

Why Reading Matters—and How to Be a Better Reader

1. What is your purpose for reading this selection?

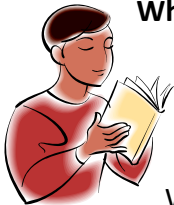
2. What prior knowledge do you have about this subject?

3. What text features do you notice?

4. What questions do you have?

Jack thought he knew how to read—or read well enough. But his science and social studies textbooks leave him frustrated. “I can’t understand them!” he complains. “And they’re boring, too!”

Jack is not alone. Many students have trouble reading well. Even if they understand individual words and can sound them out, they often don’t understand what the passage or book means.



Why Reading Matters

Students need to read well not just to get good grades or pass state tests. Reading well is a key that unlocks many doors. You can become a lifelong learner who is able to satisfy your curiosity, learn new skills and information, and find meaningful jobs.

What might you want to read? Many different kinds of texts help people improve their lives! How about a driver’s education manual so you can get your driver’s license? A review of a new movie? A new novel from your favorite author? A religious book that explores the meaning of life? A bus schedule so you can get to the mall or to an after-school job? You might want to find a recipe for chocolate brownies online or in a cookbook. Or read a manual that teaches you how to change the oil in your car. If your neighbor is from Turkey or Vietnam or Kenya, you might want to learn about life in that country. Maybe you’ll skim an encyclopedia article or look up some information online.

Adults Struggle, Too

Unfortunately, many adults can’t read well enough to cope with daily life. Over 30 million adults can’t understand a newspaper, read an advertisement, or fill out a job application. Half of our nation’s jobless youths ages 16-21 have the same struggles. Without effective reading skills, it’s almost impossible to find a good job.



What Happens When You Read

Reading is not mindless or passive. When you read, your mind is awake and active! Your brain is creating new pathways for learning. Scientists and researchers used to think that only young brains could grow new cells. But we now know that the human brain can grow and change throughout life. Young people's brains can make new connections in response to learning, practice, and stimulation.



Reading vs. Screen Time



You've probably noticed that watching television, YouTube, or TikTok is much easier than reading. It demands far less concentration. That's because when you look at a screen, your brain goes into neutral—almost as if it is partially asleep. It does not process or analyze the information it is receiving. It is passive, not active.

Studies show that fast-paced screen images may actually change your brain—for the worse! Even one or two hours of passive screen time every day can affect your ability to do well in school. Unfortunately, many people spend six or seven hours watching television or looking at devices every day.

What Successful Readers Do

Successful readers have a collection of thinking strategies to understand and remember what they read. They know *why* they want to read something—they have a purpose. They make predictions about what they will read, and connect it to something they already know (prior knowledge). They visualize or make “mind movies,” and ask questions while they read. They monitor their own progress and may reread a difficult passage, speed up, or slow down.

Do You Want to Become a Better Reader?



Many research studies show that if you read *more*, you will read *better*. In other words, practice makes perfect (or at least helps)! Did you know that reading alone for just 15 minutes a day can expose you to more than a million words a year? Think how much smarter you will become—and how you will become a better reader. Just as you practice basketball or the violin to develop your skills, practicing reading will make you a better reader.

No matter what your reading skill level is today, you can be a better reader—and then a better thinker. Michael King was a poor boy in the segregated South who attended school just a few months each year. When he decided to become a Baptist minister, he could only read at a fifth-grade level. But he loved to read and went to school at night to prepare for college. He eventually earned his degree, became a successful minister and political activist, and raised three children. You may have heard of one of them—his son, the famous Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

