There are many theories of reading. Some regard reading as a skill which relies heavily on our visual perception and ability to recognize words, letter shapes, sound patterns and so on. Other theories regard reading much like looking at a picture, where we read to get the whole message and the bits and pieces, like the separate brush strokes of a picture, are not singularly important.

Reading instruction often focuses on items of knowledge - words, letters, sounds. Most people respond to this type of teaching. They search for links between the items and they relate new discoveries to old knowledge. They search for relationships and link old knowledge with new. So, there are many things which go on inside a reader's head when reading occurs.

People who fail to progress in reading do not approach print in this way. The skills which they have tried to carry out have not brought order to the complexity of the text and they have often become passive in their confusion. This confusion involves losing track of what they read, which usually results in three things - regression, vocalization and faulty fixations.

Regression occurs to most readers. Have you ever had the experience of thinking you were reading and suddenly realized you haven't taken a word in for ages? Usually we go back and re-read what we missed. We spend as much as a third of our time going back. The second problem most readers have involved saying the words, they are reading, either in their minds - where a little internal voice says the words, or under their breath. Some very slow readers read out loud. A common solution for this is to place a pen or pencil in between the teeth so, talking becomes rather difficult, or chewing on gum often works. The third problem some readers experience involves fixating on every word. The brain only processes the images from the eye when the eye is actually stopped for that split second when it fixates on a word. This means that your brain processes these images by relating them other information to make meaning. The more words you take in when your eyes stop the more information your brain can process. Where you limit your brain to processing one word at a time, you obviously work harder than is necessary. Reading dynamically, in word groups, or dimensionally down the page using a pacer, you have fewer and fewer fixations. This has the potential to increase your comprehension and reading rate at the same time. You simply take in more!

Reading is like any other skill we learn. For example, when we first learn to walk, we tend to move quickly, but with not much stability. The more confident and stronger we become, the slower and steadier we are until we learn how to control our speed. So, when we decide to run, we can usually control the pace, so we avoid falling over. Sometimes we can increase the speed at which we run, other times we purposely reduce the speed, when we realize that if we don't, we could come to harm. When we learn to speed read, we use the same technique. When we read the newspaper, we might fly through at 1000 words per minute. A magazine or journal article might require us to read at about 800 words per minute while a highly technical report and drawings may require that we read at about 500 words per minute. Speed reading then is a tool. It is your choice how you use it.

This passage on reading is from "Speed Reading: How to read faster and more effectively" a booklet produced by Student Services at the Sunshine Coast University College, Queensland, Australia.