Improving Your Reading Rate
Reading Myths

Before addressing how to improve your reading rate, we need to first dispel a few myths.
Myth 1: I Have to Read Every Word

Many words used in writing grammatically correct sentences actually convey no meaning. By reading and conceptualizing these meaningless words as you do the important ones, you limit not only your reading speed but your comprehension as well.
Myth 2: Reading Once is Enough

Skim once as rapidly as possible to determine the main idea and to identify those parts that need careful reading. Reread more carefully to plug the gaps in your knowledge. Good reading is selective reading. Spend your time learning ideas, not painfully processing words visually.
Myth 3: It is Sinful to Skip Passages in Reading

Today’s proliferation of books and printed matter brought about by the information explosion creates a reading problem for everyone. You must, of course, make daily decisions as to what is worth spending your time on. The idea that you cannot skip but have to read every page is old-fashioned.
Myth 4: Machines are Necessary to Improve My Reading Speed

Machines are useful as motivators, but the best and most effective way to increase your reading rate is to consciously force yourself to read faster. If you find yourself in need of a pusher, use a 3X5 card as a pacer, or use your hand, or your finger. Be sure that your hand or finger or card is used to push, not merely to follow your eyes.
Myth 5: If I Skim or Read too Rapidly My Comprehension Will Drop

If you concentrate on your purpose for reading—e.g. locating main ideas and details, and forcing yourself to stick to the task of finding them quickly—both your speed and comprehension could increase. Your concern should be not with how fast you can get through a chapter, but with how quickly you can locate the facts and ideas that you need.
Myth 6: There is Something About my Eyes That Keeps Me From Reading Fast

Usually it is your brain, not your eyes, that slow you down in reading. Your eyes are capable of taking in more words than your brain is used to processing. If you sound out words as you read, you will probably read very slowly and have difficulty in skimming and scanning until you break this habit.
Reading Rate Techniques:

Speed reading will require that you change your attitude and your approach to reading. Learning a systematic and disciplined approach to reading will not only increase your speed and efficiency, but will also increase your enjoyment and appreciation of reading.
Step 1: Prepare to Read Faster

Get comfortable. If you are tired, do some quick calisthenics or breathing exercise to move oxygen to your brain.

Whenever you read, you should have a few basic supplies close at hand
-- a clock or timer
-- a note pad for taking notes
-- a dictionary

Get as far away from outside activity as possible. Your reading environment is important. It should include
-- a bright light to shine directly on the reading material
-- a straight back chair
-- and a flat surface for the reading material. You do not want to hold a book in your hands; it will make you tired.
Step 2: Pick Up the Pace

The first secret to reading faster is quite simple: read faster. Pick up the pace a little right now. People usually don’t read as fast as they can or even close to it for fear that they might miss something. However, your mind can process material much more quickly than your eye can scan across the page. Don’t worry; push yourself. Your mind will quickly get used to working harder and faster.
Step 3: Use Your Eyes and Hands to Read Faster

When driving you use your eyes, hands, and feet to aid you in moving smoothly along the highway. In reading, you will use your eyes and hands to aid you in moving smoothly and quickly across and down the page.
Eye Movements

When you read English, your eyes move from left to right across the page then sweep back to the beginning of the next line. The actual reading occurs when you stop the movement and focus on the words in front of you. You do this a number of times as you move across the line.

The more times you stop to focus, the slower you read. If you stop to focus fewer times per line, you will absorb more words at each stop and read significantly faster. This simple concept forms the basis for most speed-reading training.
As you are reading this paragraph, pay attention to eye movement. Try to make the same number of stops in the same place on each line. Then try to decrease the number of stops. Notice how you must absorb more words. Try particularly hard to keep your eyes moving in a smooth pattern. Don’t go back. Don’t wander around the page. Move quickly to the next line. For a line of this length you will want to get down to only two stops. The number of stops on a line depends upon the number of words. Books with small print require more stops than single newspaper columns. Adjust yourself.
Hand Movements

Besides setting the pace for your reading, using your hand as a guide will help prevent you from losing your place, reading lines twice, and other common positional problems in reading.

• Lay your writing hand flat on the page with your palm down.

• Move your hand until your long finger is pointing at the first line you are going to read.

• When you get to about one half inch from the end, sweep it back to the next line and repeat the movement.

• Keep this up until you have finished the page; then turn the page with your other hand and continue to the end.

• Do not stop until you have finished the passage, chapter, or section.

• Never stop in the middle of a paragraph or other unnatural stopping point or you will probably have to read it over again.
This method is called the “S” movement. The faster you move your hand, the faster you will read. As you increase your skill, you can increase the motion of your hand to include two, three, four, or more lines in each motion. Again, the more lines per motion, the faster you will be reading.
Reading on a Computer Screen

If you are reading on a computer screen, as you are doing right now, you can perform the same hand movements on the screen and use your other hand to scroll or “click” to the next page. It may feel cumbersome, so you may have to experiment with it to see which hand works better.
Skimming and Scanning

When you are faced with lots of reading material, you need to decide what is important and what is unnecessary. Sometimes you will need to read the whole thing and sometimes you can throw it out without reading any of it (as is the case with most junk mail).

Most of the time, you read to either identify main points or to find specific facts. You can separate these tasks and save time.

- When you need to get only the main points of a passage, you use a technique known as **skimming**.
- When you are looking for specific information, you use a technique called **scanning**.
Skimming

When *skimming*, you move along at a rate much faster than your normal reading pace. To skim, you do the following tasks.

- Look at the title. (Hint: Most magazines place the thesis of an article just below the headline or title.)
- Read the first paragraph and the first sentence of each succeeding paragraph.
- Read section headings and the conclusion.

This will give you a pretty good overview of the passage.

If, for some reason, you decide to read a complete section that is of particular interest to you, it is OK. At least you have skipped what you do not need, and focused only on those things that required your attention.
Scanning

When *scanning*, you should know what you are looking for before you start looking. It may be a name, a date, a quantity, a financial figure, a concept, a formula, etc. To scan, you should do the following tasks.

- Focus on the key words or symbols that would likely surround the fact and go hunting.
- Do not read the passage; just look for the particular fact.

When you consult a telephone directory or a dictionary, you are actually *scanning*. 
Develop Reading Flexibility According to Difficulty

When you’re on a road trip, you slow down in unfamiliar territory or on winding rural roads and speed up when you’re on the highway. Similarly, when applying your newly acquired speed reading skills to your studies, it is important to realize that different materials require different reading skills. This is called *flexibility*.

*Flexibility* is the ability to change your reading speed both overall and at the moment you see the need. You must consider all aspects of purpose and difficulty as you adjust your speed to get the most out of your reading.
Determine Difficulty

Generally, if the material is a subject that you have trouble with, slow down; if it is a subject you are good at, speed up. Here are some additional guidelines.

• Math and math-related subjects use very condensed writing to present ideas, so slow down.

• Social science and literature spread their ideas out a little more so you can read them faster.

• New topics and ideas are more difficult to read than familiar topics and ideas and, therefore, require more time to digest.
You will have to constantly adjust your reading rate even within chapters and paragraphs.

- Definitions, formulas, new concepts, and informational lists all require you to slow down.
- You can pick up the pace as you breeze through examples.
- Proceed even faster if you already understand the concept.
- Don’t get bogged down with filler-boxes and features or pictures with long captions.
- Listen to your professor before you read the chapter. He or she will often give clues as to what is important.
Remember...

Your goal should be to read faster and more efficiently without sacrificing comprehension. By putting into practice the previous tips, you will experience improvement in your reading rate.
References

- Academic Skills Center, Dartmouth College 2001