

How to Read When Sensitive to Printed Materials

by J. Campbell

Reading is a challenge when sensitive to the fumes from printed materials, whether it is the ink or the paper itself. Fortunately, there are a variety of ways to cope. Some are very simple, while others use technology, but there should be a solution for anyone. Sometimes it takes a combination of methods.

Electronic Methods

For people who have a computer they can tolerate, there are a variety of electronic options. The internet offers an enormous number of news sources, both newspapers, TV stations, magazines and blogs are sites that offer news and commentary. There are also many foreign sites that offer news in English, with a perspective that may be a little different.

Books are also available. Electronic books can be purchased and many classical and newer titles are available for free download. The Gutenberg Project has offered classical texts for free for decades. Many libraries offer audio-books on tapes and CD.

The Federal government offers a free service with books on tape from libraries in all states. The tapes require a special tape player that also is lent out for free. Some electrically sensitive do well with this device; while others do better with an alternative model, which can be purchased. The tapes arrive by mail, complete with free return postage. These talking-book libraries only accept disabled patrons, a doctor is needed to sign the application form. Call 202-707-5100 for details, or ask at any library.

Treatment of Books and Papers

Printed materials can be treated to make them less toxic. Some are more toxic than others and it may not be practical to make all types inert. Slick magazines and newspapers can be especially difficult. Older materials can also be moldy, I have not found a method to help with mold.

I have used most of the methods listed here and know people who have used the rest. They are all in use and work for some folks.

Every evening, I put on my respirator and go into the garage. There, I hang up twenty sheets of paper on the clothesline and take down the sheets from the night before, which are now ready for me. This is how I handle all incoming mail, photocopies, etc.

I also have a table where a handful of slick magazines are laid open. Every night I flip a page on each magazine, they are held in place by clothespins. It takes about two months for a National Geographic to get through.

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For some magazines I remove the staples and hang each sheet separately on an outdoor clothesline for a day, sometimes 24 hours. The desert winds are usually calmer at night. The movement of air seems to be more effective at offgassing outside, than in the still air inside the garage, but the paper is often damaged some by the wind. In wetter climates there is also rain to consider.

Some people do well enough with magazines that have been allowed to flap in the wind for a few days. The whole magazine is hung on the clothesline or otherwise left for the wind to catch the pages. Slick magazines do not become inert by these treatments, they only help. I still need to read them in my reading box (see later).

Some people put books, magazines or sheets of paper in a plastic bag with a couple handfuls of baking soda and shake vigorously. The baking soda absorbs some of the chemicals on the surface of the paper.

For a while I baked my books before reading them under a glass plate. I heated up an oven to 250 degrees Fahrenheit (120 degrees Centigrade) and baked the books for 25 minutes. A microwave oven may also work. This fuses the ink better into the paper, but it does not work with slick paper. The method creates a royal stink in the kitchen and be careful that the books are not so close to the heating elements that they catch fire. Some people find books become less tolerable after heat treatment.

Covering Up

Putting the book or magazine inside something greatly reduces the fumes. It is very difficult to seal up completely – at least if pages need to be turned – so some very sensitive people may need to both treat the book and then enclose it in something.

The simplest method is putting the open book in a plastic or cellophane bag and then read it through the material. The bag is open in one end where one sticks the hand inside to turn the page. Supermarkets sell special plastic bags to roast a turkey in, which is particularly tolerable to some people. It's a different type of plastic.

An improvement over the simple reading bag is to put a pencil inside the bag and then seal it up. The pencil must have an eraserhead at one end and not be sharpened in the other. If it is a sharp pencil, it will soon punch holes in the bag.

To turn the pages, grab the pencil through the side of the bag and use the friction of the eraserhead to move the page a little. Then get the pencil worked in under the page and move the page. With experience, this can be done easily and pretty fast, but it takes some practice.

Unfortunately, this is hard on the bag. It may take two cellophane bags to get through a book, and they'll have to be patched up several times along the way. I used small pieces of aluminum tape to patch the little holes – the holes tended to develop in the corners. Try plastic bags first.

Another method is to cover the open book with a glass plate or a large piece of hard plastic. Individual sheets of paper could be put between two plates that are held together with clothes pins. I've used an old picture frame from a secondhand store where I taped the glass to the metal frame and discarded the backing.

An improvement of the glass-covered book method is to put the book in some sort of tray, perhaps one used for roasting meat in the oven. Then cover the tray with a glass plate.

A real reading box offers better protection from the fumes, but even those can leak some. A variety of models are made by individuals, sometimes advertised for sale. There are electric and non-electric models.

The electric models are the best, if one is not electrically sensitive. They have a fan that pulls the fumes out the side of the box and through a hose that goes out the window. The opposite end of the box is open and one flips the pages by sticking the hand inside. The movement of the hand can still allow some ink fumes to escape, so some folks leave their hand inside while reading or use a pencil to turn the pages.

The non-electric reading boxes are more tricky. Any hole will leak ink fumes, as there is no vacuum to help us out. I have heard of people using laboratory glove boxes, but they are really expensive and the gloves themselves tend to be a problem. The more common method is to have two sticks going through narrow holes to be used to turn the pages. Using pencils with eraser heads is a good choice. I use one a friend built for me. The holes where the pencils enter are closed with a plastic sheath, but it's not air tight. Unless the box is really air tight, it is important to minimize the change of volume inside the box, as that really pushes air out through any little hole. The volume of air changes when anything enters or leaves, even a hand or a stick. I do fine with books, but magazines must be treated before I can read them, and even then I sometimes have problems with them.

Other Methods

Sometimes, the only practical method is to photocopy the material and then offgas the photocopies.

One woman reads sitting outside with a huge fan right in front of her to suck the fumes away from her face.

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Some people react to the paper and ink touching their skin and read using gloves. Cotton gloves work well, they do not need to be air tight.

I have experimented with freezing books, but it didn't help on either ink fumes or mold problems.

Some folks tear off the front and back of books and magazines, as they are often stinky slick material, which got further contaminated in transit.

Consider giving books to a healthy friend to read first, which helps airing them out, before you read them.

Leaving the books in the sun can help, but discolors the pages.

New books may be more tolerable than used books/library books, as they have not been fragranced by others' hands.

Ozoning books may be useful, though I don't know anyone who does.