

Building Braille Reading Speed: Some Helpful Suggestions

by Jerry Whittle

From the Editor: For those of us who were not taught to read Braille efficiently as children or who did not become blind until adulthood, there are three Braille-reading options. We can sit around lamenting our bad luck and wishing that we could read Braille the way President Maurer does during his banquet addresses. We can learn a little Braille and use it gratefully but with some difficulty-complaining all the while about the frustration of not having Braille as a really first-rate tool of literacy. Or we can set to and work on increasing our reading speed on the theory that any increase will improve the usefulness of Braille and our competitiveness in the job market and in life.

Speaking personally, I have chosen the last alternative and have been working to increase my reading speed for several years now. Perhaps that is why I found the following article both interesting and challenging. Finding the time to read 10,000 pages or more of Braille a year, as Harry Whittle recommends, sounds like a tall order to me, but I have discovered that the more one reads, the faster the words slide past under one's fingers, and I am already reading between ten and fifteen pages a day.

Mr. Whittle teaches Braille at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. He certainly knows what he is talking about when he gives advice about increasing Braille reading speed. This article first appeared in the Winter, 1993 edition of the Pathfinder, the publication of the National Federation of the Blind of Louisiana.

Here is what Mr. Whittle has to say:

Over the past seven years I have had the opportunity to teach over two hundred blind persons to read Braille. During that period I have timed twelve students at rates of greater than three hundred words per minute. Of course, all of these rapid readers had been reading Braille since early childhood, and none of them needed to improve speed; however, there were some interesting similarities among many of them that are worthy of noting. First of all, eleven of the twelve read with two hands, starting the line with the left hand and finishing it with the right. Meanwhile, the left dropped down to the next line to find the beginning and start reading as soon as the right hand had finished. Only one of the twelve read more than three hundred words per minute using only the right hand. In fact, he read over five hundred words per minute. One of these twelve read one hundred sixty-nine words a minute when he entered the center. At the beginning of his training he read with his left hand only, but he moved both hands across the entire line and brought both all the way back to the beginning of the next line, losing approximately one second per line because of the inefficiency of this method. We encouraged him to read the first half of each line with his left hand, then track down to the beginning of the next line while finishing the line with his right. Once he started practicing this more efficient method, he no longer lost that second on each line since he could pick up the next one with his right hand as soon as the last.

As a consequence he increased his reading speed from 169 to 302 words a minute before graduating.

After years of teaching, it is absolutely clear to me that the two-handed technique is by far the superior method. I remember another student who read only 60 words per minute when she entered the center. She read with only her right hands. She also took the advice to begin using both hands, and she increased her reading speed from sixty to one hundred twenty words per minute in six months; however, I should point out that she also read over three thousand Braille pages while she was a student at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. The number of pages read is an extremely important factor in building speed. A large proportion of Braille readers read at a rate of fifty to seventy words per minute. In order to increase speed, once someone is reading at sixty words a minute or more, he or she should read a minimum of ten thousand Braille pages a year, two hundred fifty pages a week, thirty-five pages a day-give or take a few pages.

Setting goals is another important factor in attaining good or excellent reading speeds. I would suggest that one set page goals per day. For example, I currently have a student who has just finished Grade II Braille, and she is working diligently to build speed. When she first completed the code, she began to read a short

novel, setting a goal of ten pages per day. She set aside a certain time in the evening to accomplish this rather ambitious task. During her first time test she read twenty-four words per minute. During the next month she faithfully maintained her page goal and even increased it to about fifteen pages per day. In her last timing she read forty-five words per minute. Of course, some of this speed resulted from her being able to pick up words more rapidly from context, and this ability accelerated her reading rate. Some of the improvement also resulted from her growing ability to pick up the signs more easily through constant practice and in general from her consistent hard work.

I have noticed that most of the students who really work hard attain a level of about sixty words per minute rather quickly after completing the code, usually in two to three months. The rate of speed levels off. This observation is not based on a controlled study but merely on my observation. What usually happens is that students are able to increase speed rapidly because the faster they read, the more it makes sense to them, and the more they pick up by context.

For example, "Jack and Jill went up the ...": it does not take a mental giant to guess that the final word of this sentence will be "hill." However, once the student has reached a speed that takes account of contextual prediction, the rate levels off, and it then takes reading a tremendous number of pages to continue to increase steadily - at least ten thousand pages per year.

The best readers at the Louisiana Center for the Blind who knew no Braille before entering the Center have learned to read at a rate of fifty to seventy-five words per minute in six to nine months. The student in this category who attained the greatest speed before graduation read at a rate of seventy-five words per minute. That person read over eight thousand pages during that six-month period. She actually stayed in her apartment on many weekends and read Braille diligently. In other words she approached her Braille reading as if it were a job.

I would also suggest that those working to increase their reading speed work on their Braille before becoming too fatigued. If you are an early morning person, read early in the day. I know a former student who arises at five o'clock in the morning to read Braille before he begins to prepare for school at seven. Others are able to read late at night and set aside the time to do so. I also think it is important to read aloud during part of this reading time so that one does not develop sloppy reading habits. For example, when one reads aloud, it is hard to mumble through words; one must be exact. Also, by reading aloud periodically, one can begin to develop good reading techniques for delivering speeches or for reading in public places, such as church or before civic organizations. Additionally, reading aloud enables one to hear how fast he or she is picking up a line or to identify where any problems lie. I once had a student who was timed at three hundred fifteen words per minute. When she read aloud in public, she tried to read at that speed. She sounded like she was on fast forward. While she attended the center, she worked on improving her speech-making techniques. She tried to slow down to a reading rate of about one hundred twenty words per minute, and her speaking style improved tremendously. Incidentally, President Clinton's Inaugural Address was read at a rate of one hundred twenty words per minute, about the proper rate for communication of ideas without losing one's audience.

Another suggestion is to set a timer for five minutes and read aloud during this interval. If you can finish a Braille page in five minutes, you are reading at a rate of forty words per minute. If you read two pages, your rate is eighty words per minute. If you complete three, you are reading at a rate of one hundred twenty words per minute. By setting a timer periodically, one can see how much progress is being made, and the timer acts as a very good motivator to read faster.

In conclusion I would say that building reading speed requires hard work and consistency. It does little good to read thirty pages in one day and wait a week to read another thirty pages. The reading must be done in a consistent, day-by-day basis until a certain level of efficiency has been established.

One must approach the challenge of increasing reading speed in the same way one approaches a job. Many students carry Dr. Jernigan's and President Maurer's banquet speeches around with them on trips in order to get in some reading in airplanes or in doctor's offices. These Braille speeches are lightweight and quite portable. It is amazing how much time one spends waiting, and this time can be used to increase reading

speed. Most important, it is essential that one set high page goals, not necessarily time goals. Then pages per day is a better goal than one hour. The two-handed technique is by far the best for optimum reading speed. Find something that holds your interest. if you are just beginning to read for speed, choose a book or magazine article that is not too complicated and work your way into more sophisticated reading material.

Finally, read! read! read! Always read with both hands, and set ambitious page goals for yourself. if I can be of any further assistance in your quest to build reading speed, please call me at (318) 251-2891.