



# Paying Attention

## An Introduction to Slow Reading

By Tom Newkirk

I am a slow reader. There, it's out.

I can imagine few readers, not even my family members, truly interested in my reading process. But my own slowness is clearly a motivation for writing. It may take me a week to read a book that, a colleague assures me, I “can read in a night.” I’ve even bookmarked comic books.

I enter a book carefully, trying to get a feel for this writer/narrator/teller that I will spend time with. I hear the language, feel the movement of sentences, pay attention to punctuation, sense pauses, feel the writer’s energy (or lack of it), construct the voice and temperament of the writer. To be sure, I visualize, but equally important I *auditorize*. My spell-checker underlines auditorize, so I need to create a rule recognizing it. The fact I can’t find a recognizable word for this activity indicates there is important work to do here.

If I am going to spend time with an author, I want to hear his or her voice—I want some human connection. Because even as I read “silently,” I am still in a world of sound. My connection to writers, my pleasure in reading, even my capacity for comprehension depends on this sound, on the voiced quality of print.

I don’t hear this voice all the time—when I skim the Internet for facts, or fast-forward through the too-frequent, too-lengthy letters from university administrators. But for reading that truly matters to

me, that asks me to be continuously present, I depend on this acoustic connection.

I am thrown off my reading game, when I am forced to go too fast. I can feel this connection slipping away. I lose this vital sense of language and rhythm. I am forced to skip, scan, and sample when I feel myself on the clock. As I feel myself pushed beyond a physiological processing limit, one of my favorite and most pleasurable activities becomes suddenly unpleasant. And surely there is no such auditory connection in much of the reading we all do on the Internet where, by some accounts, we “read” about 18 percent of the words on the screen.

To read slowly is to maintain an intimate relationship with a writer. If we are to respond to a writer, we must be *responsible*. We commit ourselves to follow a train of thought, to mentally construct characters, to follow the unfolding of an idea, to hear a text, to attend to language, to question, to visualize scenes. It means paying attention to the deci-

sions a writer makes. Though often characterized as “literary reading,” it is relevant to all texts we take seriously. There is usually an ebb and flow to slow reading, periods when we are immersed in the narrative flow, and times when we pause to reflect or reread or just savor the moment. Outside directives that seek to regulate this rhythm (making us stop too often, telling us when to stop, or not giving us the opportunity to stop—even making us go too slowly) are profoundly disrupting.

Although I am convinced that slow reading is essential for real comprehension, it is also clearly crucial to the deep pleasure we take in reading and for the power of reading to change us. As John Miedema eloquently puts it: “By opening your inner self to a book in this way, you invite ideas and feelings that enrich and expand your interiority. Reading is the making of a deeper self.”

My own reading story is a very privileged one. My father, a biology professor, was a voracious and eclectic reader, from Montaigne to Mickey Spillane. I would come home from school and I could sometimes hear his voice drifting down from the second floor as he paced and read. He loved Mark Twain and read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to my brother and me several times as a bedtime book. I remember vividly how scary the graveyard scene was. He later bribed us to read both that book and *Huckleberry Finn*—paying us a penny a page. For both of us, there was a ceremonial reading of the last page, and Dad would just shake his head in appreciation of the ending where Huck decides to “light out for new territory” and not go back to the Widow Douglas. “I been there before,” my dad would say, quoting Huck, “Isn’t that just great? I been there before.”

And from an early age I had contact with writers. My dad loved mosquitoes more than anyone I would ever meet; we grew up with their names as part of our vocabulary (*Culex*, *Anopheles*, *Aedes aegypti*), and he would write scientific papers on insects like the dance fly that preyed on mosquitoes. He would send them off to *Annals of the Entomological Society of America*; then, as now, there would be the long wait, and after months he received the decision with the reviewers’ comments, which he always resented. I’m convinced I first learned the expression “son of a bitch” in reference to outside reviewers. There would be the two-hour trip to the Ohio State library to incorporate additional citations, the return of the manuscript, and the eventual publication.

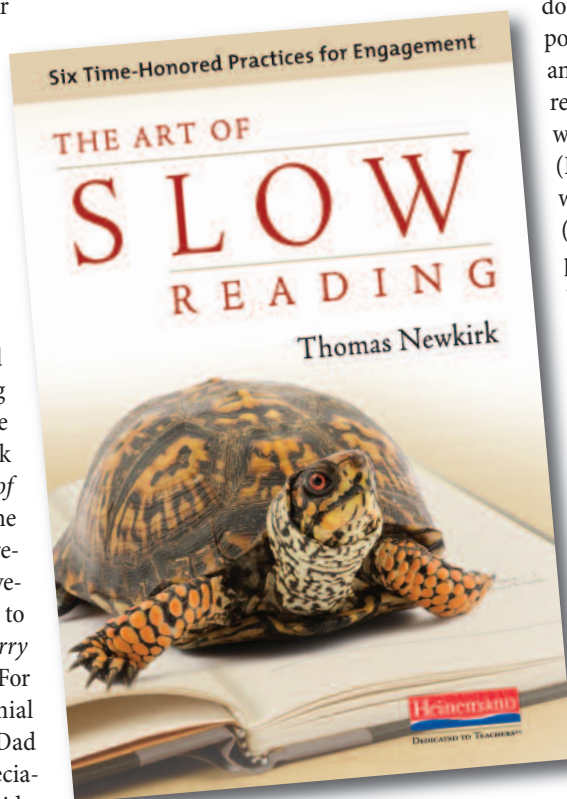
His best friend, Dick Snyder, was a poet and short story writer, who brought a steady stream of acclaimed writers to the college campus. We would hear his stories about the literary critic John Crowe Ransom

whom he studied with, and of writers like Randall Jarrell, Mary Lavin, Gwendolyn Brooks, or Stephen Spender, all of whom passed through our little town. I once asked Dick’s widow, Mary, what she remembered of Ransom, and she said, “Hell of a poker player.” In the early ’60s, after *Catch-22* became a huge best seller, he had Joseph Heller over to his house. They both flew in bombers during World War II and exchanged war stories. Dick himself talked about his own efforts to place poems, and later let me read drafts of the stories he was working on.

I was privileged to see reading being made by writers, and I could also see the deep affection my father and his friends had for particular writers. Even as a ten-year-old there was no doubt in my mind that James Joyce was more important than Dwight Eisenhower. From an early age, and to this day, reading for me was about an intense relationship with a writer, whose presence I felt. It was reciprocal: the writer was working hard for me (I’d seen it firsthand) and I would work hard as well. I would persist, and together we, the author (or narrator) and I, would enact the story. It was a partnership. Even then, I knew that much of the way I was taught and tested was bogus—texts didn’t have main ideas, I determined them through my own pattern of attention. Texts didn’t have correct interpretations that could be passed on to me. Interpretation was something we did together. Hidden meanings? I didn’t believe authors hid things from me, though there was much I discovered in multiple readings.

I was loyal to the books and authors I read, and learned to give them my full attention; in fact, reading taught me to be attentive.

The ideas in this article are explored in more detail in Tom Newkirk’s newest Heinemann book *The Art of Slow Reading: Six Time-Honored Practices for Engagement*.



**Tom Newkirk**, recipient of the University of New Hampshire’s prestigious Lindberg Award in 2010, is the author of numerous Heinemann titles. His *Misreading Masculinity* was cited by Instructor Magazine as one of the most significant books for teachers in the past decade. Tom also wrote the books  *Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones* and *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* which won NCTE’s David H. Russell Award for Research. His latest Heinemann title *The Art of Slow Reading* explores the importance of deep, focused, thoughtful reading. A former teacher at an at-risk high school in Boston, Tom now teaches at the University of New Hampshire and directs the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes.



Tom has also written professional journal articles regarding his perspectives on the Common Core State Standards. Read his special CCSS opinion piece *The Text Itself* and continue to engage with Tom at [www.heinemann.com/pd/journal](http://www.heinemann.com/pd/journal).