



# Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

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Volume 2  
Issue 2 January 1962

Article 4

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1-1-1962

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### Recommended Citation

Carter, H. L., & McGinnis, D. J. (1962). Mental Content and Its Relationship to Flexibility of Reading. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 2 (2). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol2/iss2/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol2/iss2/4)

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## Mental Content and Its Relationship To Flexibility of Reading

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If reading performance is to vary as to kind and degree and especially if rate of reading and the newer media of instruction are to be stressed, a greater emphasis must be placed upon mental content and its relationship to the reading process. For example, in the sentence "The whipple-tree and traces were seriously damaged," little meaning can be secured without adequate mental content. An increased span of perception provides limited help. Contextual clues are of little value. Structural analysis furnishes little aid, and a rapid rate of reading complicates the whole attempt to secure understanding. There must be mental content (3) which can be used in identifying, interpreting, and evaluating meaning in all reading situations. It is the function of this paper to discuss briefly mental content and the reading process, selective reading, and the development of flexibility.

### Mental Content and the Reading Process

Mental content is the total awareness of an individual at any moment and is the result of his background and experience. In showing the importance of mental content, it may be well to let "S" represent any symbol and "M" mental content. Then three aspects of reading may be shown as follows:

$$(1) \text{ Identification} = \frac{S}{M}$$

$$(2) \text{ Interpretation} = \frac{\frac{S}{M}}{M} \quad \text{or} \quad \frac{S}{M^2}$$

$$(3) \text{ Evaluation} = \frac{\frac{S}{M^2}}{M} \quad \text{or} \quad \frac{S}{M^3}$$

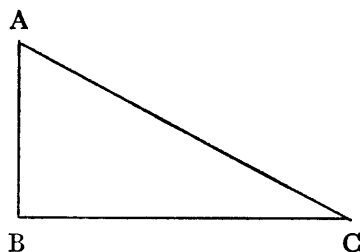
In equation (1) the symbol is identified in terms of one's mental

content. In equation (2) the identified symbol is interpreted in harmony with mental content. Equation (3) shows the evaluation of the interpreted symbol in terms of "M." With these statements in

mind, reading may be redefined as a function of  $\frac{S}{M} \cdot \frac{S}{M^2} \cdot \frac{S}{M^3}$

having characteristics and properties differing from its constituent parts. This functional concept of reading seems superior to the old two-dimensional description of reading as "rate and comprehension." In fact, the term comprehension is obsolete and has probably far outlived its usefulness.

Reading then is shown as an integration of skills rather than an accumulation, and furthermore it is apparent that "M" increases in importance as the aspects of reading become more complex. Mental content or "M" is introspectively utilized in the identification, interpretation and evaluation of concepts for it is the "ground" upon which the "figure" is transposed (4). For example, the reader who sees the word "sine" may *identify* it as the "function of an angle" or as "without" depending upon his "M." If this "M" is made up of experiences in the field of trigonometry, his *interpretation* of "sine" based upon his mental content as he views the following triangle will be that sine of angle BAC is  $\frac{BC}{AC}$ . Obviously, this requires a greater degree of "M" than merely identification.



Furthermore, the *evaluation* of the term "sine" which can be expressed by its use in the solution of a trigonometric problem would require comparatively the greatest degree of "M." One reads to secure meaning and one uses the integration of "meanings" to read effectively (1). The process is goal oriented and makes use of feed-

back which can add to "M." Surely, if speed reading is to be emphasized and if effective reading is to be developed, mental content must be given greater consideration by the classroom teacher.

### Selective Reading and Flexibility

Flexibility in reading involves more than variations in rate which is adjusted upward or downward to meet changes in difficulty of materials and modifications of purpose. Flexibility involves *selectivity*. Selective reading is an attempt to read only those parts of the material which best serve the reader's purpose. Identification, interpretation and evaluation are always prerequisites. Selective reading usually takes two forms: *skimming* and *scanning*. Skimming is the process of quickly identifying the main ideas of an entire selection in order to secure a general impression of it. The reader obtains, for example, an overview of a chapter which consists of a feeling for the general nature of its content and main ideas. Skimming is utilized in making a preview of a book, in surveying a chapter before reading it carefully and in finding appropriate material for different purposes. Furthermore, skimming is employed in review of material previously read in order to prepare for a test or compile a report. Scanning also implies a careful identification, interpretation and evaluation of ideas. It differs from skimming in that the reader searches for specific concepts and is not immediately concerned with the entire content. The reader seeks answers to questions, an appropriate statement, or reference. He scans as he locates names in directories, words in a dictionary, or prices in a catalogue. The reader considers only as much of the content as is necessary to accomplish his immediate purpose.

### Developing Flexibility

The versatile reader can identify, interpret and evaluate concepts expressed in a wide range of reading material with varying rate and method of attack dependent upon the nature of the material and the reader's purpose. If versatility is to be achieved, basic skills must be developed and mental content in many fields must be available, for the reader is required to contribute if he is to receive.

★ The teacher's function is to provide the kind of instruction which will lead to versatility in reading. One way of accomplishing this goal is to teach students how to apply the five-step plan for reading a chapter (2). This plan, when effectively used, requires skill in

skimming and scanning as well as careful analytical reading. In previewing a chapter to identify the main ideas, selective reading is required. The reader seeks both an overview and specific ideas found in the introduction and summary. Moreover, information concerning the general nature of the content is gained by skimming the main headings. These, in turn, are converted into suitable questions by both skimming and scanning the subheadings in order to make certain that the questions formed are actually answered by the content of the text. In reading to answer these questions, the individual is required to identify, interpret and evaluate in a selective manner the concepts expressed in the chapter. Careful reading is essential. After the student has answered the question and stated his responses in his *own* words, he is ready to try out and test the organization mastery of his information. In reading a chapter in this manner, both selective and careful reading are utilized. Accelerated reading is not recommended.

The teacher should also develop skill and appreciation in the reading of poetry. For example, in the following stanza by Wordsworth, selective and careful reading is necessary.

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

The imagery created by choice of words, diction, form and tone contributes to appreciation. Mental content is essential to adequate interpretation.

In addition, the teacher should show her students how to read in order to solve problems, how to find and organize facts, and how to think and read critically. In developing these skills, adequate materials at the grade and interest levels of the student should be employed.

If teachers make use of machines, structured materials, and the newer media of instruction, provision must be made to assure transfer of skills to actual reading situations for the whole purpose of reading instruction is to show students how to make more effective use of their books. In doing so, reading skills must be integrated, not merely accumulated. Surely, mental content and flexibility are factors to be emphasized by the reading teacher.

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