

The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads

By D.T. Willingham

San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

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In *The Reading Mind*, Willingham ascertained: “Cognitive psychologists commonly tackle large, daunting questions by breaking them down into smaller, more manageable questions. We do that by thinking through what had to happen in order for some bit of mental work to get done” (p.2). This is the exact method, the breaking down of complex ideas into smaller more manageable pieces, used throughout this book to educate readers on the processes the mind goes through to comprehend the act of reading. Step by step Willingham established for the reader how the mind approaches the procedures used for reading. The author relates the phases passed through towards a fully functioning reading mind. Fully functioning translates into a reader’s ability to take words written on a page and comprehend the author’s intended meaning. To have a rich experience via the text, or a more acute understanding of a difficult textbox. He defined the flow towards cognition as starting with mastering writing and sound, progressing to meaning and the forming of words, words into sentences, and finally sentences into reading comprehension (Willingham, 2017). In addition, and perhaps more relevant to the modern reader, the author explored the differences in forming cognition inherent in digital platforms, discussing the pros and cons between pleasure reading and digital textbooks.

Willingham takes the multifaceted topic of reading and breaks it down into manageable parts that provided a linear path through the mind for the reader to follow. Each chapter provides a detailed rendering of the steps along the path towards cognition, mastering writing and sound, progressing to meaning and the forming of words, words into sentences, and finally sentences into reading comprehension. When the book was reviewed by Dr. David James a leading academic at the Bryanston School in Dorset, he felt Willingham's latest book is typically readable, and this is not to be underestimated when you consider the complexity of the subject he is exploring (James, 2017). James goes further, giving praise for Willingham, calling him a hugely informed and interesting guide who is keen to hold your hand and explain things several times over to check you've understood it all (James, 2017).

The Reading Mind is a progression of thought processes that culminate in the reader being able to comprehend the written word. To better illustrate this journey Willingham breaks his book into chapters highlighting each aptitude set as individual skills — writing, sound and word recognition, the formation of sentences, and sentences coalescing into a broader understanding of topics and concepts -- that need to be mastered to move to the next step in development. The chapters are populated with flowcharts and tables to better elucidate the author theme. *The Reading Mind* is readable, having a levity and prose style that engages the reader and helps them move through a multilayered topic. Each chapter comes with its own set of references that tackles the theme presented. The author gathers research and theory from an amalgam of fields; education, psychology, and neuroscience.

The Reading Mind is a deep dive into the many processes happening as people translate black marks on a page into meaning. It's an ambitious undertaking, covering everything from why sound-based-versus picture-based-coding systems were created to how reading on digital

devices affects comprehension. In an interview with L. Loewus in 2017, the author explained that the purpose of writing and, by extension, reading-is to communicate thought across time and space. Writing with pictures or symbols requires too much memorization, so instead, sound-based decoding systems were developed, in which the sounds that make up spoken language are written down (Loewus, 2017).

When reading goes digital does the process for cognition change? When it comes to reading a novel on an e-reader versus on paper, there's not a whole lot of difference between the two formats. For example, when reading on your Kindle for pleasure there is no demonstrable loss of comprehension. There's probably a small hit to reading comprehension on the screen. However, when the subject becomes more complicated or is one the reader has little interest in, there seems to be a slightly larger negative impact on comprehension (Loewus, 2017).

Daniel Willingham holds a Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology from Harvard University and currently is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, where he has taught since 1992. Until about 2000, his research focused solely on the brain as the basis of learning and memory. Today, all of his research concerns the application of cognitive psychology to K-16 education. Willingham has authored more than thirty articles related to both the cognitive process and the evaluation of theories, and three books not including *The Reading Mind* (Willingham, nd).

Willingham's *The Reading Mind* makes the difficult topic of how the mind takes on information through reading, both in print and digital, a less daunting journey. By creating a linear path through the mind, the author, through humor and malleability, but more importantly, a deep understanding of the subject, makes the reader better able to comprehend the reading mind.

References

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