

# Why Are Books Disappearing from English and Reading Classrooms?

*Hint: it has nothing to do with censorship*

**R**EADING BOOKS—ideally great ones, together as a class—should be common practice in American English and reading classrooms. Diverse research supports this assertion and helps explain why the experience of reading books, especially shared books, is critical to ensuring better outcomes in English and reading.

The idea that one might need to make the case for reading books might surprise those who haven't spent much time in K–12 classrooms lately, but it is in fact an argument that goes against entrenched beliefs about reading and learning that have come to predominate in schools.

The case for books also reveals something ironic. So much of the recent discussion of books in schools takes the form of debate about efforts from both the left and the right to restrict access to them for content or ideological reasons. This might lead you to imagine that reading books is a core activity of students, that teachers are carefully choosing and assigning them, one after the other, while a few subversive instructors perhaps sneak tattered copies of edgier texts into eager students' hands, and that, on balance, books are shaping the worldviews of American students.

Sadly, though, the notion that books are central to the intellectual life of schools is false. First, there's the fact that few students read books on their own anymore. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that, in 2023, 14 percent

of 13-year-olds read for fun almost every day; that number was 2.5 times higher as recently as 1984. Meanwhile, 31 percent of 13-year-olds never or hardly ever read, almost a fourfold increase from 1984. And these data count not only books but all reading material, including online sources. It's not likely that most reading for pleasure involves the consumption of books in hard copy. After all, the Pew Research Center reports that a supermajority of American teens say they are on social media "almost constantly" outside of school, and a 2023 Gallup poll indicates that the average teen spends about five hours per day on social media apps, including TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook.

But even in classrooms, books are few and far between. And when they do appear in curricula, they are often selected primarily in the hope that something "appealing" or "accessible" or "relevant" will prompt reluctant students to actually read them. So, while the books we assign in school are more and more likely to be the only ones many students read in their formative years, it's doubly concerning that they are less and less likely to be challenging or chosen for their literary merit.

In fact, the National Council of Teachers of English recently announced its support for the idea of "decenter[ing] book reading" in English language arts education. They suggest instead "critically examining digital media and popular culture" as a more worthwhile pursuit. YouTube videos, they mean to say,

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are a much easier sell to screen-obsessed teenagers. Argument: let's stop trying to get students to read at all and find some other way to be relevant.

But even in schools with the good sense to ignore NCTE on this point, classrooms have quietly migrated away from the book for other reasons. "Over the past few decades, reading comprehension instruction has become 'content agnostic,' focused on skill practice," Sarah Schwartz wrote recently in *EdWeek*. In other words, it doesn't really matter what you read, so long as you use it as a vehicle to develop a core set of skills: finding the main idea, evaluating evidence to support a conclusion, making inferences.

The idea that reading consists of transferable skills students can practice and apply across texts remains the dominant paradigm in American schools, despite the fact that it runs counter to the science, which tells us that reading-comprehension success is largely a product of a readers' background knowledge and that skills like drawing inferences do not in fact transfer across subject-matter domains.

"People don't decide that they're going to make . . . inferences, the mind just makes them happen," the cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham writes. At least the mind does so if a reader knows enough to fill in the blanks where the author assumed they would. The student's knowledge enables the inference. This is perhaps one reason why, as Willingham puts it, "practice brings no benefit to reading-comprehension strategy use."

When as a teacher you believe that reading comprises a set of skills, the incentive is to base your daily lesson on the skill of the day. The easiest way to do that is to present students with a short passage that foregrounds that skill. Why have a

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student flip through a novel looking for a section that allows you to discuss supporting details when the teacher can present a passage that guarantees it?

I recently observed a classroom lesson in which students read a few paragraphs and then spent 40 minutes "identifying supporting details for the main idea." The passage described the impressions of a recent emigree from Ukraine of her new home. Predictably, most of their guesses about which details were important missed the mark, because the students knew almost nothing about Ukraine.

But more broadly, what was in evidence was the instruction model: a skills-driven encounter with a "passage" each day as the soul of English instruction. Tomorrow, perhaps those students will have an equally poorly informed interaction with the supporting details in an article about the naked mole rat.

The most common explanation for the rise of the text-passage approach is that it is the fault of schools' emphasis on "test prep" in instruction, but this is a bit of a strawman. It's true that state reading comprehension tests are made up almost exclusively of text passages, so of course some schools try to prepare students by having them read lots of passages. But this practice is itself a result of the accepted (but erroneous) belief that reading is composed of transferrable skills. Questions on England's English Literature General Certificate of Secondary Education exams, which are not content agnostic, ask for analysis of important books and genres.

Yet another threat to the centrality of the book in English classrooms comes from the common argument that students will be more inclined to read if they are allowed to read a book of their choice.

The presumption that choice will mitigate disinterest in reading is questionable. A student who has read a handful of books in his life is less likely to choose a book that will set his mind on fire than a teacher or curriculum designer who has read hundreds and chosen the best. One of the

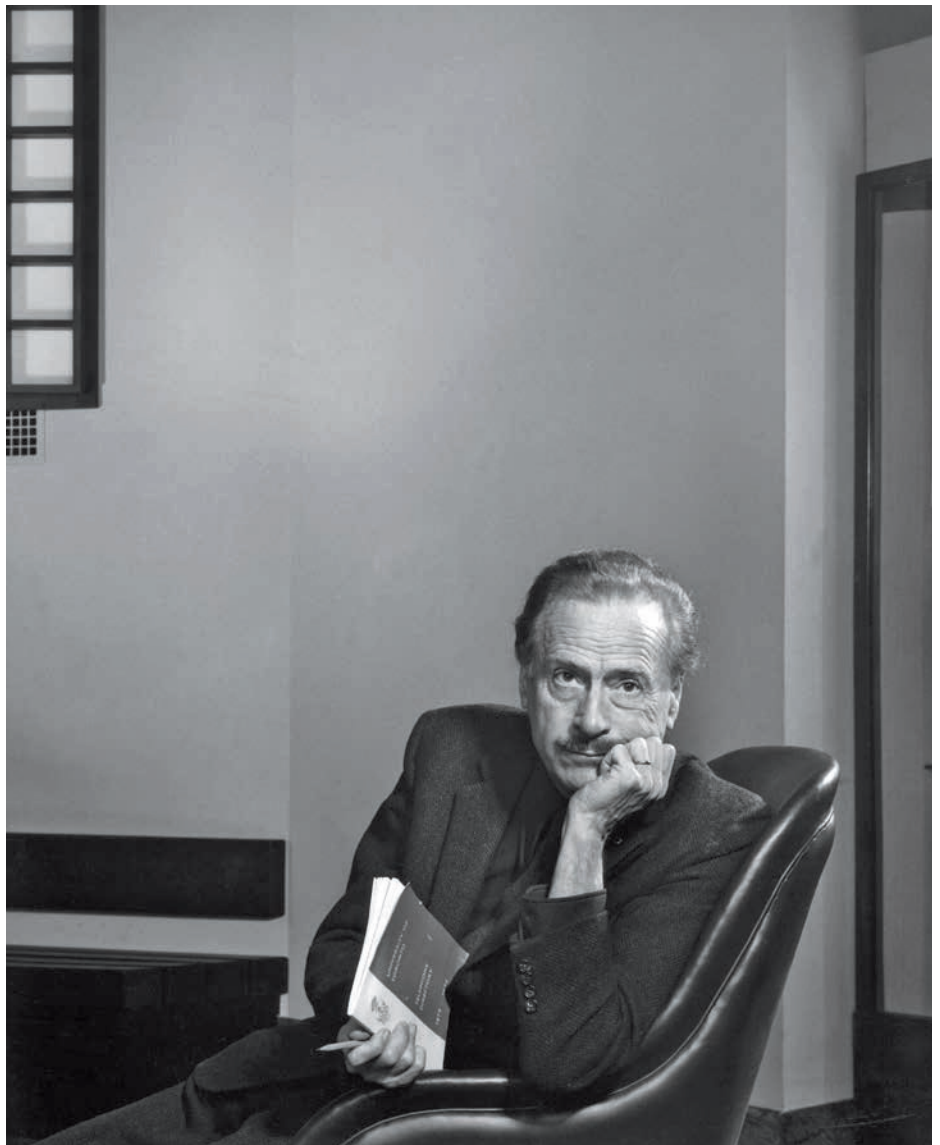


*Cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham refutes the idea that comprehension depends on transferring and intentionally applying reading skills across text types.*

roles of a teacher, in fact, is to introduce students to books that are beyond their current knowledge and interest—and that just might surprise them. If you had asked me what I wanted to read in 7th grade, it would have been a sports biography. But a teacher handed me *The Old Man and the Sea* instead. At first, I thought: *no way*. But not for long. Soon I saw that a book was something much more substantial than I had previously believed.

Relying on students to choose books also robs them of a key part of the value of reading: shared experience. When a book is shared with others, it adds the value of perspective beyond the student's individual reading experience. In discussion with others, students hear and wrestle with different interpretations and reactions, and they grow intellectually. They also grow emotionally, because by reading together, they are connected by a common experience.

Students in classrooms where everyone chooses their own book miss out on these opportunities. True, it is lovely to imagine students in beanbag chairs in every corner of the classroom, quietly reading “choice books.” But we can be sure that they will be less likely to discuss those books with others who may see them differently and even less likely to do so under the guidance of a knowledgeable adult who can help bring the books' depth to life. Students in such settings will probably not come to see books as a means to a shared experience.



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*Marshall McLuhan popularized the idea that “the medium is the message” in his 1975 book *Understanding Media*. Books communicate that the world is complex and full of nuance.*

## The Case for the Book

So what's the big deal about books? Why do they matter, and what is this purported research that supports reading them rather than, say, passages or stories or even (tip of the hat to NCTE) YouTube videos.

A phrase from the social theorist Marshall McLuhan's 1975 book *Understanding Media* has proven one of the most enduring and important observations about human communication. The medium, McLuhan wrote, is the message; every means of communication shapes the way we see the world. “Every time a new medium of communication comes along,” Johann Hari writes in *Stolen Focus*, “it is gently guiding us to see the world according to a new set of codes.”

For example, part of the implicit message of social media platforms is that, as Hari puts it, “the world can be understood in short simple statements of 280 characters” and “can be interpreted and confidently understood very quickly.” All around us we see evidence of this message. Hasty and simplistic worldviews are shouted back and forth in a cacophony.

By contrast, Hari writes, “the medium of the book tells us, that . . . the world is complex and requires steady focus to understand; it needs to be thought about and comprehended slowly.” First impressions often turn out to be wrong. The truth is nuanced and often not simple. A protagonist never understands fully at the start; a book always involves a change in thinking about the world. If there is a hope for our increasingly fractious and

fast-thinking society, it lies in part in the sustained and evolving understanding a book fosters.

We also learn especially well from stories. Willingham describes them as “cognitively privileged.” This is to say that researchers find that people remember ideas and insights better when they encounter them in a story. We remember the facts because they are connected to a story, and the more memorable and compelling the story—and the deeper our relationship to it—the better. Thus is the unique power of books.

It’s probable that our receptiveness to stories from a learning and memory perspective is evolutionary in origin. Long ago in the mists of human pre-history, stories both taught us how to survive and also how to build the groups that became our societies, William von Hippel argues in his 2018 book, *The Social Leap*. “Once night falls, communal fires are lit and people gather in small groups, conversations blend into stories and stories often reveal important lessons about how to live one’s life and follow cultural rules,” von Hippel writes.

Those who listened received a double selection advantage—they knew more about the cumulative knowledge of their society, and they were bound together by ties of belonging. Even though people in contemporary America now tend toward individualism, we are still wired to want to form and belong to groups. “Life satisfaction is achieved primarily by being embedded in your community,” von Hippel writes. Sharing stories teaches us better but also binds us together in communities, and this, too, is important. Social scientists find that people who lack social connections have poorer physical health, with social isolation having an impact comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In the long view, those who were drawn to stories were more likely to survive, enough so that the tendency was selected for, and we are the heirs of that process.

Another reason for the privileged status of stories in accelerating learning may be what the psychologist Raymond Mar and colleagues call “close parallels” between their narrative structure and how we “communicate our own experiences” internally. A story is a series of “temporally ordered causal events organized around personal goals,” and that mimics the goal-oriented internal narrative unfolding each day in a person’s mind. It’s a form that is intuitive to us from lived experience, and so our attention and working memory are able to focus on the insights within the text. We are especially receptive to the ideas we encounter in this intuitive form.

Because of this similarity in format between books and our own thinking, Mar also argues that exposure to narrative fiction appears to “improve or maintain social skills, especially

skills of empathy and social understanding,” as he and his colleagues write in a paper titled “Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy.” Stories improve people’s capacity for empathy, their ability and desire to understand what other people think and feel. The longer and deeper the story, the greater the benefits. When you build a relationship with a character and care about him or her, you are primed to build memory and understanding. Emotional events are often called “flash-bulb memories,” Mar and colleagues write, and become “deeply imprinted in the mind,” whether they happen in fiction or in reality.

So, if you want students to remember things and build the rich schema that help them learn even more about the world, give them long-form narrative—doubly so if you want to help them build empathy and be responsive to the perspectives of others.

But the benefits of books don’t stop there. One of the most challenging skills in reading is to understand “narrative voice.” Is the narrator trustworthy? Pompous? Subtly ironic? To read a book is not only to spend hours in contemplation of a series of themes but also to learn how to pick up on the nuances and subtleties of a narrative voice. In doing this, we develop the ability to hear more clearly who is speaking to us through the words we read. We are subtler and more perceptive readers when we hear “voice.”

Finally, books are the format in which the important ideas of society have been transmitted for centuries. This means that great books are a form of cultural capital. If you have read *1984*, you understand an allusion to Big Brother and can enter into discussion with people around you. The world is full of these allusions and references, and so, because we want students to



*Psychologist Raymond Mar of York University identifies parallels between the narrative structure of stories and the goal-oriented nature of people’s lived experiences.*

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become full participants in societal discourse, it is a gift to help them acquire shared knowledge. But books can be challenging. They are often old, written in the parlance of a bygone era. They are often complex, occasionally even resisting the efforts of readers to make easy meaning of them.

This is beneficial. Students should learn that understanding sometimes requires struggle. At times, accessing the world of ideas encoded in books means struggling to understand archaic syntax, say, and having to read a passage two or three times. If students never read text that is more than fifty or a hundred years old, the writing of the past will slip farther and farther away from them. Do we want a society where students lack familiarity with such writing and the mindset to persist at the challenges it presents? I can’t imagine it will be a good thing when only a small number of experts can extract meaning from *On the Origin of Species* or the U.S. Constitution.

### How to Read a Book

Books are powerful—potentially the most powerful form of written discourse—and centering them in the curriculum is important, especially given the data that students read less and less on their own. But *how* students read a book also matters.

We know, for example, that when students have background knowledge about what they are reading, they comprehend more and thereby learn more. Willingham calls this a “central, undisputed finding: All students will learn more if they have greater background knowledge.” This means we should be feeding them knowledge as they read.

Including nonfiction in the reading curriculum is one effective way to do this. It means pairing short nonfiction articles with books to elucidate and elaborate on details encountered in the text. A colleague recently read a novel set in World War II with her students. There was frequent mention of U-boats and victory gardens and rationing. Each day she would choose one of these terms and give students a short article about it: What was rationing? What items were rationed? How did people react? Result: students understood more of the novel and gained more insights from it. And yes, the text passage has again reared its head, but in this case its function is different. The nonfiction passages are connected to a larger narrative, and the ideas will stick more because students know and care more about them.

Read aloud. A shared book presents an opportunity to read aloud together, but that opportunity is all too often overlooked, especially with older students. Generally, studies find that about half of demonstrated reading comprehension is predicted by students’ reading fluency—their ability to read accurately, rapidly, and with some expression. David Paige and his colleagues at Northern Illinois University found, in a study of 6th- and 7th-grade students, that oral reading fluency explained between 50 and 62 percent of differences in reading comprehension. Reading aloud together helps build students’ fluency. Students can’t comprehend material when they can’t read it fluently, and too many students don’t get enough practice and development at this core skill.

A second benefit of reading aloud is that it allows you not just to discuss a book as a group but also to share in the emotional experiences it evokes and in so doing build connection and belonging. One of my favorite videos to demonstrate this effect portrays a teacher named Maggie Johnson reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* with her 8th graders. They are reading aloud; the scene is a humorous one, in which Scout’s naïveté is revealed, and the class is giggling as a handful of students read. Later they gasp together at the more profound scenes. They share the experience and are connected to one another because of it. And this harkens back to the source of stories—to the reasons they are cognitively privileged and a tool for building connection.

Recently, on a weekend when my two older children were home from college, we watched a movie as a family. That is, we chose sharing a story as a way to reconnect. I noticed in the moments when I laughed at some scene or other that I was looking around briefly to see if my wife and children were laughing too. Perhaps you’ve done something similar. Why would one look around at others’ reactions while sharing a story? One reason is that the laughter is not as meaningful if others don’t share the experience. Laughing alone is not as meaningful as laughing together, which connects us in an often atomized world.

Stories gain even more power when they are brought to life by reading aloud. In fact, this may be the book’s primary chance of salvation. If the book is going to survive its death struggle with the isolating and disconnecting technology of the smartphone, its best bet, I argue, will be if we can encourage students to read books with each other, laughing and gasping together, and in so doing create meaningful and connected experiences that they hope to re-create by reading more and further. Books are the ideal vehicle to both inform us and link us together. It’s time we brought them back into the classroom and made the shared experience of them the centerpiece of literacy instruction.

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