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# Slow Reading



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By John Miedema

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*For Kraemer, Samantha, and for my wife, Sue*



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## Contents

Dedication	v.
Contents	vii.
Acknowledgments	ix.
Preamble and Overview	1.
1. The Personal Nature of Slow Reading	7.
2. Slow Reading in an Information Ecology	19.
3. The Slow Movement and Slow Reading	41.
4. The Psychology of Slow Reading	53.
5. The Practice of Slow Reading	63.
Conclusion	67.
References	69.
Index	81.
About the Author	83.



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## Preamble and Overview

Slow reading is about reading at a reflective pace. The idea of reading more slowly may seem odd in a time of increasing demand for speed reading of volumes of information. Certainly, it is often important to be able to read quickly. Those who read slowly by nature only admit to it reluctantly. I am a slow reader. A book that takes me a month to read others might consume in a weekend. Slow reading is sometimes considered to reflect slow thinking, and I do not object to that association. Reading a book slowly allows for a deeper relationship with stories and ideas. When I read a book slowly it continues to influence me even years later.

For the past two years I have followed the formal research and informal web dialogue on slow reading. There are some consistent themes. In general, slow reading is regarded as a negative thing because it is perceived to be an involuntary condition. Research on slow reading is almost exclusively about physical barriers to reading such as dyslexia and eye disorders. Clearly, in these cases, slow reading is a problem and interventions may be appropriate to increase reading speed. However, one also hears of students forced to read long or difficult books and complaining about being slow readers. These students are targeted by vendors of speed reading courses. For a price, a student can learn to break the bad habits that cause slow reading. Implicit is the assumption that slow reading is not involuntary but can be cured by learning the right techniques. These students might share my resistance to rushing a good book; it feels like a violation of the author's intent and my own need to process it properly. An increasing number of people are get-

ting frustrated with information overload and are choosing to read slowly. They share a conviction that slow reading is an advantage, a pleasure when reading fiction and an aid to comprehension when deciphering a complex text.

As part of a Master of Library and Information Science degree, I undertook an independent study to gather research on the voluntary practice of slow reading. I posted the results on my website. Rory Litwin, publisher of Litwin Books, suggested turning the research into a book. This invitation was a pleasant turn for me, but it was also a good idea for another reason. The independent research was a part of a graduate course, and its time demands forced a contradiction with the subject matter. For much of the original research on slow reading I relied heavily on speed reading techniques. I had to admit that in some contexts, I am a fast reader. In fact, I work in information technology and can read my own code faster than other eyes can follow. I thought of myself as a slow reader only because I did not count these other practices as reading. For this book, I had the opportunity to reread the source material more slowly and carefully. Still, there were many cases in which the material did not require or deserve slow reading. This fact reinforces an important theme that slow reading is not always about reading as slow as possible. A slow reader might skim a book, only slowing down for the good parts. Slow reading is a voluntary practice taking many different forms.

This book is a meditation on the many meanings of slow reading. It is organized into four essays, each making many passing references to other sources in the hope that this book serves a bibliographic function for others interested in research on slow reading. Each essay draws on the research and ideas and offers an original perspective. The first essay, "The Personal Nature of Slow Reading", traces the practice

of slow reading back to the symbolic eating of books by prophets in the Bible. Later on, the technique of close reading was adopted by scholars as a way to extract the many layers of meaning from a complex text. Close reading became associated with scholarly analysis, but modern educators find that slow reading techniques are useful for teaching reading skills to students even of young ages. Personal control over the rate and content of reading is essential to the enjoyment of reading, which in turn creates lifelong readers. The accelerating quantity of reading materials available today increases the likelihood that the right book exists for any reader's given needs, though it also increases the challenge of finding it.

The second essay, "Slow Reading in an Information Ecology" examines how the traditional practice of reading print books came into question with the advent of the digital age. With the mainstream integration of the personal computer in the early 1990s, a paperless society was predicted, and with it the demise of books and traditional libraries. A generation later, it is clear that the prediction was wrong. A much greater quantity of information is available to people today. Much of that information is online, exactly where it should be. However, print, books and libraries are also thriving elements of modern culture. Digital and print formats are associated with different practices of reading. Online reading tends toward rapid scanning, useful for searching and reading snippets. Print is still the superior technology for slow reading anything of length, substance or richness. The prediction of a paperless society should be replaced with that of information ecology, incorporating a spectrum of print and digital technologies.

In "The Slow Movement and Slow Reading", it is observed how the Slow Movement has risen as a response to

the rush of modern life. The movement began with Slow Food as a protest against fast food. The organization encourages a view that is hard to deny, that slowing down to prepare and enjoy food increases pleasure in life. A similar attitude can be taken to reading. Slow Food also emphasizes the benefits of eating local foods toward agricultural diversity and sustainable farming. A similar theme of locality can be applied to information. Slow reading can be viewed as reading local stories and stories by local writers. Libraries can play an important role as providers of local information and as micropublishers of local stories. The theme of locality also plays out around the issue of physical location. Digital information may seem ethereal, not requiring a library to house it, but online bookstores struggle to emulate physical shelves and browsing. E-books are purportedly greener than print because they do not consume trees, but we are beginning to assess the impact of the Internet on the environment.

The fourth essay, "The Psychology of Slow Reading", surveys psychological phenomena associated with slow reading. It contrasts the depiction of slow reading as a deficit against research showing it as a deliberate cognitive strategy. Readers may experience an altered state of consciousness in which the reader becomes "lost" to the book and the act of reading feels effortless. Bibliotherapy is an unspoken therapeutic function of a librarian, helping people to cope through reading. The definition of slow reading is extended to include any type of reading that deeply engages the reader's subjective faculties. While it is possible that brains will someday evolve to read faster, it is also possible that our brains have evolved to incorporate slowness to make the most of reading.

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Having explored the multifaceted subject of slow reading from these four perspectives, the book concludes with a chapter of suggestions about the practice of slow reading. It is hoped that the book provides a first, full sketch of the breadth of the subject of slow reading, encouraging further research in the area, and inspiring readers to take up slow reading for pleasure.



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## Chapter 1

### The Personal Nature of Slow Reading

Everyone, it seems, wants us to read a message. Our attention is yanked from one bit of information to the next. It hardly feels like reading. We claim to multi-task but in truth we can only give decent attention to one thing at a time. We shift back and forth rapidly, marshalling our cognitive resources on one stimulus only to release it for the next. At best this strategy is inefficient. When it comes to reading anything of length or substance, we miss the meaning entirely. If only we could read faster, we think, perhaps we could manage it all.

A central theme in this book is that reading slowly is often a better choice for comprehension and pleasure in reading. In the past, reading was practiced only by the rare literate person, often in a clerical capacity reading a sacred book with reverence. Later, in the humanities, academics practiced close reading to extract the full meaning of a text. In the modern classroom, educators use slow reading techniques with students of all ages to increase literacy and pleasure in reading. The more successful methods recognize the role of voluntarism in reading. Slow reading is not about reading as slow as possible at all times, but rather exercising the right to slow down at will. The voluntary aspect of slow reading allows for a deep and personal relationship between readers and their information.

*Slow Reading in Religion and the Humanities*

Modern life has us reading from morning till night -- an ad on a cereal box, headlines and weather on the web, billboards along the road, email and instant messages at work, a credit card statement in the mail. Levy (2001) contrasts this style of reading with the more contemplative style of deep reading associated with books. That deep reading has sacred and reverential qualities is no surprise, for books have their roots in the codex, first adopted by early Christian communities as a vehicle for the Bible. Levy wonders if we experience resonances of the ancestral sacred uses of books. He advises that even in business culture, it is important to develop the capacity for sustained attention rather than just successive attention. By making choices about the stimuli to which we attend, we can draw greater meaning from our experience.

The books of the Bible describe acts of slow reading in the form of bibliophagy, the symbolic eating of a book to gain deep comprehension of a spiritual idea (Peterson, 2006). In the Old Testament, the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah ate books by divine command, a preparation for their role as prophets. In the New Testament, an angel told St. John to eat a book, which then was metabolized into his *Book of Revelations*. Eating a book symbolizes a deep and personal internalization of an idea, an intimate act with transformative power. Unlike our modern consumption of information, slow reading is a journey that fundamentally changes us.

Sire (1978) connects slow reading with religiosity in his book, *How to Read Slowly: A Christian Guide to Reading with the Mind*. At first, I found the subtitle an odd one. Why are Christians the intended audience? Sire acknowledges that

the practical content can benefit anyone. For example, he advises readers to take the time to read a book's preface and introduction, have a dictionary handy, and read with a pen in hand for notes. Good advice. But Sire's deeper motives are religious. He wants to teach readers to detect the worldview of a writer to see if it squares with Christianity. The reader is advised to apply philosophical questions, e.g., what morality is presupposed? When analyzing fiction, the reader can examine how the plot, theme and characters add up to the author's vision of life. The reader can supplement his or her understanding with biographical, historical, or other contextual information. Sire wisely advises the reader to bring a clear self-understanding to the reading. The subtitle is not so strange after all, since religion deals with deep questions, and Sire's approach is a positive alternative to extremists who would censor books that do not fit their worldview. Still, the techniques are useful to thinkers of any faith.

The eating of books is a recurring metaphor in discussions of slow reading. Bacon used it in his familiar quote about reading:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention (2001).

Nell observes that as reading rate drops, readers tend to subvocalize, a motor activity of the tongue that mimics eating. "As with a morsel, so with a phrase: rolling it on the tongue for longer than mastication requires extracts its full flavour and nutritive value" (1988, 99).

The earliest explicit reference to the phrase “slow reading” appears to be in Nietzsche’s preface to *Daybreak*: “It is not for nothing that one has been a philologist, perhaps one is a philologist still, that it to say, a teacher of slow reading” (1997, 5). Nietzsche views philology as a “connoisseurship of the word” (5) requiring the reader to take the time to read well.

The practice of slow reading continues today in philosophy and the humanities. Quite often, religious scholars will refer to existential philosophers, especially Heidegger. Pike (2004) notes Heidegger’s view that “the literary work of art requires that we bring all of ourselves, our spiritual and moral faculties included, to the reading event” (161) and recommended it for studying biblical passages. Others distinguish between religious and philosophical approaches to reading. Smith (2004) argued that a type of slow reading he called aesthetic reading was in fact limited in what it could offer a person’s spiritual growth.

Modern reading practices stand in marked contrast to the past when reading was a skill practiced reverentially by the few. If eating a book symbolizes the slow reading of the past, a reverse metaphor is a better fit for today. The exponential growth of information today envelops us, demanding our full attention, almost against our will. It sometimes seems as if the information will eat us up.

### *The New Criticism and Close Reading*

I was not a student of the humanities in university and did not discover at that time the type of slow reading called close reading in literary criticism. Close reading has its origins in the New Criticism, the view that one should pay

close attention to the text and language on its own merits, rather than appealing to historical, biographical and cultural sources for interpretation. English students in particular are taught how to analyze a single passage in great depth to extract its layers of meaning.

There may be a reason that I did not hear about close reading outside the halls of the humanities. Debates on the subject of close reading can become quite esoteric. The professional critics distinguish variants in the New Criticism between American and British cultures (Murray, 1991). Other schools of literary criticism object that close reading eclipses political ideas that run deeper than the writer's intentions. The New Criticism is also contrasted with Reader Response Criticism, approaches that focus on the reader's subjective responses rather than the text itself (e.g., Mial & Kuken, 2002). Those of us on the outside may be less interested in these debates.

Academics sometimes treat close reading as a professional practice with highly prescribed techniques. Elder and Paul (2004) defined four structured levels of close reading, with the aim of working one's way into the mind of the author. Students are taught to paraphrase and analyze the text using specific questions and exercises. Learning this approach would take extended instruction and practice.

Stereotypes suggest that literary readers are an elite group, applying techniques hardly amenable to pleasure reading. As such, close reading becomes a professional practice, not a voluntary act. All of this is sufficient to ward off a reader curious about close reading for recreation. It should not be so. Academics often artificially protect their discipline with abstraction. Oz (1999) complains that the literati are doing what her sex education nurse did in her seventh grade – forget to tell the students that the practice is quite fun.

“Only the pleasure of reading do they castrate -- just a bit -- so it doesn't get in the way; so that we remember that literature is not playing games, and, in general, that life is no picnic” (14).

In *Reading Like a Writer* (2006), Prose tells how she used close reading to teach students how to write. She was concerned that many students found reading stressful. In her view, close reading provides a way around this stress. We all begin as close readers, she says, learning to read by listening word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, to those reading to us. Her view is consistent with Carver's (1990) “rauding” research that matches the process of reading for comprehension to that of listening to speech. In Prose's view, close reading is completely natural.

Prose's book begins with analyzing single words, “Calling her ‘the grandmother’ at once reduces her to her role in the family” (17). She moves on to sentences – “can a word or phrase be cut from this without sacrificing anything essential?” (43) – and then to paragraphs, and characters, and so on. The essence of the technique is simply to slow down and ask questions.

For Prose, close reading is pleasurable; that is why it works a teaching technique. She tells of the plain fun she had tracing patterns and making connections in her reading at even a young age. Prose's book has been received enthusiastically. Crediting Prose, Grimes (2006) states that the drudgery of reading as information processing only returns to “the sheer bliss of the childhood reading experience ... when time, mercifully, stands still.” The practice can be called close reading or slow reading or deep reading; it does not matter. Any variant of slow reading can be used to increase comprehension and pleasure in reading.

*Slow Reading with Youths*

Slow reading has a heritage from religion and the humanities, and with that comes a perception that it is a practice only for advanced readers. That perception is being challenged by teachers who are innovating with slow reading techniques to teach literacy and lasting pleasure in reading to students of all ages.

Metzger (1998) was concerned that her high-school students were not learning how to comprehend difficult text. After researching and experimenting with a number of techniques, Metzger found what she was looking for. She modified a pedagogy known as the Socratic Seminar, a focused discussion on the possible interpretations of a short piece of writing. Her modification entailed an outer circle of students that observes how an inner circle comprehends the text. "In other words, students focus on how they are reading as well as what they are reading." She admits that while the technique cannot make all students love reading, it does give them the skills to comprehend difficult text.

In an earlier version of Metzger's technique, she led the discussion in the inner circle. She agrees with student feedback that it works better when students lead the discussion. Duke (1982) focuses explicitly on this theme, urging teachers to "encourage students to discover the meaning of a text for themselves, using the language of the text and without unnecessary intervention of the teacher." Examples include journal entries and oral reading. This view suggests that slow reading should be voluntary for the best quality of reading experience. Applying a highly prescribed technique or forcing the reading in some way is contrary to the essence of slow reading; to some extent, it must be voluntary for it to be slow reading.

Rereading is a common technique used in close reading. Galef (1998) investigated rereading of narrative texts, including children's literature. He examined how perspectives change after the first reading, and the distortions that emerge through repetition. In examining the gains and losses that go with rereading, he observed that "Rereading has many joys but suspense is not one of them. Anticipation has replaced it." Faust & Glenzer (2000) also used rereading in the classroom. The title of their article came from the testimony of their children: *I could read those parts over and over*. The students readily grasped that rereading literature is like watching movies and listening to music more than once.

Another innovative approach is performance reading. Instead of having students read at their desks or having teachers read Hamlet's soliloquy, Lindblom (2005) used performance methods in English classes. "Performance happens when students look closely at a piece of text and use their voices and bodies to explore the subtleties of the author's words" (116). Lindblom called it "close reading on your feet" and the students loved it. Performance reading requires the performer to process the script in a deeper way, such as imagining how the character feels.

The success of slow reading in the classroom compels an expansion of its meaning. It turns out that slow reading is useful and entertaining for people of all ages. Innovations such as performance reading extend the notion of slow reading to anything that deepens a reader's processing of a text.

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