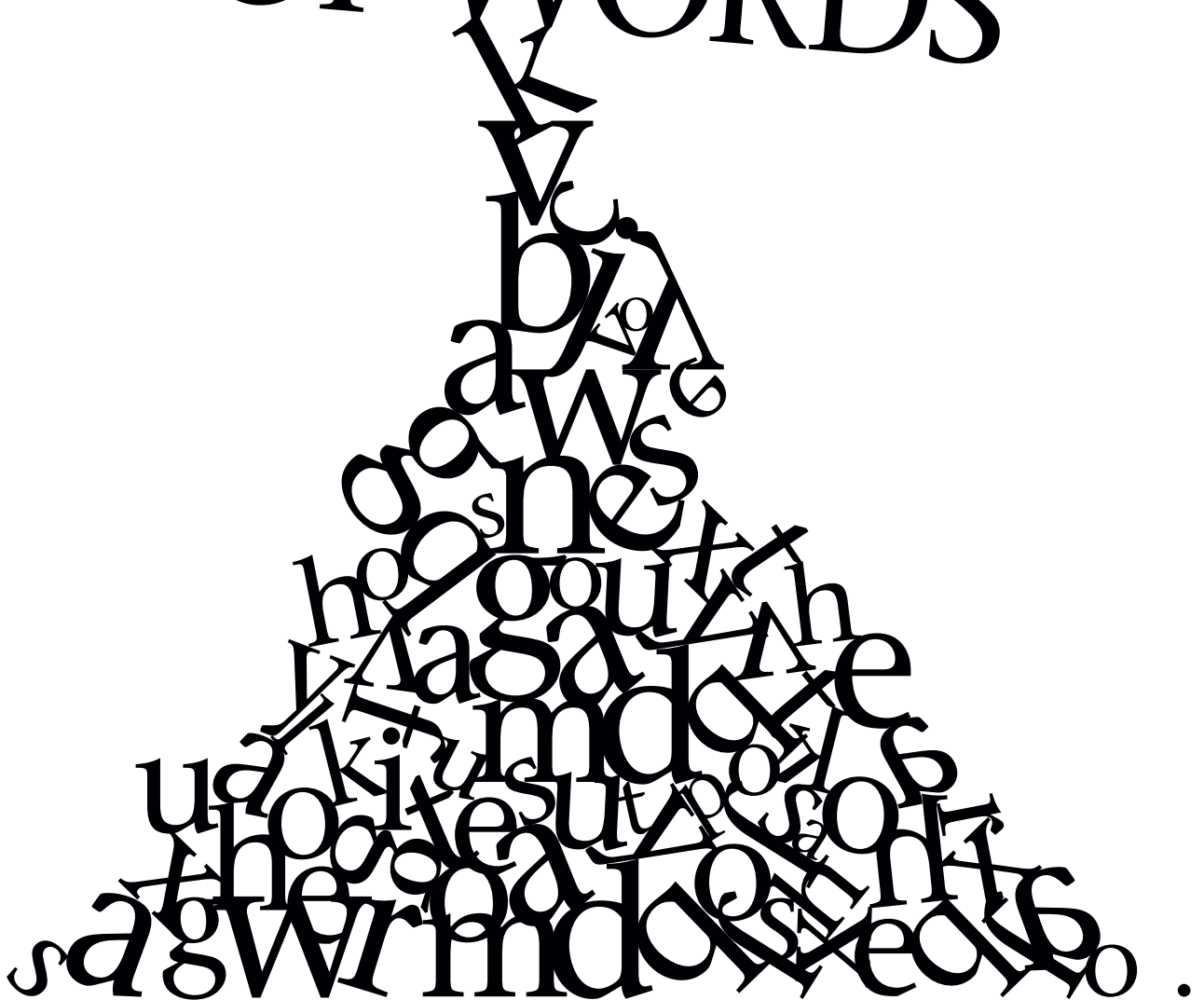


A MOUNTAIN OF WORDS



Emails, social media and online news mean we have more reading to do than ever before. How best to cope, wonders Emma Young

THE onslaught of words begins the moment you wake up. Even before dressing, you may check your emails, peruse the morning news online, respond to texts and skim your Twitter feed. Then, at work, there are reports, memos or articles to be read and more emails to deal with. You might even dip into some prose for the sheer pleasure of it.

With the rise of the internet and social media, many of us encounter far more written information than earlier generations. This daily deluge of text can be overwhelming. Whether you're struggling to cope or would just like to read even more, it's tempting to wonder whether there are better methods.

We know that the human brain is capable of amazing feats. "People are now memorising decks of cards in less than 20 seconds, and an individual recently solved eight Rubik's cubes under water in a single breath," says David Balota of Washington University in St Louis, Missouri. "It's interesting to speculate whether such training may be achievable within the reading domain."

Realistically, most of us can never hope to challenge six-times world speed-reading champion Anne Jones, who has clocked up rates of 4251 words a minute. But there are ways anyone can get more from what they

read. To read more efficiently and more accurately, you just need to know which advice to follow and which to ignore.

The average university-educated person reads between 200 and 400 words per minute. Historically, reading better has been synonymous with reading faster. Since US teacher Evelyn Wood pioneered the concept of speed-reading in the 1950s, there has been a proliferation of courses and books promising to teach people to read up to five times faster without any loss of comprehension. Now modern technology has made the idea even more attractive. One popular app called Spritz, for example, has been used by millions of people worldwide, according to the company behind it. It even comes pre-loaded on some cellphones.

"Until recently, speed-reading systems were only available on training courses, so you'd have to go out and enrol and it would take several weeks," says cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Schotter from the University of South Florida. "With the tech-based approaches, one claim is that you don't need to do any training and you can start right away. That's really appealing, because people are always looking for quick and easy ways to solve their life problems – like having too much to read."

However, until recently, we had little idea of whether speed-reading actually works. To find out, Schotter and her colleagues have evaluated many of the most popular strategies and systems. Their findings make disappointing reading.

Take the common "solution" suggesting that your reading will accelerate if you learn to get rid of sub-vocalisations. The trick here is not to "hear" the words in your mind, and to rely solely on a "visual" reading process. Internal vocalisation is a time-wasting carry-over from how we learned to read, aloud, as children, the argument goes. However, Schotter and her colleagues point to good evidence that getting rid of this inner speech reduces comprehension. It makes sense that translating visual information into an aural form helps readers to understand it, she says, given that the primary form of language is vocal and auditory. We started talking to each other at least 100,000 years ago but it wasn't until about 3400 BC that Mesopotamians invented a written language.

Another popular concept used in apps is to present single words rapidly, one after the other. With Spritz, for example, users can set the rate at anything between 250 and 1000 words per minute. It is claimed that this does away with the need to make eye movements. ►

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