
Today's News

Monday, November 19, 2007

Americans Are Closing the Book on Reading, Study Finds

By [JENNIFER HOWARD](#)

Americans aren't just reading fewer books, but are reading less and less of everything, in any medium. That's the doleful conclusion of "To Read or Not to Read," a [report](#) scheduled for release today by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Subtitled "A Question of National Consequence," the report piles on the bad news delivered by "Reading at Risk," the NEA's 2004 warning about the nation's rapidly declining literacy ([The Chronicle](#), July 16, 2004).

"The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming," writes Dana Gioia, the NEA's chairman, in the new report's preface. Elementary-school children have posted some gains in literacy, but "there is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans."

"Most alarming," he continues, "both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates."

Unlike the 2004 study, "To Read or Not to Read" examined not just literary reading but all kinds of reading, including online. And it tapped a far wider range of sources, notably statistics from the Department of Education and the Department of Labor, as well as academic and corporate studies.

None of it adds up to good news for the written word. Just how reading-averse have Americans become? In 2006, the study found, 15-to-24-year-olds spent just seven minutes on voluntary reading on weekdaysâ€” 10 minutes on Saturdays and Sundays. They found time to watch two to two-and-a-half hours of television daily.

Older and presumably wiserâ€” or at least more bookishâ€” generations didn't do much better. In 2006 people ages 35 to 44 devoted only 12 minutes a day to reading. Even the best-read group, Americans 65 and older, logged less than an hour each weekday and just over an hour on weekends.

"This study shows that reading is endangered at the moment in the United States, especially among younger Americans," Mr. Gioia said during a telephone news conference announcing the report.

Drop in Proficiency

When Americans do manage to read something, whether it's a book or a blog, more and more of us can't do it well. The proportion of 12th graders reading at or above the proficient level fell significantly from 1992 to 2005, from 40 percentâ€” hardly a robust number to begin withâ€” to 35 percent. Meanwhile, during roughly the same period, the share of college graduates who could reliably find their way through a piece of prose declined by 23 percent. If you think your master's or doctorate renders you immune to the national decline,

think again: Even Americans who have studied at the graduate level saw their reading skills atrophy: 51 percent were rated proficient readers in 1992, but only 41 percent made that grade in 2003.

Aside from making authors, publishers, and librarians weep, what do those dismal numbers mean for the nation? "These negative trends have more than literary importance," Mr. Gioia writes in the preface. "As this report makes clear, the declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications."

The report confirms that poor readers tend to make poor students, who become poorly paid workers. Twenty percent of American workers don't read at the level required by their jobs. In 2003, 58 percent of proficient readers earned at least \$850 a week; only 13 percent of below-basic readers did.

That reality hasn't been lost on employers, 38 percent of whom say high-school graduates don't measure up when it comes to reading comprehension. And those employers are shelling out large amounts— an estimated \$3.1-billion among corporations, for instance— for remedial training.

A 'Distracted' Society

The study does not dwell on what's to blame, but it makes ominous references to multitasking and to "the omnipresence of electronic media."

"You become distracted as a society," said Mr. Gioia in the news conference. "I don't think, in a country that publishes 100,000 books a year, the problem is that people can't find something they want to read."

Absorbing one negative statistic after another, one wonders why the NEA didn't name the report "Requiem for Reading." Mr. Gioia understands the cumulative disheartening effect. "It's easy to read the data as a negative story, and the trends are almost consistently down," he told reporters.

But he refused to give in to despair: "Is this a cultural apocalypse? No."

He made a game attempt to find a silver lining, observing that the report highlights "the crucial importance that reading has on individual lives and community lives and collectively on the national life." Reading, he said, "really seems to be a transformational behavior that changes your life's course."

The numbers show that good readers make better citizens. They volunteer more. They go to art museums more. And, defying stereotype, they even exercise and play sports more.

"'To Read or Not to Read' is not an elegy for the death of print culture but a call to action, that this nation is losing an invaluable human resource that it cannot afford to lose," Mr. Gioia said.

Like its 2004 predecessor, however, "To Read or Not to Read" calls for a national debate about the crisis but does not offer strategies or solutions.

"The conversation is more important than the dictates of a small cultural agency," Mr. Gioia responded when asked why the NEA had been reluctant to dispense advice. "I'm not a cockeyed optimist, but I do believe that if the United States believes that something is important, it can make it happen."

The chairman added, "If Oprah Winfrey can get Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* on the best-seller list, anything is possible in this country."

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The study found that people who read for up to 3.5 hours a week were 17 per cent less likely to die than those who read no books. A researcher said older people lived longer when they read. She said it didn't matter if you were male or female, healthy, rich or well educated.Â <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-3726386/Why-reading-help-live-longer-Immersing-good-story-mind-active-ease-stress.html>. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/those-who-read-books-live-longer-than-those-who-dont-study-finds_us_57a358c8e4b0104052a17cd2. <https://www.rawstory.com/2016/08/a-new-study-has-found-that-avid-readers-appear-to-live-a-longer-life/>. Reading fiction can help you be more open-minded and creative. According to research conducted at the University of Toronto, study participants who read short-story fiction experienced far less need for "cognitive closure" compared with counterparts who read nonfiction essays. Essentially, they tested as more open-minded, compared with the readers of essays. "Although nonfiction reading allows students to learn the subject matter, it may not always help them in thinking about it," the authors write. "A physician may have an encyclopedic knowledge of his or her subject, You read where to buy what you need at a lowest price, what happened yesterday in your town and around the world. Newspapers also tell you where to go for fun. They also tell you about shows and sports. Lots of events happen to people, and newspapers tell you what happened, who did it, where it happened, why it happened and how it happened.No one can read everything in the newspaper every day. But if you read a part of your newspaper every day, you will know a lot.The first American newspaper was published in Boston in 1690. Now lots of magazines and newspapers are published in the USA.