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Benefits of the Habit of Reading

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Professor Wallentine

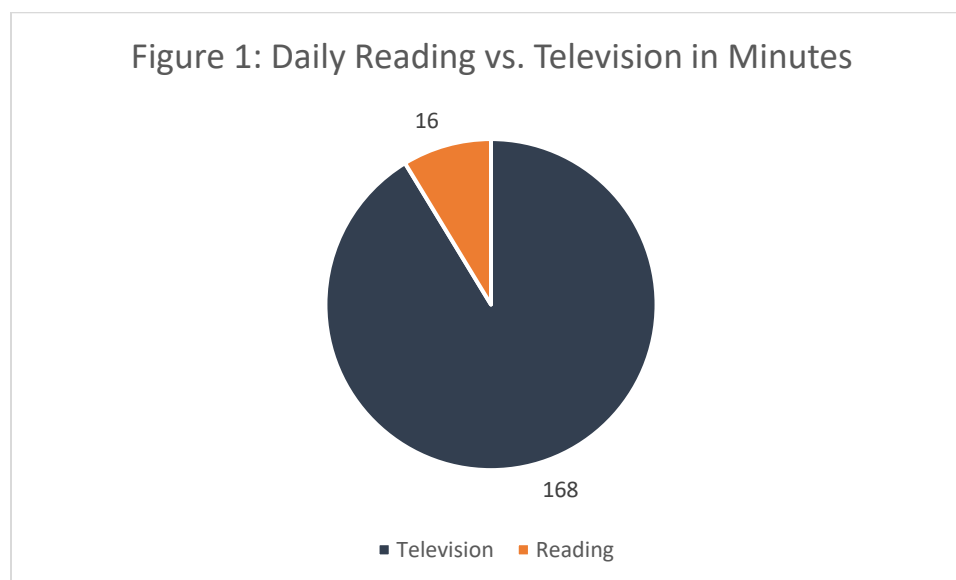
Benefits of the Habit of Reading

Jackson Wagstaff

Introduction

What type of person takes time out of their day to read? It depends who you ask. For example, some people perceive readers in a negative light. They view those who read as nerdy bookworms who separate themselves too much from the outside world. They see reading as a time-consuming, quirky habit with little benefit—after all, why spend twelve hours reading a book when you can watch the movie in under two? However, others see readers as intelligent, well-disciplined people who follow respectable routines. Those with this view may find reading difficult to do themselves, yet still perceive reading as a valuable, elite activity. In contrast, those who do take time out of their day to read would likely say that readers are normal, curious people, motivated by both the desire to learn and the need for entertainment.

Although pleasure reading is a miniscule part of the average American's day, those who read reap many benefits. According to a 2017 survey performed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans spend only 16 minutes each day pleasure reading-- a tiny fraction of the average time spent watching television (see fig.1).ⁱ These findings *would* be good if reading was a time-consuming, unhealthy habit. However, this is far from the truth. Researchers have shown that reading is healthy and life-enhancing, with wide-ranging benefits. This article will explore the cognitive, social, emotional, and health benefits of reading to determine how worthy an investment it truly is.



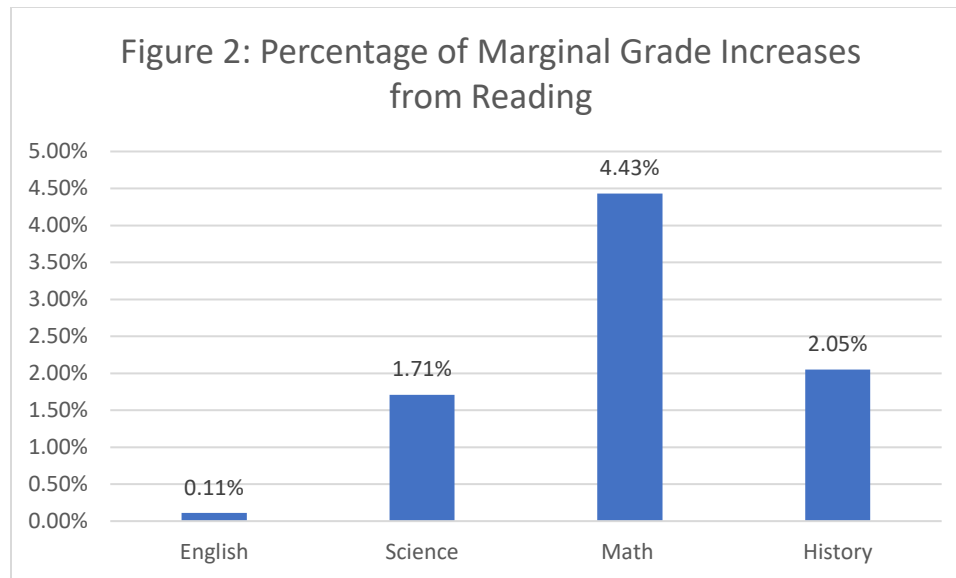
Source: Original graphic based on data from the *American Time Use Survey* by the Bureau of Labor Statistics **CITE**

Cognitive Benefits

An evident benefit of reading is that it brightens and sharpens our minds. According to a college student named Jackson Wagstaff, establishing a daily reading habit increased his ACT test score by 75%.ⁱⁱ In high school, Jackson wasn't a reader. He avoided reading because he was a slow reader, and simply didn't enjoy it. When Jackson took the ACT in 2014, he received a 20 — a score that placed him in the 49th percentile of test takers. After high school, Jackson began reading more often in an effort to learn more about the world. At first, he read on his own for about an hour a day; later, he adopted the goal of finishing a book each month. In 2020, six years after taking the ACT for the first time, Jackson decided to retake the test in order to enhance his resume. This time, he scored a 35, a score that put him well into the 99th percentile.ⁱⁱⁱ When discussing his new results, Jackson stated:

I attribute my ACT improvement completely to the reading habits I formed over the years. When I took the test in high school, I was a poor reader. This was because I avoided reading. I was unable to understand the information well enough to perform well. After years of reading on my own, however, the reading-heavy sections were actually the easiest part of the test. I'm both pleased and amazed with my results. Reading did a lot for me!

Jackson's case is not singular. A study published in the *Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research* suggests that reading enhances academic performance for many students. The study looked at the correlation between the reading habits of high school juniors and their grades. In every subject, students who reported reading for pleasure were found to have higher grades (see fig.2).^{iv}



Source: Original graphic based on data from the article *The Impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success*

One important result from this study is the large increase in mathematics scores. This suggests that reading habits not only help people to become better readers, but also better thinkers and problem solvers. The cognitive benefits of reading go far beyond English as a subject.

Social Benefits

Reading increases awareness of the broader human experience. This awareness helps to grow empathy and understanding of others.

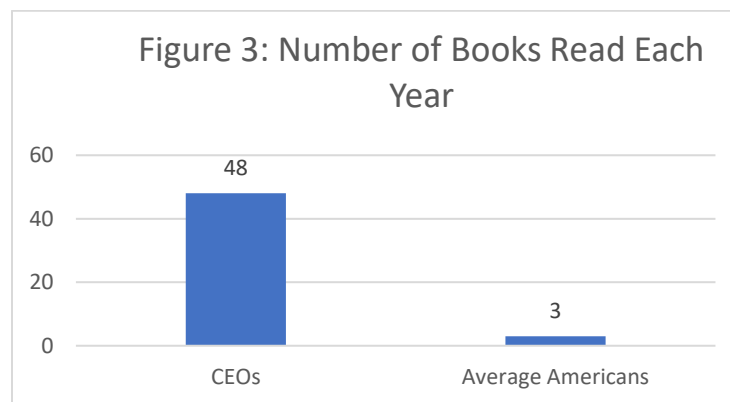
This effect is especially true for reading literary fiction, especially works that larger and more universal issues, such as society, politics, and the human condition. A study published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science explores literary fiction's effect on a person's ability to understand others.^v The article refers to this ability as the *theory of mind*-- "the human capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires that differ from one's own beliefs and desires." In the study, participants were divided in various groups and given different reading assignments. After reading, participants took a test that measured their ability to perceive the emotions of others. The study found that the participants who read literary fiction scored significantly higher than those who read nothing.

Reading doesn't only raise our social awareness. It also enhances our achievement and leadership abilities. An article posted on Inc.com reported that CEOs read an average of 4-5 books each month.^{vi} This is much higher than the average person's 2-3 books each year (figure 3 illustrates this considerable difference). Since becoming a CEO is often a rigorous process, this finding would highlight how reading is correlated to achievement. Both the lessons learned from

books and the general cognitive enhancement from reading *could* be the reason why those who have made it to the top of organizations tend to have such rigorous reading habits (of course, this is unproven, and the reading habit of the CEOs could simply be due to more monthly free time than the average worker). Additionally, the article argues that reading is important for leaders like CEOs because it enables them to be aware of issues that are crucial for their organizations' success. It states:

If somebody has decades of experiences in marketing, for example, and they put all that info into a book, and you can sit down and get through the entire thing in a few days, you've just downloaded decades of insight in a very short amount of time. There's no greater advantage in the workplace than to be able to do that.

Undoubtedly, reading offers a great advantage to leaders since it keeps them attuned to important information.



Source: Original graphic based on data from the article *Most CEOs Read A Book A Week. This Is How You Can Too (According To This Renowned Brain Coach)*.

Emotional/Health Benefits

Reading also provides wisdom and emotional comfort. In the *Enchanted Hour*, a book about the benefits of reading, Wall Street Journal writer Meghan Gurdon explores how reading does this. She says, “In literature, we are freed from physical constraints and from the orthodoxies of our time and place. We meet characters we would never encounter in the real world. In a vicarious way we experience life through them.”^{vii} In our busy and burdensome lives, an occasional escape is a great relief. Just as reading can increase our emotional awareness of others, diving into the experiences of characters in books may also enable readers to see themselves more clearly. A clearer view of oneself can, in turn, help someone to behave and think in healthier ways and to avoid damaging beliefs. For example, a person struggling with family issues could benefit from reading a relevant and eye-opening book, such as Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*. Through the lessons on family that the characters *in* this book learn, *readers* gain applicable insights for

their own lives. With millions of books in existence, readers seeking specific wisdom and life lessons are never left wanting.

The emotional advantages of reading also lead to health advantages. In a surprising study published in *Social Science & Medicine*, researchers found that reading provides a survival advantage.^{viii} When looking at a group of elderly people, researchers found that readers, on average, lived for an additional 2 years. These results were true regardless of gender, wealth, or education. Researchers believe that this increase in life expectancy from reading works via cognitive mediation. In other words, mental stimulation from reading may be the reason for the increased survival. Conceivably, literature that is more emotionally stimulating may lead to better results in terms of survival, since emotional stimulation often goes hand-in-hand with mental stimulation.

Conclusion

Reading offers a plethora of benefits. It enhances cognitive performance. Students with reading habits have been shown to perform better in the classroom and on tests. It also increases social awareness and leadership abilities. Reading genres like literary fiction has been shown to increase one's Theory of Mind, or the ability to comprehend others' beliefs. Leadership abilities are also enhanced by reading as it enables leaders to efficiently gather new information that their organizations need. Reading also provides opportunities for healthy emotional engagement. In this sense, reading can act as both an emotional escape and an emotional training ground where people can learn to see themselves in a more advantageous light. Lastly, reading can lead to greater longevity due to its mentally invigorating effect.

With so many benefits of reading, everyone ought to set goals and commit to reading more. After all, the amount of time the average American spends leisure reading each day is a measly 16 minutes, less than one-tenth of the average time spent watching T.V. Surely we can shift some of that television time into reading time. Try to set specific goals-- finishing a book within a certain amount of time (a week, a month, or two months), or reading for a certain amount of time each day (30 minutes or one hour). Time spent reading is time well invested. So pick up a book and get ready to grow!

Notes

ⁱ "American Time Use Survey – 2017 Results," *Bls.gov*, 2017, www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/atus_06282018.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Jackson Wagstaff, interview by author, San Francisco, March 14, 2020.

- iii “ACT Score Percentiles,” Manhattan Review, last modified October 27, 2018, www.manhattanreview.com/act-percentiles/.
- iv Christy Whitten et al, “The Impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success,” *The Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research 2* (2016): 48–64, www.shsu.edu/academics/education/journal-of-multidisciplinary-graduate-research/documents/2016/WhittenJournalFinal.pdf.
- v David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” *American Association for the Advancement of Science* 342 no. 6156 (October 8, 2013): 377–380, science.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/377.
- vi Brian D Evans, “Most CEOs Read A Book A Week. This Is How You Can Too (According To This Renowned Brain Coach),” Inc.com, last modified June 27, 2017, www.inc.com/brian-d-evans/most-ceos-read-a-book-a-week-this-is-how-you-can-too-according-to-this-renowned-.html.
- vii Meghan Gurdon, *The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2020)
- viii Avni Bavishi et al, “A Chapter a Day: Association of Book Reading with Longevity,” *Social Science & Medicine* 164 (2016): 44–48, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953616303689.