

# Rev That Engine, Parnelli!

Good readers have the mind-set of a race-car driver. They press the pedal to the metal on the straightaways and slow down on the curves. In other words, they vary their reading speed depending on what they want to accomplish. You should too.

The passages in the ACT Reading test are about 750 words. Your aim should be to spend no more than about three to four minutes reading each passage. To do so, you should try to average at least 200 words per minute. That will leave you about forty seconds to answer each question.

The average college student reads between 250 and 350 words per minute on fiction and nontechnical material. Some people can read a thousand words per minute or even faster, but the ACT isn't about speed-reading—it's about reading for meaning.

Nevertheless, research has shown that the faster you read, the more likely you are to remember what you've read. Slow reading—plodding along word by word—inhibits understanding. With a little guided practice, most people can double their reading speed without lowering their comprehension.

Here are some techniques that may help you increase how fast you read:

1. **Avoid regressing** (going back over what you've already read). Rereading words and phrases is a habit that will slow your reading down to a snail's pace. Usually, it is unnecessary to reread words, as the ideas you want are explained and elaborated more fully later in the passage.

If you read slowly, your mind has time to wander. Even worse, if you find yourself doing so, this reflects both an inability to concentrate and a lack of confidence in your comprehension skills (think of the student who never hears the directions the first time).

2. **Develop a wider eye span.** This will help you read more than one word at a glance. Since written material is less meaningful if read word by word, this will help you learn to read by phrases or thought units.

3. **Learn to adjust your rate to your purpose in reading and to the difficulty of the material.** The effective reader adjusts his or her rate; the ineffective reader uses the same rate for all types of material.

Suppose you took a 100-mile mountain trip by car. You might plan to average about fifty miles an hour, but in reality, you slow down to twenty on some hills and curves and speed up to seventy on certain straightaways. The same concept holds true with reading.

In general, slow down when you find the following:

- unfamiliar terms not immediately clear from context
- difficult sentence or paragraph structure
- abstract concepts
- detailed technical material (complicated directions, for example)

On the other hand, increase your reading speed when you encounter:

- simple material with few ideas that are new to you
- unnecessary examples or illustrations
- broad, general ideas or ideas that are restatements of previous ones

Keep your reading attack flexible; adjust your rate from passage to passage and within each passage. The crucial skill is to be able to change speed, to know when to slow down or speed up.

Pacing is particularly important on the Reading passages—if you spend too much time reading the passages, you won't leave enough time for the questions. Don't sweat the details. Don't waste time reading and rereading parts you don't understand. Make sure you leave time for answering the questions, which is what really counts.