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AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL STUDENTS WHY READ?

Dorothy Edna Smith

Western Michigan University

A few years ago Morris Bishop (1) wrote a fantastic and fascinating tale about a professor who invented a reading machine. This machine would read everything that was fed into it, making it unnecessary for anyone to go through the tedium of reading for himself. This invention seemed as sensible to the professor as the computers are that solve complicated mathematical problems for scientists. There was a slight flaw in his reasoning, of course and that was, what would anyone do with the results of the reading machine's labors? Read them?

This final step, the result of reading, is the important step. This is where many of us need help. We already can read, poorly or well, but we can read. We say, why bother, when what we read doesn't stick around inside us long enough to matter? What we read goes in our eyes and out the holes in our heads, leaving barely a trace.

Do you think so? If you do, you're wrong. You and I, all of us, have a helper so marvelous it puts to shame the professor's reading machine. The helper is our own private data processor, a machine which can do so much more than the professor's invention. Does it sound silly to say that you own a data processor when you barely can make it financially from that Saturday night date to Tuesday's lunch? Everybody knows computers cost thousands of dollars.

Believe it or not, though, you do have a calculating machine, an organizer, a memory machine, built within you. The complicated mechanism is designed solely to your specifications. It will operate at peak efficiency for nobody else in the world, only you.

How do you make it work? What will activate it? You. You and practice. As you know, what makes all electronic data processors produce the right answers is the material that is fed into them, material which is both qualitative and quantitative. In other words, you must do two things, feed it a mixture that is rich, and feed it one that is also accurate. This rich feeding process is recognized by

investigators in the field of reading. It is called “mental content” by Carter, “. . . if one possesses appropriate mental content, he is able to identify, interpret, and evaluate . . .” (2), and Holmes calls it “Substrata Factor.” He says, “Incoming information (is) ordered and stored in localized cell-assemblies in the brain.” (4) Then all these coded comprehensions, or punched cards as it were, are compiled and cross-indexed, ready for use whenever you push the button.

The rich mixture is what your data processor feeds on, and the bin that you use for storage is your preconscious. (3) There has never yet been a machine developed by IBM or any other electronics firm which is so individually tailored to you, nor so accurate for you, as your preconscious. Everything you have seen, heard, dreamt, felt, decided, been forced into, thought, and *read* is dumped into this bin. Everything. Your beliefs, additions to, subtractions from, modifications of are recorded faithfully by this super-secretary. It is never home with a cold or out to lunch. It stays on its feet and operates at maximum efficiency no matter how you feel.

All right, You have a preconscious. Everybody except human vegetables has one. And if you are a vegetable you won't be reading this. Ergo, you have a preconscious. What are you doing with your electronic brain? Are you using it to capacity?

Few of us do. In the first place, we're afraid to trust it. If an answer comes from within us, unbidden and without strain, we tend to mistrust it. We're sure it can't be right. But that is where we're wrong. Our preconscious can almost always come out with the right answer. IF. Our preconscious can almost always come out with the right answer if we have fed it the right dope in the first place. If we have learned facts and balances and principles, if we have fed all of these into our private machine, when we need to solve a problem involving those same principles, our preconscious can come up with the one best right answer.

One word of caution, however. Our preconscious takes all the facts and figures and conclusions that we give it, but it also takes our own personal biases, our individualities (called our peculiarities by outsiders) and amalgamates them with our problem-solving facts, correlates them with a heavy balance on the side of “feeling,” and gives us the solution. Ordinarily this is not a bad thing. Ordinarily the answer we want is one that is palatable to us, one that we can tolerate. Occasionally, however, we need an unbiased answer, an answer

that has nothing to do with the way we feel about something. Then, when we feed the data to our preconscious, we must add that restriction—please omit the hearts and flowers.

What has all this to do with the problem of reading or how to study or how to learn? It has almost everything to do with it. It means that all you have to do is to learn something right, use it a few times to establish the right pathway within your machine, and behold! That bit of knowledge is forever stored in your nervous system. It has to be used now and then so it won't be put into "dead storage," from whence things only reluctantly ever reappear. Nobody ever forgets completely anything he has ever learned. He may bury it or overlay it or even mislay it, but it's there, in his preconscious until the day he dies. Such an array of knowledge, if it were put onto 3" x 5" cards, would require a building the size of Westminster Abbey. But we—each one of us—can carry that much around with us in our cantaloupe-sized brains, wherever we go, all day, every day. And we can use it. And we should use it.

The moral of this story is: stuff your private computer with everything you can read, every item, mote of knowledge, idea, vague thought that comes your way. Work at it. Feed it. And, if you have fed it well—not too much starch, not too much sugar, not too much pap—it will return the favor. It will feed you.

References

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3. English, Horace B., and Ava Champney English, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms*. Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1958.
4. Holmes, Jack A., "Speed, Comprehension and Power in Reading," *Problems, Programs and Projects in College—Adult Reading*. The National Reading Conference, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1962.

Dorothy Edna Smith is the co-author of *An Introduction to General American Phonetics* published by Harper and Row. A suspense story she wrote, "Thirty-nine," was anthologized in *The Lethal Sex* as one of the best mystery stories of 1959. At one time she was assistant to the director of the Speech Clinic at Western Michigan University, and she is now a member of the staff of the Psycho-Educational Clinic. Mrs. Smith has four children—all going to college—and a professional humorist for a husband. He is also a professor. Her extra-collegiate activities include having been a member of the Board of Directors (with George Romney) of Citizens for Michigan, president of the League of Women Voters of Kalamazoo and president of Friends of the Juvenile Court.