



## Why We Need to Read

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In a 1771 letter to a friend, Thomas Jefferson praised both the pleasures and the usefulness of reading fiction:

[E]verything is useful which contributes to fix in the principles and practices of virtue. When any original act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity, and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body acquire strength by exercise. But exercise produces habit, and in the instance of which we speak the exercise being of the moral feelings produces a habit of thinking and acting virtuously.<sup>1</sup>

Etymologically, “virtue” is synonymous with “excellence.” Jefferson—like many before and fewer following him—understood the connection between reading and the development of virtue or excellence of character.

Reading is a habit that forms one’s character, or virtue, both ethically and aesthetically—through both its content and its form. Literary reading, in particular, entails both reading about virtue (often by negative example) and, in a deeper, less

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<sup>1</sup>The Letters of Thomas Jefferson, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/let4.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/let4.asp)

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obvious way, allows one to practice virtue by the very act of reading. The act of reading—reading well—requires virtues such as patience, attentiveness, diligence, and a kind of epistemological humility.

In the modern university, however, reading is primarily understood and valued in more utilitarian terms. It is viewed as an intellectual activity that informs, merely one mode of delivery to the student that can be accomplished in a variety of ways. This approach to reading—which emphasizes what one gets out of reading more than what one puts into reading—reflects (at the same time that it reinforces) larger cultural trends. The university follows the reading practices of the culture at its own peril—and ours.

The National Endowment for the Arts' comprehensive 2007 report on the reading habits of Americans, "To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence," found that reading skills and reading habits—whether good or bad—have significant "civic, social, and economic implications." Literary readers are more likely to patronize museums and concerts, participate in sports and outdoor activities, volunteer, and vote. Skilled readers are more likely to get better paying positions. On the other hand, employers cite the deficiencies in reading and writing skills of new employees as a top concern. Moreover, these deficiencies incur significant, measurable costs for companies. The most sobering aspect of the report, however, is the extensive data indicating a general decline in Americans' reading habits and abilities. In sum, the research shows, despite increased emphasis placed on reading instruction during the elementary school years, reading generally decreases during the teen and adult years.<sup>2</sup> More recently, beginning in 2011, Pew Research has begun tracking American reading habits. The most recent survey, published in 2018, found reading levels "largely unchanged" during those years: the typical American reads four books a year, and about one-quarter of them have not read one.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, as a print age that is half a millennium long transforms into a digital age, lower levels of reading are hardly surprising. Nor has the decline proven (yet) to be more than a temporary adjustment of our cultural trousers.

For a better assessment of the current and future state of reading, literacy, and print culture, one must look to the academy. But what one finds there is less than comforting.

Reading requirements in the college curriculum and within individual classrooms have declined, and appear generally to have contributed to the

<sup>2</sup>"To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence," *National Endowment for the Arts* 47 (Washington: National Endowment for the Arts 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Perrin, "Nearly one-in-five Americans now listen to audiobooks," *Fact Tank*, March 8, 2018.

diminished ability and dwindling desire of students to read. (Notably, the desire of students to read on their own for pleasure is correlated with higher achievements in other subjects. For example, one recent, small study measured the impact of pleasure reading on high school students' performance in an array of subject matters. The researchers found that students who read independently for pleasure averaged higher scores than their non-reading peers in history, science, and mathematics, as well as in English.)<sup>4</sup>

Surely, the curricular and professorial concessions are, at least in part, accommodations to students who today possess lower reading abilities when they arrive at college than they did decades ago. The 2015 results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show, in fact, that while basic literacy is rising in most countries and has achieved an all-time high globally,<sup>5</sup> the scores of U. S. students have been dropping steadily since 2000.<sup>6</sup>

Further, as colleges and universities shift from content-based to competency-based assessments (in response to the lowered competencies of students entering college), and as accreditation requirements of professional schools require more of a student's total credit hours, institutions are increasingly replacing general education (or core curriculum) courses with pre-professional courses. The traditional English composition course, for instance, might be replaced for engineering majors with an introductory course on technical writing.

Twenty years ago, at the institution where I began my academic career, every student was required to take three general education English courses, two of which were literature classes. Now only one of these courses is required of all students—and that only for the decreasing number of them who don't test out based on their high school coursework. One organization that evaluates the requirements of over 1,100 institutions of higher education (including every four-year public university with a stated liberal arts mission) reports that only 34 percent of these schools require even one course in literature.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Christy Whitten, Sandra Labby, Sam L. Sullivan, "The impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success," *The Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research* 2, no. 4 (2016): 48–64, <https://www.shsu.edu/academics/education/journal-of-multidisciplinary-graduate-research/documents/2016/WhittenJournalFinal.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>Sarah D. Sparks, "Global Reading Scores Are Rising, But Not for U.S. Students," *Education Week* 37, no. 15 (April 2019): 6–7, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/12/05/global-reading-scores-are-rising-but-not.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Louis Serino, "What international test scores reveal about American education," Brookings Institute, (April 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/04/07/what-international-test-scores-reveal-about-american-education/>.

<sup>7</sup>"What Will They Learn? A Survey of Core Requirements at Our Nation's Colleges and Universities," *American Council of Trustees and Alumni* (2018): 13, <https://www.goacta.org/images/download/what-will-they-learn-2018-19.pdf>.

The depreciation of reading has resulted not only in reduced reading requirements for all students, but also in fewer students who choose reading-rich majors in the humanities. *Inside Higher Ed* reported last year that from 1991 to 2012, the percentage of baccalaureate students majoring in the humanities was relatively stable. During those years, the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded in English averaged about 52,684 per year. But since 2012, that average has fallen each year. In 2016, the most recent year data was available for the report, 42,868 undergraduate degrees in English were awarded. Experts predict that the future of the English major will depend upon greater curricular emphasis on cultural studies, digital media, and creative writing.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests a current spike in students who want to be writers—but not necessarily readers.

When even English majors read less, what might the expectations be for the rest of the student body? Not much, it seems.

Self-reporting by students in the National Survey of Student Assessment bears this out. In response to the statement, “I did not complete my course assignments due to the time constraints of my schedule,” 63 percent of first year students agreed or strongly agreed, while 71 percent of seniors agreed or strongly agreed.<sup>9</sup>

Long gone are the days of 6,000 pages of reading required of W. H. Auden’s syllabus for a two credit hour English course taught at the University of Michigan during the 1941-42 academic year.<sup>10</sup> In 2019, a veteran economics professor at Ohio University confesses in an opinion essay for the *Wall Street Journal*, “I’ve been teaching for 55 years, and I assign far less reading, demand less writing, and give higher grades than I did two generations ago.”<sup>11</sup>

Research confirms such anecdotal evidence. One oft-cited study documents a dramatic decline over the last half century of the time college students spend studying: “Study time for full-time students at four-year colleges in the United States fell from twenty-four hours per week in 1961 to fourteen hours per week in 2003, and the decline is not explained by changes over time in student work

<sup>8</sup>Colleen Flaherty, “The Evolving English Major,” *Inside Higher Ed* (July 2018), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/07/18/new-analysis-english-departments-says-numbers-majors-are-way-down-2012-its-not-death>

<sup>9</sup>Amy Ribera and Rong Wang, “To Read or Not to Read? Investigating Students Reading Motivation,” Indiana University, (November 2015), [http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/presentations/2015/POD\\_2015\\_Ribera\\_Wang.pdf](http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/presentations/2015/POD_2015_Ribera_Wang.pdf)

<sup>10</sup>Dan Piepenbring, “W. H. Auden’s Potent Syllabus, and Other News,” *Paris Review*, January 29, 2015, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/29/w-h-audens-syllabus-and-other-news/>

<sup>11</sup>Richard Vedder, “College Wouldn’t Cost So Much if Students and Faculty Worked Harder,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2019, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-wouldnt-cost-so-much-if-students-and-faculty-worked-harder-11554936810?fbclid=IwAR1uLT3jGxwUICv4T2eJ8mWOzmJm3VB3zq97T7\\_treyBxUDgD1C25eIIQ](https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-wouldnt-cost-so-much-if-students-and-faculty-worked-harder-11554936810?fbclid=IwAR1uLT3jGxwUICv4T2eJ8mWOzmJm3VB3zq97T7_treyBxUDgD1C25eIIQ)

status, parental education, major choice, or the type of institution students attended.”<sup>12</sup> While not all study necessarily consists of reading, much of it does. When study time is down, reading time diminishes as well. Reading improves primarily through practice. Less practice, less skill.

It is well established that reading skills, along with the comprehension and critical thinking skills that reading requires and cultivates, translate to other academic and real world contexts. The more deficient reading skills become, the less success in other subjects. ACT cites ample research linking low literacy levels to difficulty in mastering and even pursuing other subjects. Moreover, the depreciation of literacy skill costs students, universities, and businesses “as much as \$16 billion per year in decreased productivity and remedial costs.”<sup>13</sup>

Cognitive researchers have found that volume of reading (quantity of reading) has a reciprocal effect on reading skills (quality of reading):

Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond its immediate task of lifting meaning from a particular passage. Furthermore, these consequences are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Accumulated over time—spiraling either upward or downward—they carry profound implications for the development of a wide range of cognitive capabilities.<sup>14</sup>

More than basic literacy, skills in comprehending what ACT calls “complex reading” material cultivate a reader’s critical thinking skills and character in ways that extend far beyond the curriculum. Complex reading refers to texts that are characterized by subtle relationships among ideas or characters, richness of literary language, unexpected or elaborate structure, intricate use of language or tone, vocabulary enriched by context, and meaning that is implicit rather than explicit.<sup>15</sup> Such literary qualities reflect the fabric of real life and real relationships, thereby cultivating analytical and interpretive skills that a reader can apply to life as well as to imaginative literature and other subjects of study.

Through the imagination, readers identify with the character and learn about human nature and themselves through their reactions to the vicarious experience. Even literature that doesn’t have character or plot, such as

<sup>12</sup>Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, “Leisure College, USA: The Decline in Student Study Time,” *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, no.7 (August 2010): 1-7, [https://immagic.com/eLibrary/ARCHIVES/GENERAL/AEI\\_US/A100809B.pdf](https://immagic.com/eLibrary/ARCHIVES/GENERAL/AEI_US/A100809B.pdf)

<sup>13</sup>“Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading,” ACT (2006): 1-10, [https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/reading\\_summary.pdf](https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/reading_summary.pdf).

<sup>14</sup>Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich, “What Reading Does for the Mind,” *American Educator* 2, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer, 1998): 22.

<sup>15</sup>“Reading Between the Lines,” 1-10.

poetry, allows for a similar kind of process: the speaker of the poem is a kind of character whose experience the reader enters into, and the unfolding of the poem in time as it is read is itself a form of plotting. This is the difference, Paul A. Taylor explains in his essay, “Sympathy and Insight in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” between learning propositional truth through reading history or an argumentative essay, and the knowledge gained aesthetically through the process of reading a fictional narrative.<sup>16</sup> The aesthetic experience of literature—its formative quality—differs from its intellectual or informative qualities. Taylor says that “we learn from fiction in something like the way we learn directly from real life.”<sup>17</sup> Just as in real life, a work of literature doesn’t assert but presents.<sup>18</sup> Thus the act of reading literature invites readers to participate in the experience aesthetically, not merely intellectually. Human desires are shaped by both knowledge and experience, and to read a work of literature is to have a kind of experience. Ultimately, this kind of aesthetic experience is formative, not merely informative, and “can help to undermine an idealized picture of human nature—one which self-deception, or plain sentimentality might otherwise sustain.”<sup>19</sup> Visions of the good life presented in the world’s best literature can be agents for cultivating knowledge of and desire for the good and, unlike visions sustained by sentimentality or self-deception, the true.

Reading well entails discerning which visions of life are false and which are good and true, as well as recognizing how deeply rooted these visions are in language. As Mark Edmundson explains in his book, *Why Read*, “Such visions are easier to derive from words, from writings, in part because for most of us the prevailing medium, moment to moment, is verbal.”<sup>20</sup> Bucking the fashions in literary theory that have ruled English departments in leading universities for the past several decades, Edmundson (a distinguished professor at the University of Virginia), makes an assertion most of his colleagues would deem quaint at best: “The ultimate test of a book, or of an interpretation, is the difference it would make in the conduct of life.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, training affect or emotions is also a way of “training people to ‘see situations in the right way,’” or shaping our very perceptions.<sup>22</sup> Developing

<sup>16</sup>Paul A. Taylor, “Sympathy and Insight in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66, no.3 (Summer 2008): 265-280.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>20</sup>Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 112.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>22</sup>James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Baker Academic, 2013), 36.

perceptiveness that literary reading requires cultivates virtue, or good character, because action follows affective response. The connection between literary interpretation and affective response is seen in a 2009 study in which participants who were shown words associated with emotions understood the words better when they made facial expressions that mimicked the emotions conveyed by the words.<sup>23</sup>

The very form of literature echoes the form of the virtuous life and teaches us “to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing . . . search[ing] for truth,” according to the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum.<sup>24</sup> Literature conveys not life, but “a sense of life,” Nussbaum says, “a sense of what matters and what does not . . . of life’s relations and connections.”<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum explains:

[W]e have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling . . . All living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world as something. So in this sense no life is “raw,” and . . . throughout our living we are, in a sense, makers of fictions. The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived.<sup>26</sup>

A persistent question about virtue arises in most contemporary discussions. This question centers on whether or not virtue is an end in itself or a means to some other end. The evidence that many think it is the latter can be seen in the pervasive belief today that if one simply does a certain thing right, the reward will be a particular desired outcome. This way of thinking about virtue owes in part to the fact that we no longer have a sense of our larger purpose, a condition of our age insightfully explicated by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Apart from an understanding of ultimate human purpose, virtue becomes mere emotivism, which MacIntyre describes as the belief that “moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference,

<sup>23</sup>Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 112, 221.

<sup>24</sup>Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3–4.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

expressions of attitude or feeling.”<sup>27</sup> Because the language of morality has been hijacked by emotivism, giving us a “simulacra of morality” (a mere image or reflection in place of the real thing), talking about virtue and morality is nearly impossible in a life “after virtue.”<sup>28</sup> Without knowing what the purpose of a bicycle is, for example, one cannot determine its quality. Similarly, one can hardly attain human excellence if we don’t have an understanding of human purpose.

Even if we don’t engage with ultimate purpose, however, and we look for practical outcomes in education, we will find that learning based on outcomes also needs reading at its core:

The ability to read the great works of literature enables students to analyze complex and subtle language and explore the diversity of human thought and experience. Forming habits of attentive reading and reflection imparts cognitive gains that students will use for the rest of their lives. It is fundamental training for the critical thinking skills that are so important for all careers. In many cases, college marks the last time students will read books they do not choose themselves, making it even more urgent to offer this core educational experience.<sup>29</sup>

Living well depends on learning well. Learning well depends on reading well. Reading well requires practice. Such practice should be required more, not less, in the college curriculum.

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<sup>27</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 11-12.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>29</sup>“What Will They Learn?” 8.