

The Need to Read:

Why reading in high school is critical to future success

Future success, whether in college or at work, will likely all come down to one key skill: How well does your child read? Like any skill, reading improves with practice, so it's essential to stress the importance of reading with your teen. Here are some reasons why:

Reading develops the mind and creativity

According to research from the Franklin Institute's Resources for Science Learning, developing good reading habits prior to age 18 improves cognitive brain function later in life. Having good reading skills improves your teen's ability to comprehend concepts and ideas, increasing the odds that he'll be able to think and make good decisions for himself down the road. So, while video games might be fun, they aren't necessarily helping your teen strengthen his brain or use his creativity. Unlike movies in which the cast and crew do all the creative work, books allow your teen to create in his mind what a particular character looks like or how a scene plays out. That means while he's reading, he's cultivating creative thinking skills.

College reading requires preparation

If your teen lacks adequate reading skills in high school, he's more likely to fall behind on the workload once he gets to college. A 2009 study by American College Testing, or ACT, found that about half of all ACT-tested high school students are unprepared for college-level reading. Another study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 70 percent of students who took one or more remedial reading courses in college didn't earn a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment. Students who take remedial reading courses in college simply aren't used to reading and analyzing college-level material. John Briggs, a member of the College Board SAT Reading Development Committee, told Greatschools.org that students know about topic sentences and main ideas, but they don't understand the questions the writer is addressing and they don't have enough experience participating in academic conversations.

Reading helps teens discover new things

From newspapers and magazines to the Internet and the latest Twilight novel, the world is overflowing with information. Some of these are great learning tools that require strong reading comprehension skills. When your teen reads well, she can educate herself in any area of life she's interested in.

Reading is vital for finding and keeping a good job

When it comes to succeeding in today's workplace, reading is the most critical skill of all, says one high school guidance counselor. Many well-paying jobs require reading as a part of job performance. The need to read starts with the initial job posting or classified ad and continues through to the application and the job itself.

"Everything is based around your ability to read. In school, no matter what class you're in or what subject you're taking, your ability to read and comprehend what you've read is critical. Reading is even an important component of math," the guidance counselor said. "On the job site, employers say your ability to read and follow directions is critical even in an entry-level job."

Reading is fundamental to function in today's society

The written word is everywhere, even if you don't read for pleasure. Reading is essential to understanding what's written on a prescription bottle, following the instructions for setting up a new flat-screen television, filling out a job application, and even understanding a road map. Without good reading skills, day-to-day activities that many teens take for granted can become a chore.

Reading builds self-esteem

Some teens may have low opinions of themselves and their abilities or may sometimes feel like the world is against them. Inadequate reading comprehension skills can lead to poor performance in all their subjects and ultimately result in teens giving up on school. It might sound simple, but the more your teen reads, the more knowledgeable they become. With more knowledge comes more confidence, and confidence builds self-esteem.

Those who read well write better

Excellent reading skills improve and reinforce vocabulary development and provide your teen with the opportunity to explore multiple writing styles and models. If your teen reads a magazine or news on the Internet, she will naturally be exposed to words and sentence structures she can later use in writing a paper or essay. Reading will also expand her vocabulary so she has a larger pool of words to draw from when writing.

Want to help your teen read well?

Here are some tips:

Encourage reading all the way through graduation

The New York State Board of Regents recommends that all students in grades K-12 read at least 25 age-appropriate books per year. So, as your teen moves through high school, encourage him to read more books – both fiction and non-fiction – and spend less time on the phone or in front of the computer or TV.

Model good reading habits at home

Teens learn from what they see you doing. You still have more influence on them than you think. Take the time to read a book together and then discuss it as a family. If you read an interesting article on the Internet, print it out or e-mail it to your teen.

Hang out at the book store or library

A lot of the bigger book stores also serve coffee and food. So, make an afternoon out of it and take your teen for a bite to eat after picking out a few books. As an alternative, take a trip to your local library where you can browse the suggested reading section or ask a librarian for recommendations.

Check for understanding

While many teachers see homework as practice, it's not all about just completing assignments. Reading is about comprehension and retention. Stress that reading speed is less important than reading the material and understanding it. Ask your teen such questions as: "Did you understand the assignment?" "How did you decide to approach this topic?" and "Did you have a chance to read over your essay or check your work?"

Encourage your teen to take challenging courses

If you think your teen is ready, encourage him to add some challenging courses to his schedule. Teens who take courses that demand research, writing, and in-depth reading in high school are more likely to succeed in college. Look for courses that require a lot of independent work outside of class and that use class time to integrate and build on basic understanding of the material. If your teen isn't ready, ask his guidance counselor about before or after-school programs that can provide him with extra help.

What students can do to improve reading skills:

- Read independently: John Briggs, a member of the College Board SAT Reading Development Committee, told Greatschools.org he believes it's important for students to rediscover literature. Classic books are part of our cultural legacy and should not be forgotten. A Tale of Two Cities, anyone?

- Look for variety: Reading a wide range of material will help your reading skills adapt to different kinds of writing, from technical directions for electronic gadgets to opinion pieces in the daily newspaper, and from humorous novels to gripping biographies of every-day and extraordinary people.
- Don't be afraid to reread what you've read: It may be surprising, but many students don't go back and reread something they don't understand. Understanding what you've read – and knowing when you don't – are both important skills. If you don't understand something the first time, train yourself to go back and try again.
- Form study groups or join academic clubs: One of the best ways to improve reading skills is to find ways to discuss what you've read with your peers and teachers. Many book clubs feature books that are prominent in pop culture.
- Take the time to read without distractions: Reading requires concentration. It's difficult to read if you're doing something else (like listening to music) or there are other distractions around you.

Five Reading Resources:

- Teenagers and Reading (<http://www.rif.org/us/literacy-resources/articles/teenagers-and-reading.htm>)
- SAT College Reading List (<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/boost-your-skills/23628.html>)
- Online Literature Library (www.literature.org/)
- Reading your textbooks effectively and efficiently (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/reading.html>)
- Reading tips for the busy ninth grade student (http://math-and-reading-help-for-kids.org/article_directory/High_School.html, scroll down and choose the article on ninth grade reading tips.)