

“The Joy of Reading”

(The Common Review, Nov-Dec '05)

See the text of the article below the exercises.

- 1) Based on the title, what do you think the text will discuss?
- 2) Please read the first paragraph.
 - a) What is the main idea of the paragraph?
 - b) What evidence supports the main idea?
- 3) a) What does the writer mean by “scapegoating of technology is hardly the point” (para 2) ?
 - b) Why is it hardly the point?
 - c) What is the point? Which word helped you find the answer to (b)?
- 4) What is LexisNexis (para. 2) an example of?
- 5) What is the difference between the intellectual capabilities required for using the computer and for reading a book?
- 6) What does NEA stand for? (clue: the full term is first introduced at the beginning of the text)
- 7) What question does NEA raise regarding the Americans’ reading habits?
- 8) a) What question is answered by “It does matter, and we should care” (para. 4).
 - b) Whose opinion is it?
- 9) What main idea is supported by the information about the numbers of people illiterate in English in the U.S.A.?
- 10) Provide two more reasons from the article why reading for pleasure matters.

Writing activity/Journal activities:

Do you think reading for pleasure is important?

1) Please answer this question in the form of a well-structured essay containing a clear thesis statement in the introduction, as well as explanations in the body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph.

OR

Write a letter to the chair person of the English Department in which you discuss the importance of reading for pleasure in the reading class. Should it be part of the curriculum or is it an “outdated idea”? Tell the chair person your views.

The Joy of Reading: Is Reading for Pleasure an Outdated Idea?

By Daniel Born, from The Common Review

1. A platoon of lethal computer derivatives may form the axis of evil that destroys literary reading. That’s one conclusion you could reach after perusing the Reading at Risk study published in 2004 by the National Endowment for the Arts. The study points out that the steepest decline in literary reading habits is among 18- to 24- year-olds and notes this age group’s extraordinary commitment to electronic and Internet-related forms of entertainment.

2. But the scapegoating of technology is hardly the point: The survey showed that serious readers watch almost as much television-about three hours a day-as nonreaders. Rather, the larger issue is whether Americans can make room for the kind of extended, sustained intellectual experience that books offer. One’s brain is not similarly massaged by trawling for Web site residue, a habit familiar to the millions of Americans living in cubicle-land. Or by repetitive acts of Googling, no matter how useful such activity may be for sizing up a mutual fund portfolio. If I want to think about the things that matter, like friendship, love, or my spiritual path of enlightenment, I don’t consult LexisNexis. NEA chair Dana Gioia speaks truth when he claims that “print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capability . . . would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment.”

3. The main question the NEA raises is whether reading for pleasure will continue to be a major part of American life. If it is in decline (the core group of book readers has remained static at roughly 96 million people in about the past 20 years, despite a sizable jump in the overall population), does it matter, should we care, and what can be done?

4. It does matter, and we should care. Forget for a moment about whether it’s “literary” or not. Less reading overall lowers our collective IQ. There are now more literate speakers and writers of English in India than in the United States, and our percentage of functionally illiterate

adults is staggeringly high. According to a national adult literacy survey conducted in 1993, a full 48 percent of the adult population was unable to function at minimal 12th-grade reading standards.

Another reason that reading for pleasure matters is indicated in the NEA study itself: Readers participate in the life of their community, and are more likely to contribute time and ideas to its well-being. Readers also tend to vote. The link between reading and democratic participation is clear, Gioia says. Authoritarianism, as scholars of both the Reformation and of political tyranny will tell you, is always helped by large doses of ignorance, poverty, and illiteracy, so getting books in to the hands of the young, and helping them learn to love these books, has strategic importance.

In other words, if you don't want Dr. Strangelove or Big Brother in the future, you could, at the very least, help kids appreciate *Hansel and Gretel*.

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