Reading speedily can help the overburdened improve

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Staff Reporter

Imagine being able to read 400 pages in one evening. Imagine that reading 400 words a minute is considered a slow pace.

Alumna Jeannie Gordon was a single parent with four young children in 1970 and striving for her bachelor's degree in education.

"I taught myself to speed read," Gordon said. "I had such a critical need for it because I didn't have the time with four little ones."

Speed reading is a technique used by people who try to increase the number of words they can read each minute. A number of online classes, books and courses that teach speed reading are available.

"As an undergrad, reading was more tedious because I didn't recognize all the words," Gordon said. "After you know words, you might not see a word on the page because your mind automatically recognizes it."

When Gordon reads, she said she doesn't pay attention to individual words but instead can see the main thoughts, phrases and details.
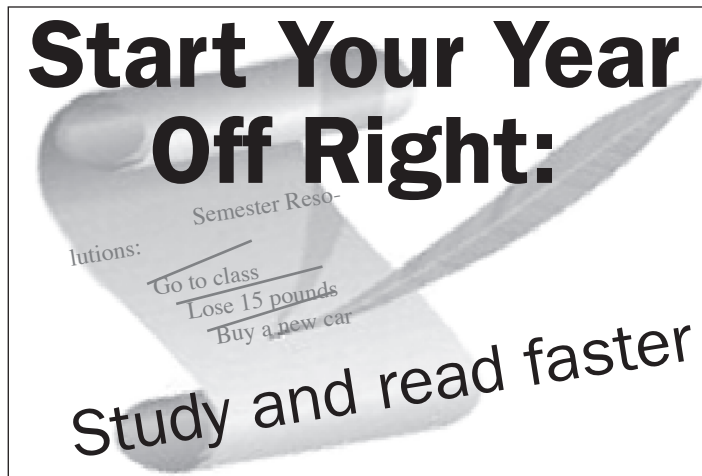
"When I am in that mindset, it's a very intense concentration," Gordon said.

Concentration allows her to get through hundreds of words faster than the average reader. She said she picks out the information she needs and just continues to follow her finger down the page.

"When you read a lot, your mind is building new knowledge on old knowledge which you don't need the old knowledge," Gordon said. "You already know it, so instead your mind recognizes the new information."

Several Missouri universities have caught on to the speed-reading trend and offer it as a class.

University of Central Missouri offers two one-credit hour classes in speed reading each semester. Students who enroll in the class typically double the number of words they can read per minute after they finish the course, said Patrick Streck, assistant professor and coordinator of the learning center.

"Some of [the students] come in because they have so much reading that they're getting behind," he said. "Some of them very frankly come in because it's a one-hour class that's by arrangement. We always have students who come in for that reason but express wonder at what they can accomplish."

Streck said students take a test to assess their current reading level and rate before doing sessions on a computer that make the eyes work quicker and increase peripheral vision. They've used the computer program Ultimate Speed Reading for the past 10 years, he said.

While some courses are quick and online, other classes are taught during several weeks. The Evelyn Woods program takes three days and can increase reading speed from about 400 words per minute to more than 1,000, according to www.pryor.com.

Elizabeth Lindhardt, an admissions office worker at the Sylvan Learning Center in Quincy, Ill., said the Sylvan program takes 12 hours and is guaranteed to raise one's effective reading level.

"The way they base the program is to assess each student and then teach and reassess," Lindhardt said. "It'll help to determine strengths and weaknesses and then monitor progress."

The speed-reading program at Sylvan creates small groups of two to five people. The 12-hour program breaks down into one or two hours a day, said Josh Inghram, director of education at the Sylvan Learning Center in Quincy.

The process comes in three parts — chunking, skimming and scanning.

Chunking teaches students to put about seven words in their short-term memory. If students chunk slowly, they can comprehend 300 to 400 words per minute. If students chunk quickly, they can comprehend 400 to 600 words per minute.

"We have kids on record that have gotten up to 1,300 words per minute and still retain the comprehension," Inghram said.

When skimming and scanning, speed reading teachers encourage students to ignore sight words, Inghram said. Students move over such words as "and," "the" and "in," allowing them to improve reading speed.

"About 60 to 70 percent of texts are sight words," Inghram said. "You don't need them."

The level of reading comprehension affects the quickness of reading. Reading facts or studying for school requires high comprehension, leisure reading requires less comprehension. The lower the comprehension, the faster someone reads naturally, she said.

"Speed reading teaches students to take the leisure reading pace and apply it to the higher comprehension level," Inghram said.

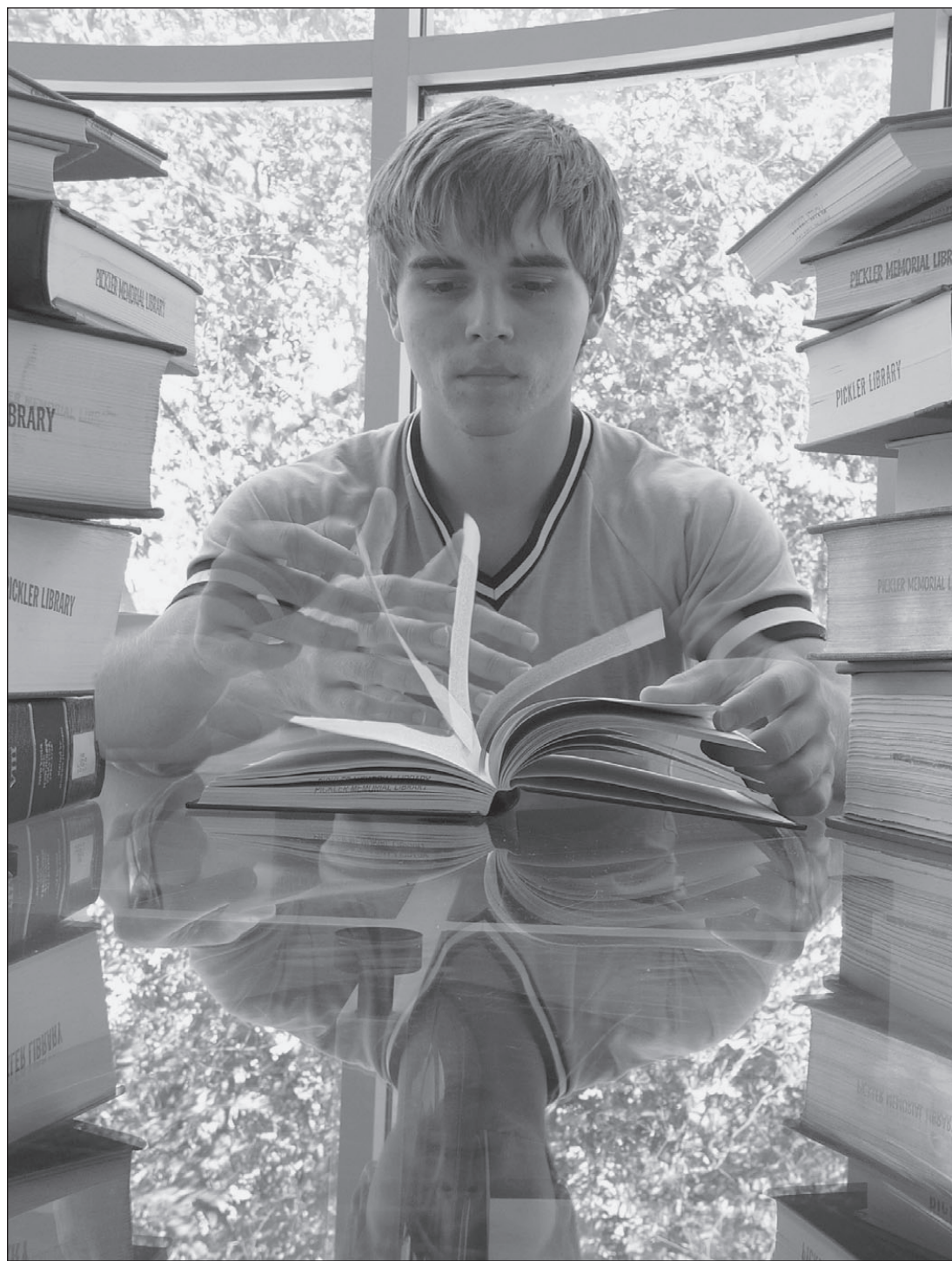Like anything, Inghram said, speed reading takes practice. Although he said it is fairly easy to learn, it takes practice to retain.

The program is designed for students in 8th grade or higher who read at or above their grade level.

Gordon said she attributes a lot of her speed reading, and her ability to learn it easily, to her love of reading. She reads hundreds of books a year and said she still retains the details, thoughts and ideas.

"It's like basketball or tennis," Gordon said. "You must practice to recognize words visually so certain words don't make you stop and think."

She said she only has one caution for students who want to learn speed reading.

"I think you have to be careful because you don't want to give up quality for speed," Gordon said. "College exposes you to new thoughts and ideas and that's what true education is about."

And when Gordon reads for fun, she said she slows down dramatically.

"I slow down when reading for fun because it's for fun," Gordon said. "And it can take me an evening to read about 400 pages."

Additional reporting by Kalen Ponche.

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Online Speed Reading Resources

- rocketreader.com
- speedreading.com
- readingsoft.com
- eyeq.tv
- pryor.com
- acereader.com