

General Tips for Learning to Read Greek (in no particular order)

1. Get really comfortable with the script

When you are just starting out, photocopy / print out some Greek text (from your textbook or from your GNT) enlarged. There's a reason children's books have big print: it's designed to help those new to a script to see the letters and recognise them, individually and in groups, *readily*. You may protest 'I'm not a kid!' —but when you start learning the Greek alphabet, you are at the reading level of a kid. You'll learn faster if you accept that and accept the help you need in your elementary state. It won't last forever but it'll be over more quickly if you address yourself where you are. Read big print for a little while. It will get you faster to the level where you can read small print fast.

2. Read aloud

I never did this when I was first learning Greek. Now I wish I had. It was Bruce Metzger, of all people, who taught me this. Metzger was one of the greatest textual critics of the GNT of the C20, a true scholar. But he was also a teacher: a kind, encouraging and knowledgeable teacher, as far as I can tell. His little vocabulary builder for students (*Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek*) is still one of the best helps for new readers of Greek and in it, Metzger recommends reading aloud.

I can see why. First, if you read aloud, you really have to pay close attention to the forms of words: you can't just let your eye gloss lazily over strings of letters, being satisfied with more or less seeing them. Second, you'll notice the difference between words that are lexically and morphologically similar, training your eye to notice the small differences that can be easily glossed over. Third, you'll make use of another sense, hearing, to retain forms and vocabulary. Fourth, you'll notice stylistic features that you might otherwise miss.

So read the GNT aloud to yourself: even just a verse or two a day will make a big difference to your learning.

3. No more than 7 words per day.

If you're going to learn vocabulary the brute way (such as for the test on Friday), maybe you can 'learn' 20 words a day, or more. But if you want to *retain* vocabulary for the long term, try to space out the learning and don't try to memorise more than seven a day. Doing more is just counterproductive, research indicates, for any other purpose than passing Friday's test. If your goal is to acquire the vocabulary so as actually to read the GNT, keep your goals modest: you'll retain more in the end. (Think back over all the stuff you once knew well enough to get a good mark on a test. How much of that do you remember, if the subject matter isn't something you now need to use on a frequent basis?)

Learning vocabulary shouldn't be the linguistic equivalent of a pie eating contest—think how those often end. Sorry—maybe it's best you don't imagine that. Just pace yourself on brute memorisation.

4. Not too proud to be silly—if silly gets you where you need to go

Learning an additional language involves acquiring habits but also, retaining a lot of bits and pieces in your memory. Use whatever aids, any at all, that help vocabulary, paradigms and rules to stick in your mind. You could make up silly mnemonics, use fanciful visual images, rhymes, snatches of tunes—anything. In fact, the sillier the better. See the section on this site on Silly Mnemonics and Miscellaneous Memory Aids for some helps and ideas.

What works for you may be different from what works for someone else. When I had to learn the order of sharps in musical signatures (FCGDAEB), there were mnemonics in music theory books but those didn't speak to me, so I invented my own: Frisky Cats Gaily Dancing Always Eat Bats. Mock it if you wish but it got me through music theory. (I had another one for the order of flats: this will be gladly supplied to anyone in dire need who sends me 10K pounds/euros/dollars/silver doubloons.)

5. Slow food, fast food

Sometimes you need a quick meal, but sometimes the slow-braised beef is better. You need both slow and fast in language learning. Slow means, for example, dissecting a sentence into verbs, subjects and objects (for example, using the 'What does what?' strategy—see the Grammar Morsels section of this website). Doing this painstakingly sometimes can hammer home basic forms or habits that will help you all the time. However if you *always* use such strategies when you read, you'll never learn to read fluently.

Research into the habits of people reading their native language shows that good readers read quickly. They go back, adjust and correct themselves when they have to, but for the most part, their comprehension is aided, not despite their speed, but because of it. Those who read everything slowly get poorer scores on comprehension tests.

So as you learn Greek, try sometimes to read quickly, not worrying overly much about the niceties of syntax or the nuances of tenses, and sometimes slowly, stopping to puzzle through a sentence or clause. Slow and fast. Not one or the other, but both.

Think about your earliest reading experiences in your language of strength: do you remember racing through a picture book, maybe garbling the words, just because you were so excited by the story? If so, hold onto that memory: it will help you to learn Greek. Take one of your favourite stories from the NT: find it in the Greek and just read through it, the way a child devours a picture book. Then do what kids do with picture books: read it over and over.

Then take some short passage of the NT that means a lot to you, even if the Greek seems hard. Go through the Greek using whatever helps you need (parsing and vocabulary helps, an interlinear, what have you). Puzzle out each word, get parsing help for each verb if you have to, check different translations. Then when you've done all that, go back and read the words you have taken such pains to decipher and try to read them as you would a love letter, savouring every word. Use the slow to build up to the fast. Use the fast to

gulp down what you love to read and lightly hammer home a multiplicity of vocabulary and structures.

Using the slow and fast strategies in tandem (though not simultaneously) is better than using just one or the other, just as sometimes you want a sandwich and other times, you appreciate the meal that took hours to prepare.

6. Read and re-read. Do and re-do.

When my mother retired she decided she wanted to learn a non-European language. She was fortunate that where she lived (far, far away from the country where she grew up) there was a correspondence school, set up for kids in remote areas, which got education done via the postal service and a dedicated radio station (this was before the internet). They would take on older people, too. My mother signed up to learn Japanese.

I used to hear, on echoey telephone lines from the opposite side of the world, about my mother's progress in this new language. I had no doubt she would do well—she was a gifted linguist. But it wasn't till after she died and I was cleaning out her house, that I discovered a secret. She had huge folders (binders) of her Japanese coursework. Some of it was marked, the exercises and translations she'd sent off by post and which had been marked by her teacher. But there was lots more: whole pages of a single character, written over and over again, exercises that had the same numbers as those that had been earlier sent to the teacher, carefully dated—the same exercise, re-done, months later. And then re-done, after that. Re-done and re-done and re-done, better every time.

I'd been in awe of my mother's linguistic talents all my life. It wasn't till I cleaned out her house that I realised her secret: she worked harder than I ever had. Specifically, she *repeated*. Her repetition meant she learnt Japanese, up to a high intermediate standard, when she was in her mid-sixties, with no help other than a faceless teacher whom she only knew through the post office and broadcasts on a bare-bones radio station.

Repetition isn't everything in language learning, but it does a lot. One of the worst mistakes you can make in language learning (I speak as someone who learnt five foreign languages between the ages of 11 and 17) is *not* to re-do the stuff you did a week or two ago, or a month or two, ago and not to strengthen the stuff you thought was easy at first.

Whenever you're discouraged in your journey with Greek, go back several chapters in your textbook—go back to chapter 1, if you want—and re-do the exercises or re-read the reading passage. You will probably still make mistakes, but it will feel much easier than it did the first time. By re-doing/re-reading, you'll both fill the holes in your knowledge and shore up the things you did actually learn, but also—and this is not trivial—be able to relish the fact that what once seemed hard now seems almost easy.

7. Strengthen and extend. Extend and strengthen.

Textbooks generally start with the basic things. Don't think the basic things are insignificant just because they're basic: the basic things lay a base. If you wobble on the

present active indicative, however simple that might seem, you're probably not going to shine like a superstar on the occasion of the aorist passive subjunctive. In any case, there just aren't a lot of aorist passive subjunctives in the GNT. There are a whole lot of presents. Build your Greek house like the person who built a house on the rock (Mt 7.24ff).

8. Memorise the meaningful

It's easier to remember things when they're attached to a significant context in some way. If you have trouble remembering a particular vocabulary item or grammatical structure or form, use a concordance or internet search facility to hunt down a verse that contains it. Look for a verse or phrase that is fairly short and concerns something significant (rather than something like 'Then Jesus got into the boat'). Never underestimate the power of having small chunks of text stored in your memory: they'll come to your aid more often than you could ever believe.

9. Read in bulk

Read lots. Even if you glide over some puzzling bits, the sheer fact of reading extended sections of text will improve your Greek much more rapidly than constantly poring over small sections of text. Start with the Gospels. Get into the habit of reading a fixed amount of the Greek text each day. If you can at first manage only ten verses, read those. As your Greek improves, you'll be able to read longer sections. Set yourself a goal, such as reading Mark right through. Mark contains 678 verses. At the rate of ten a day, you could read the whole thing in little more than two months. Imagine the sense of satisfaction you'll have when you accomplish that, even if you had to forego puzzling out some of the harder structures—once you've read it once, the next time you read it will be easier and the next easier still. (Well, mostly: after having read it many times in Greek, I still find II Corinthians a bear.) See the Recommended Reading section on this site to get some suggestions for working your way through the Gospels in Greek with some help.

10. Guess before you look up

It's tempting when learning a language to stop at any word or phrase you don't immediately understand and look it up. It can be especially tempting to do this if you're using a Reader's GNT with lexical helps right there on the page. Learn to resist this temptation for at least as long as it takes you to read to the end of a sentence, clause or phrase. Often, if you read on, context will help you to figure out the unknown word. Read an unfamiliar word aloud, to make sure you're taking on its exact form. Take a guess at the meaning before seeking help. You may be surprised at how often you guessed correctly or at least got passably close. The process of guessing the unfamiliar will mean that you take on board all the information you can squeeze out of the rest of the sentence, and that is very valuable for learning, even if you end up mis-guessing the unknown.

The value of guessing first lies in learning to do precisely what you do when reading your mother tongue. None of us has a receptive vocabulary so large that we know for sure the meaning of every last word we encounter when we read. Yes, sometimes it might be necessary—or just interesting—to look up the unfamiliar word. Often, however, we either don't have the time right then or don't have a dictionary to hand. We know from

experience that we don't have to understand every single word in order to grasp the meaning of a passage overall.

Resisting the temptation to look up every single unfamiliar word will not only help you to increase your reading speed and with it, fluency in reading. It will also exercise your brain, training you to see words, not as tiny atomised entities floating in a sea of other flotsam, but as bricks in a larger structure, which depend on the rest of the structure in order to communicate a message. Only you've taken a stab at the meaning should you look it up.

If all these suggestions seem too much to take on just now, pick just two or three strategies and resolve to make use of these in the next week. If they work well for you, keep going with them. If you get bored, try some of the others. Whatever you do, though, keep making the effort to do something, even a little, on a regular basis. If you get discouraged, try to have a conversation with a four-year-old: vocabulary limited, pronunciation sometimes wrong or unclear, grammar often erroneous, limited control, of sentence structure, making it hard to express complex ideas. And that's after four years of *immersion* in the language. We were all there once, but we got better. The same is true of learning a second language—but the four-year-old has had and will get lots and lots of practice. That's the key.