

This is Your Brain on Skim Reading - Is skim reading the new normal?

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Deep reading is dying.

Today, digital content overload is turning us into a world of skim-readers with consequences for this generation and the next one.

Modern-day reading is still evolving.

The brain's ability to read is rapidly changing.

Skimming allows you to look for details in addition to the main ideas.

Michael S. Rosenwald [reports](#) in the *Washington Post* that, according to cognitive neuroscientists, humans seem to be developing digital brains with new circuits for skimming through content at the expense of deep reading.

Many people are developing a skill to skim-read.

They read the first few lines of an article, then quickly spot certain words or phrases they find valuable rather than take in the whole text.

They hone in on what is important to their purpose.

American psychiatrist Edward Hallowell, explains, “never in human history, our brains had to work so much information as today. We have now a generation of people who spend many hours in front of a computer monitor or a cell phone and who are so busy in processing the information received from all directions, so they lose the ability to think and feel. Most of this information is superficial. People are sacrificing the depth and feeling and cut off from other people.”

Deep reading takes time. Reading slowly to comprehend information is not cognitively easy for many people.

Attention is exhausting.

When attention is limited, skimming rules.

When you embrace skimming, the brain builds a system to lower the cognitive load to maximise brain energy.

Every minute on an article is a minute not spent doing something else, hence the need to find real value in a piece before spending more time reading it.

How do you know if this article is actually good and worth your time?

You don't, so you skim.

Skimming becomes the only option when you are bombarded with headlines from hundreds, if not thousands, of news sources.

It's probably the best way to sift through the insane amount of content produced daily.

It's a fundamental reading skill for a lot of people who need to find valuable information in the shortest possible time.

I skim daily to find relevant ideas that inform my work.

Of course, if I skim an article and find it interesting, switching over to slow comprehensive reading is the next step to find even more valuable information.

The reading brain in a digital world

Reading actually changes the wiring of the brain.

Read (deeply or skimming) changes our brain's ability to comprehend, analyse, and evaluate information.

The quality of your reading has a huge impact on how you think.

[Research shows](#) that reading helps with fluid intelligence, comprehension and emotional intelligence.

Reading involves several brain functions, including visual and auditory processes, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and more.

According to the ongoing research at [Haskins Laboratories for the Science of the Spoken and Written Word](#), reading, unlike watching or listening to media, gives the brain more time to stop, think, process, and imagine the narrative.

Deep reading (attentive reading, absorbing, understanding and analysing text) expands a reader's attention span.

A [study](#) published in the *Annual Review of Psychology* found overlap in brain regions used to comprehend stories and interact with others.

Today, technology is changing our brains. We are getting better at parsing information in digital contexts and losing the benefits of deep reading.

We are also losing deep attention and focus.

“Skimming has led to a tendency to go to the sources that seem the simplest, most reduced, most familiar, and least cognitively challenging,” says Maryanne Wolf, author of “Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain In A Digital World.”

With so much online information, our brains form shortcuts to deal with it all— scanning, searching for valuable phrases, scrolling up and down quickly.

We're spending so much time scrolling, bookmarking, pushing, linking, and jumping through text that when we sit down with a great book, our skimming habits interfere with our reading process.

For many people who are accustomed to skim-reading digital content, they are likely to avoid reading anything that appears difficult or hard to understand.

In her book, [*Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain In A Digital World*](#), Maryanne seeks to understand what's happening to our brains at a time when information overload is increasingly becoming a problem for many people. She writes:

“Do you, my reader, read with less attention and perhaps even less memory for what you have read? Do you notice when reading on a screen that you are increasingly reading for key words and skimming over the rest? Has this habit or style of screen reading bled over to your reading of hard copy? Do you find yourself reading the same passage over and over to understand its meaning?”

Maryanne's concerns are real and practical in the 21st century.

Skimming is so common that, many people can't make time to slowly read a great book. They are in effect wiring their brains for better skimming at the expense of deep reading.

As you improve your skimming habit, your brain gradually avoids denser, more complex analyses, even those that are readily available.

At some point, you will no longer have the cerebral patience to plough through a long and demanding article or book unless you are really interested in the topic.

With time, you won't find the same enveloping pleasure you once derived from your former reading self.

“...critical analysis, empathy and other deep reading processes could become the unintended “collateral damage” of our digital culture,” [says](#) Maryanne.

It pays to pause and reflect on the impact of your skimming habit on your deep reading skill.

Your ability to process information deeply and critically shouldn't suffer.

Closing thoughts

The brain is constantly adapting.

You can benefit from both skimming and deep reading if you embrace the two habits. There are advantages to both ways of reading.

There is potential for a bi-literate brain.

How you read is a choice.

It's as simple as picking up an actual, physical book or skimming an article.

By all means, read, but choose to exercise your empathy, strengthen your critical thinking, attention span, and heighten your appreciation for a great book.

Cultivate a new kind of brain to benefit from both deep reading and skimming. The combination of these two methods has immense value for your adaptable brain.