smart phones. Our social media feeds are endlessly updated, and there are discussion blogs and forums on every subject you can imagine. Sometimes, we may even read a book!

But there are only so many hours in the day, so how can we keep up with all of this information?


One way is to learn how to read more efficiently. This involves a combination of skills, including reading faster, deciding what we really **need** to read, and knowing how much detail we need to understand when we're reading it.

In this **Skillbook**, you'll learn:

- Techniques to increase your reading speed and comprehension.
- Key reading strategies, and when to apply them.
- How to retain key information from what you've read.

All of this can enable you to read faster and more effectively.

## 2. Speed Reading

 ur brains can absorb the written word much more efficiently than we realize. But certain habits hold us back. For example, when we read, we often **sub-vocalize**, which means that we say the words aloud in our heads. We “hear” the words, rather than see them, and this limits our reading to the speed at which we can “talk to ourselves.”

What’s more, many of us read and process only one word at a time. This, too, holds us back. Our minds are perfectly capable of processing information more quickly by grouping several words together, and comprehending the whole lot at once.

Take a look at the text in the box, below.

Aoccdnrig to a rscheearchr at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it dseno’t mtaetr in waht oerdr the ltteres in a wrod are, the olny iproamtnt tihng is taht the frsit and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it whotuit a pboerlm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Azanmig, huh? And l awlyas tghuhot slpeling was ipmorantt!

The text shows how our minds see words as a whole, rather than as individual letters. What speed readers have discovered is that the mind can see **groups of words** as a whole, too.

This process is called **chunking**. It is a key skill that can help you to improve your reading speed and your comprehension.

To master chunking, you must overcome sub-vocalization, because you can only pronounce one word at a time in your mind. But, when you gain control of your inner voice, you will be able to see words in chunks, and to focus on the ones that are the most important.

Let’s practice these techniques.



### Action:

Use your PDF viewer's scroll function, or print out this workbook and use a piece of paper to cover the list of words below. Scroll down, or pull the paper down the list and read the words as quickly as you can without saying them in your head. A handy distraction is to count in your head, or to repeat a sound like "oo" or "ee" over and over again.

## One-Word List

linguist  
synonymously  
cumulative  
epitomized  
hubris  
benignly  
paradoxically

How did you do? Were you able to silence the voice in your head?

Let's try the exercise again, combining the same words with others in chunks of three. This makes sub-vocalizing harder, as you can't say three words at once!

This time, pay attention to your eye movements. Move your eyes smoothly across and down the list, rather than slowing your pace to read each word.



### Action:

Cover the three-word phrases below, and then scroll down and read them as quickly as you can.

## Three-Word Phrases

an armchair linguist  
interpret it synonymously  
cumulative stock returns  
who epitomized humility  
antithesis of hubris  
you benignly slip  
openness and paradoxically

Were you able to keep the voice in your head quiet?

Let's try another list of three-word phrases:

erupt into laughter  
ancillary definition includes  
described as modest  
characteristics that distinguished  
by walking around  
dynamic elevator speech  
but without arrogance

How did that go? Take a moment to think about the tactics that work for you.

Next, we're going to try some five-word phrases. As the chunks get longer, it is important to keep your head centered, and to move only your eyes. If you try to read too quickly, you may hurt your neck. Be sure to keep your sub-vocalization under control, too.

Use the natural span of your vision to see the chunks of words. Your peripheral vision is useful, too – don't forget, you are trying not to move your head. Look slightly above the line of text, and let your eyes "float" down the page. Try to read the lines, not each letter and word.

### Action:



Try the following speed-reading exercises. Scroll down the five-word phrases, and challenge yourself to read them as quickly as you read the shorter ones. Remember to keep your head still!

## Five-Word Phrases

are seldom in neutral gear  
dictionary defines humility as modesty  
superb results but shun public  
who espouses two leadership attributes  
derailment of some corporate heroes  
without drawing attention to themselves  
curiosity over protecting our point



### Action:

Try the exercise again with the next list of five-word phrases, below. See if you can scroll faster than last time.

shifting the focus away from  
the more they have accomplished  
true merit, like a river  
a leader who practices humility  
space of the beginner's mind  
circumstances don't lead you to  
zeal to impose your point

Are you feeling more confident with your ability to read quickly? Have you started to see the five words together as one unit?



### Action:

Below is another list for you to practice with. Scroll quicker than you feel comfortable with and see how you do.

it enhances one's self-confidence  
leaders on this key attribute  
just stop talking and allow  
intentions of humility fly out  
we move away from pushing  
choose open-mindedness and curiosity  
I came across this reference

If you feel ready, you can now progress to phrases of seven words, or more. Remind yourself not to sub-vocalize. Remember to look at chunks of words, and not at each one individually. And try to keep your head steady.

When you move on to longer phrases, another habit to watch out for is **regression**. This is when you skip back to something that you've just read. Don't do it! Regression disrupts the flow of your reading and, perhaps surprisingly, it actually decreases your comprehension. Force yourself to keep moving forward.





### Action:

Below is a list of seven- to nine-word phrases or sentences. Scroll quickly down the list, chunk the words into groups, and focus on scanning smoothly across and down the page.

## Seven- to Nine-Word Phrases

here are a few suggestions on practicing humility  
we move away from pushing into allowing  
on a Friday night in an empty office  
those who achieve the most brag the least  
lack of aggressiveness in the pursuit of achievement  
they will create superb results but shun public adulation  
having a lowly opinion of oneself, meekness

Here's another list to try:

An example of such a leader who epitomized humility  
Being an armchair linguist, this factoid naturally stayed  
Some words have different effects on different people  
The word "humility" first struck me in the context  
Among the many characteristics that distinguished these companies  
We spend more time in that wonderful space

So far, you've practiced the following speed-reading techniques:

- Limiting sub-vocalization.
- Chunking words together.
- Keeping your head steady.
- Scanning smoothly across and down the page.
- Avoiding regression.

Next, you'll put all of these techniques together and apply them to a longer section of text, and we'll test your comprehension of what you have read. Scroll down, or use your piece of paper to reveal the text as you read. And, with each paragraph, move faster down the page.

Remember the techniques you've learned. Avoiding re-reading sentences, and keep your eyes moving across and down the page.



### Note:

Effective speed reading requires a balance between pace and comprehension. Studies have found that the faster you read, the less information you take in, particularly when it comes to remembering detail.

This means that you must take care not to sacrifice understanding for speed. Speed reading is not recommended if you're reading a complex legal document, for example, even if you are pushed for time. And, it's sensible to slow down if the material you're reading is new or unfamiliar, or if you have to teach it to someone else later.

But speed reading is a good option when you need to understand only the basic points, arguments or conclusions being presented.



### Action:

Read the passage on the next page. Then, answer the questions on page 9 to test your comprehension of the text.

## Practice Passage

Many years ago, one of my university professors mentioned that “windowsill” was voted the most beautiful word in the English language. Being an armchair linguist, this factoid naturally stayed with me. Words have enormous power. They can make us erupt into laughter or bring tears to our eyes. They can influence, inspire, manipulate, and shock. They can build and destroy. Some words have different effects on different people. One such word is “humility.” It is one of those words that are seldom in neutral gear. Some, like me, love the word and all it stands for. Some almost fear it and interpret it synonymously with lack of self-confidence or timidity.

The dictionary defines humility as modesty, lacking pretense, and not believing that you are superior to others. An ancillary definition includes: “Having a lowly opinion of oneself, meekness.” The word “humility” first struck me in the context of leadership when Jim Collins mentioned it in his seminal work, “Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don’t.” In this book, Collins examined companies that went from good to great by sustaining 15-year cumulative stock returns at or below the general stock market, and after a transition point, cumulative returns at least three times the market over the next 15 years.

Among the many characteristics that distinguished these companies from others was that they all had a Level 5 leader. Level 5 leaders direct their ego away from themselves to the larger goal of leading their company to greatness. These leaders are a complex, paradoxical mix of intense professional will and extreme personal humility. They create superb results but shun public adulation, and are never boastful. They are described as modest. An example of such a leader who epitomized humility is David Packard, the co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, who, in Jim Collins’ words, defined himself as a HP man first and a CEO second. He was a man of the people, practicing management by walking around. Shunning all manner of publicity, Packard is quoted as saying: “You shouldn’t gloat about anything you’ve done; you ought to keep going and find something better to do.”

Another great leader is Patrick Daniel, CEO of North American energy and pipeline company Enbridge, who espouses two leadership attributes: determination to create results, and humility, shifting the focus away from himself and continually recognizing the contributions of others. “I have learned through the lives of great leaders,” he said, “that greatness comes from humility and being, at times, self-effacing.”

Clearly these leaders, and many others like them, don’t espouse the meaning of humility as “meek.” On the contrary, it is a source of their strength. But the notion of being self-effacing is one that we struggle with in our competitive culture, prescribing that we take every opportunity to toot our own horn, and that we don’t dare leave the house without our dynamic elevator speech all rehearsed.

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### Action:

Answer the following questions:

**What word was voted the most beautiful in the English language?**

--

**What did Jim Collins use as his benchmark for a company that went from good to great?**

--

**Who was quoted as saying, “You shouldn’t gloat about anything you’ve done; you ought to keep going and find something better to do”?**

--

The answers are given on [page 19](#).

### 3. Reading Strategies

**A**side from speed reading, you can improve your efficiency by reading **smarter**. This means knowing when to read in depth, when to skim, and what to discard.

You can't possibly read all of the information that crosses your path each day. And some material is unsuitable for speed reading (see Note, [page 7](#)). But that article about a new product that a team member shared with you earlier can probably be skimmed for highlights, and then filed away for future reference.

Here are some common reading strategies for different types of material:

#### Read the Introduction and Headings

Book titles can be misleading, and reviews and summaries are not always accurate. You may get a better picture of whether a book is worth reading by looking at its introduction, and the chapter headings in the table of contents. The introduction often tells you who the material is targeted at, and the chapter headings give you a good idea of the general content.

When you're reading articles, either online or in print, the headline, introduction and subheadings will often indicate whether the text will serve your needs.

However, it's important to distinguish between news stories, opinion pieces, and feature articles. A news story usually has the most important information at the beginning. The introduction and summary are the important sections in an opinion piece, and the main ideas within a feature are often in the middle. Academic articles often include an "abstract," which summarizes the main points.

#### Skim the Text for Ideas

Whatever type of material you are reading, you can often pick up its main ideas quickly by scanning it for key words and phrases.

#### Read Thoroughly

Technical information needs to be read carefully. But speed reading can allow you to understand the material just as well, so long as you don't read so fast that you miss important information.

## Read Actively

This is the method you use to grasp the finer details of a text, and to maximize retention. You may have practiced active reading at school – it involves highlighting important points and making notes in the page margins. Your mind remembers the things that you highlighted, which makes it easy to review the material later. If you're reading on your device or computer, many apps allow you to add highlights and notes to text files, e-books and PDFs.

## Create Notes and Glossaries

This is another form of active reading. Here, you make detailed notes in a separate file or on paper, including definitions of important terms. People often use this method when studying, or to keep notes for future reference.

The key to reading smarter is to determine how much depth you need to go into. There is little point in spending a lot of time on an article that contains just one key point. On the other hand, you don't want to rush through a report that's full of detailed information that you need to know.

### Action:

Consider the scenarios, below, and select which reading strategy or strategies you would use from the list in the right-hand column.



Scenario	Reading Strategies	p
Your boss asks you to review a book on project management. He thinks it could be a good resource for trainees and team members who are new to the discipline. As you are an experienced project manager, he respects your opinion.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	
Your washing machine is making a strange noise when it spins out. You think it might be the belt, but you're not sure. You've found some resources online with some advice on how you could fix the problem. You need to figure out what to do.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	
You pick up a book on career planning that you intend to use to help you to set goals for next year.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	
You have an exam in your night-school class and you are preparing to study the course materials.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	

You recently expressed an interest in astronomy. Your friend lent you a beginner's "Guide to the Stars" and you want to figure out if the subject is as interesting as you think.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	
An article in the trade press catches your eye. You wonder if it's worth reading in detail.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	
You want to use an academic article that you've found online as the basis for a training session you're preparing.	Introduction/abstract. Introduction and summary. Skim the body. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	
You've got some spare time while waiting for your appointment with your doctor. The latest issue of a history magazine is on the table. The cover story looks interesting, as do some of the related articles.	Table of contents. Introduction/abstract. Introduction and summary. Skim the body. Highlight and annotate.	
Your partner sends you a link to an online review of the new car you are thinking of buying. You are behind schedule with your report writing, and you are meeting your partner at the car dealership immediately after work.	Check the source. Introduction and summary. Skim the body. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate.	

For recommended answers, see [pages 19 and 20](#).

### Tip:



When you're reading text on screen, there are other steps that you can take to increase your reading speed and retention.

For example, try arranging the text in columns, like those in a newspaper, because you can scan short lines faster than longer ones. Make the text larger, and increase the spacing between the lines, to improve readability. And, if you're reading on a phone or tablet, try turning down the backlighting, as this can reduce eye strain.

Some web browsers also offer a "Reading mode," which isolates the main text of a page and hides distracting elements such as advertisements and menus.

## 4. Reading Retention (SQ3R)

**T**he ultimate test of your reading ability is how much you can actually remember of what you've read. We can fan through the pages of a 288-page book and say we speed-read it but, if we can't recall more than 10 percent of the information, was there any point?

Comprehension is a key part of effective reading. As you discovered in the previous chapter, you don't always have to read every word to gain a good understanding of a text. But when you do choose to read material thoroughly, you should start with the aim of retaining important information.

A great technique to improve your retention of written material is called **SQ3R**. This stands for:

- **Survey.** Scan the table of contents, the introduction and the summary to determine the relevance of the material.
- **Question.** Write down your study goals or the main questions that you expect to answer by reading the material.
- **Read.** Read thoroughly the sections that you've identified as relevant, and take notes. As you do, pay particular attention to the questions that you wrote down.
- **Recall.** When you've finished a section or chapter, recall the main points. What are the key facts that you need to remember, and how do they relate to other material you've been reading, or to the knowledge that you already have?
- **Review.** When you've finished reading all of the relevant material, evaluate what you've read. Re-read highlighted sections, go over your notes and revise them, and talk through the contents with others. These actions help to solidify the information in your mind, and make it much easier for you to recall later.

### Action:



Practice SQ3R by choosing a work-related book. Find one that is reasonably detailed, and that you find interesting. (If you don't have anything suitable to hand, you can do this exercise another time.)

In the table on the next page, write down three or four key questions that you expect this material to answer for you.



**Note:**

This activity may take longer than the one hour allotted here, depending on the length of your book.

Question
1.
2.
3.
4.

Think about what you want to achieve by reading the book, and why it's worth investing your time in reading it. For example, do you want to learn a new skill or top up your expertise in a certain area? Will this reading help you in your current role, or perhaps increase your chances of promotion?

**Action:**

Read one chapter of the book using the SQ3R approach and use the space on the next page to make notes.

**Note:**

It can help to take notes in Mind Maps® format while you are reading.

**Notes**



### Action:

Use the box below to answer the following questions:

- What are the core facts from the section that you just read?
- How did this information contribute to your understanding of the subject?
- Did the material answer any of your key questions?

### Answers

Now, review what you've written and think about what you need to do to ensure that you can remember the material. Can you discuss it with someone? Could you expand your notes and keep them for future reference? Will you need to re-read all or parts of the book to make sense of what you read?



### Action:

Write down your review actions in the box, below.

#### Review Actions

## 5. Key Points

**T**he key elements of reading smarter are improving your reading speed and efficiency, making good decisions about what to read, and understanding how thoroughly you need to read it. If you read irrelevant material slowly, you'll be wasting your time. On the other hand, if you read highly detailed information too fast, you'll miss the point.

Remember, it's not all about reading faster. It's about using your best judgment to decide when to skim and when to slow down, when to take notes, and how to read for maximum recall. Given the amount of time we spend reading, and the amount of information at our disposal, it makes sense to assess the importance of written material before you dive in.

Use the techniques and tools we've looked at to increase both the speed of your reading and the relevance of what you read. This combination will make you a smart and efficient reader – you'll consume information at an optimal rate, and you'll remember it!

# Answers

<b>What word was voted the most beautiful in the English language?</b>
Windowsill
<b>What did Jim Collins use as his benchmark to determine if a company went from good to great?</b>
If it sustained 15-year cumulative stock returns at or below the general stock market and, after a transition point, cumulative returns at least three times the market over the next 15 years.
<b>Who was quoted as saying, “You shouldn’t gloat about anything you’ve done; you ought to keep going and find something better to do?”</b>
David Packard, CEO of Hewlett-Packard (HP)

Note that the reading strategies highlighted in the right-hand column, below, should be treated as guidelines only. The strategy you choose when reading new material is subjective, and what works for one person might not work for another.

Scenario	Reading Strategies	p
Your boss asks you to review a book on project management. He thinks it could be a good resource for trainees and team members who are new to the discipline. As you are an experienced project manager, he respects your opinion.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p p
Your washing machine is making a strange noise when it spins out. You think it might be the belt, but you’re not sure. You’ve found some resources online with some advice on how you could fix the problem. You need to figure out what to do.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p p

You pick up a book on career planning that you intend to use to help you to set goals for next year.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p p
You have an exam in your night-school class and you are preparing to study the course materials.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p p
You recently expressed an interest in astronomy. Your friend lent you a beginner's "Guide to the Stars" and you want to figure out if the subject is as interesting as you think.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p
An article in the trade press catches your eye. You wonder if it's worth reading in detail.	Introduction and headings. Skim for main ideas. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p p
You want to use an academic article that you've found online as the basis for a training session you're preparing.	Introduction/abstract. Introduction and summary. Skim the body. Highlight and annotate. Notes and glossaries.	p p
You've got some spare time while waiting for your appointment with your doctor. The latest issue of a history magazine is on the table. The cover story looks interesting, as do some of the related articles.	Table of contents. Introduction/abstract. Introduction and summary. Skim the body. Highlight and annotate.	p p
Your partner sends you a link to an online review of the new car you are thinking of buying. You are behind schedule with your report writing, and you are meeting your partner at the car dealership immediately after work.	Check the source. Introduction and summary. Skim the body. Read thoroughly. Highlight and annotate.	p p