

Bionic reading: could an ADHD-friendly hack turn me into a speed-reader?

This typographical trick certainly helps me focus. But maybe having a wandering mind isn't such a bad thing

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Wooden letters from an old printing press. Photograph: Jakub Krechowicz/Alamy

With ADHD, thoughts and impulses intrude on my focus like burglars trying to break into a house. Sometimes these crooks carefully pick the backdoor lock before they silently enter and pilfer all the silverware. At other times, stealth goes out of the window; they're kicking through the front door and taking whatever they like.

Either way, I was supposed to be reading a book just now, but all I can think about is how great it would be if I waded into a river to save a litter of kittens from tumbling down a waterfall just in the nick of time. I've got the kittens in my hand, and the crowd has gone wild; the spectres of Gandhi, Churchill and Obi-Wan Kenobi hover over the riverbank, nodding their approval while fireworks crackle overhead ... I snap back and realise I've read three pages, only I don't remember a single line.

I reread the same pages, but the same thing happens, only now I'm so hung up on concentrating that another fantasy has hijacked my attention. This time I'm imagining that I'm super-focused, so focused that Manchester United have called and told me they want me to be their special penalty taker. These Walter Mitty, borderline narcissistic episodes persist for a while until I give up and go and be distracted somewhere else.

Unfortunately, I don't take Ritalin, a stimulant prescribed to daydreamers like me, so when it comes to focusing I need all the help I can get. Enter Swiss developer and typographic designer Renato Casutt, who has spent six years trying to develop a typographical trick that helps people read more quickly and efficiently. "Bionic reading" is a font people can use on their devices via apps for iPhone and other Apple products. It works by highlighting a limited number of letters in a word in bold, and allowing your brain – or, more specifically, your memory – to fill in the rest.

It [looks like this](#): **Is this sentence clearer now you're reading it in bionic, or are you just as confused as three sentences ago?**

Around half of bionic text on a page is bold, and Casutt claims that this gives readers "an advantage, facilitates fast learning and knowledge expansion, and provides a tool to read with less noise, more focus and fewer distractions". Some people have reported that it unlocked "[100% of my brain](#)", and that it has helped their dyslexia. Brilliant! This is music to my distracted ears, so I give it a go.

I'm not a scientist, and I am short of a test group, never mind a control group, so I figure that all I can do is read the same text twice and see which version reads better. Of course, if I've already read the first text in normal font, before I read in bionic then it's obvious that the second go will be easier, and the same problem arises if read vice versa. So I decide that mixing up paragraphs in bionic and a regular font from the same text would be a fairer test.

I don't know if it's because I'm trying especially hard, but the bionic font is startlingly good. It's less like reading and more like being punched in the face with letters, letters that jar my brain to fill in the partially formed words into fully formed ones. I'm finding I'm processing text more quickly and retaining more information. Still, bionic is not the most enjoyable reading experience. It's like having your favourite album played to you in spliced chunks – making everything sound like Pink Floyd.

Casutt [says he has overseen a study](#) involving 12 readers who were asked to read a text in bionic and ordinary text like what you're reading now. Casutt concedes that the results from his tests are not clear but claims most subjects reported that bionic had a positive effect on reading (whereas a minority reported feeling "disturbed").

In a way, some novels are already made for the ADHD brain. Books should encourage a wandering mind. Inspire rumination. Prose like Margaret Atwood's fizzes and pops, but there are other moments where it lilts and glides; you put it down, and reflect and grow. Readers would miss that if they read through the bionic lens, where everything becomes supercharged as if the writer was scribbling during a massive speed binge. Still, it would improve Wuthering Heights.

And bionic reading could have benefited me at school on the occasions when my art and design teacher made me read a textbook detailing the many, many shades of colour on the graphite pencil scale. Maybe I wouldn't have torn pages from it and sent rude messages to classmates via paper plane ... On second thoughts, I almost certainly would have.

Read the article [online](#).