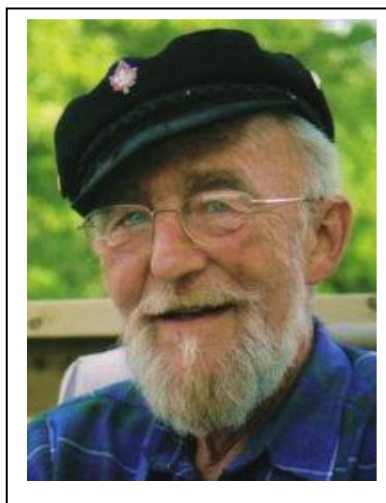


### The Microfilm Reader



Microfilm readers have been an important researcher's tool since the 1920s and despite the improvements in them they are still approached with apprehension by many researchers. One of the reasons for this is the range of different methods of loading the film into them.

The machines all come with a loading diagram but for some reason people who are able to competently operate a toaster or a microwave or even drive a car can become all thumbs in front of a reader. The solution is extremely simple. Get someone else to show you how to do it. Reading rooms have research assistants whose only job is to help you. Use them.

Take your time when starting with a reader to figure out or ask about the several controls to focus, position and orient the image. It is easier to do this now than wait until you have a problem and perhaps are a little nervous.

It is also true that readers often have their own little quirks that you can not be expected to know. I once had such a machine at Library and

Archives Canada and when I called over the research assistant she said 'Yes, this machine has that problem but Sarah is on her break and she is the one who knows this machine best. Why not try another machine?' A researcher in another repository had a machine (a fairly old one) that had to be banged on the side to keep it going and the research assistant showed her how to bang it.

Most readers thread the film from the bottom of the reel through the lens area to the bottom of the take up reel. They then project the image on a vertical screen or a horizontal (or slightly slanted) table. You will have to experiment to see which works best for you. Theoretically the horizontal table works best for people with good eyesight but the vertical screen is better for people with graduated lens or bifocals lenses.

I wear bifocals and question the validity of that. In fact a professor observed that as he grew older he found that bifocals and microfilm readers were incompatible. My wife has a pair of 'computer glasses' and she finds that these work well with the readers. Try to make sure that your chair is at the right height to give you a comfortable eye level to avoid getting a crick in the neck.

Reader/printers usually thread the film from the top of the reel to the top of the take up reel because they use rear projection to put the image on the vertical screen. Always check the diagram.

If you have a choice, pick a reader in an area with no light directly overhead and with a low level of ambient lighting. You might need a clipboard light to help you making notes but the film will be easier to read.

Sometimes the writing in the image is faint and difficult to read. You can often improve the readability by placing a sheet of coloured paper on the table or over the screen. My personal preference is to use coloured acetate instead of paper. You can obtain it at any stationery supplier where it is sold as essay covers.

Goldenrod is a favourite colour for this but some also use pale to medium shades of blue or green. Try a whole variety of colours to see what works best for you.

Many machines have both a high and low light setting. I used to automatically choose the high one but in some cases the low setting will give better readability so it is a good idea to try each for a few frames on each reel to see which you prefer.

A fair number of people experience a discomfort or queasiness when viewing microfilm. You can reduce this by not constantly watching the screen or table while the film is advancing or rewinding. The sensation is somewhat akin to motion sickness. I know of one researcher who suffered from it regularly and finally decided to take a quarter dose of a motion sickness pill before using a reader. She has had no problems since.

While most researchers either love or hate microfilm, you will enjoy your research more if you can learn to love it.