

Reading Rate Flexibility

When a student asks how to improve reading speed, experts in reading usually answer that skilled readers have several different speeds. Far from reading everything at the same rate, they shift according to their purpose at the moment, to the difficulty of the material, and their familiarity with the subject matter.

Your “collection” of reading speeds should include:

A skimming rate (1,000 to 2,000 or more words per minute) should be used for

1. locating a reference or new material
2. answering a specific question
3. getting the general idea of a selection

A very rapid reading rate (500 to 600 words per minute) should be used for

1. reviewing familiar material
2. reading a light novel or fast-moving short story for its plot

A rapid rate (350 to 500 words per minute) should be used for

1. reading fiction of moderate difficulty for characterization, mood, sensory imagery, or anticipation of outcome
2. reading easy non-fictional material in order to find the main idea, to make generalizations, or to note sequence

An average rate (250 to 350 words per minute) should be used for

1. reading complex fiction for characterization and plot analysis
2. reading non-fiction of moderate difficulty in order to note details, to grasp relationships between main ideas or to distinguish between fact and opinion

A slow rate (100 to 250 words per minute) should be used for something slower like a chemistry textbook or

1. mastering content, including details
2. reading highly factual material
3. evaluating quality and literary merit
4. solving a problem or following directions