



NEA Report Shows that Steep Decline in American Reading Skills will Have Significant Long-Term Negative Effects on Society

by Matt Burriesci

The NEA's new report, *To Read or Not to Read*, finds that Americans are reading less, and that their reading comprehension skills are eroding. Moreover, these declines will have serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications. A complete copy of the 99-page report is available at the NEA's website, www.arts.gov.

The report is a substantial expansion upon the NEA's 2004 report, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. That study found that Americans in almost every demographic group were reading fiction, poetry, and drama at significantly lower rates than 10 or 20 years earlier. Some, such as Charles McGrath at the *New York Times*, had criticized that report for failing to take into account other kinds of reading, such as nonfiction or online reading.

The new report provides a far more comprehensive—and bleak—assessment of general American reading habits. *To Read or Not To Read* compiles data from across several agencies, including the NEA, the Department of Education, and the Conference Board. It is the first time such information has been published and analyzed in such a comprehensive way.

"To Read or Not to Read confirms—without any serious qualification—the central importance of reading for a prosperous, free society," notes NEA Chairman Dana Gioia in his preface to the report. "The nation needs to focus more attention and resources on an activity both fundamental and irreplaceable for democracy."

The report finds that young adults and teenagers are reading less than they were ten years ago, and that voluntary reading habits diminish from childhood to late adolescence. Less than one-third of 13-year-olds are daily readers, and the

percentage of 17-year olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20-year period.

Table 1: Percentage Who Read Almost Every Day for Fun

Age	1984	1999	2004
9-Year Olds	53%	54%	54%
13-Year Olds	35%	28%	30%
17-Year Olds	31%	25%	22%

Source: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

College attendance no longer guarantees active reading habits, either. 65% of college freshmen read for pleasure for less than an hour per week, or not at all. By the time they become college seniors, one in three students read nothing at all for pleasure in a given week.

Not surprisingly, literary reading is in steep decline among younger Americans.

Of course, while these declines have obvious implications for the literary community, they also have demonstrable effects on society. The report finds that weak reading skills strongly correlate to lower academic achievement, lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement. Deficient readers are more likely to be imprisoned, and they are less likely to be active in the nation's civic and cultural life. Strong readers earn more, vote more, and have more rewarding career opportunities.

But perhaps the most troubling finding of the report is the link between reading proficiency and a healthy, culturally vibrant, and informed citizenry. Good readers play a crucial role in enriching the nation's cultural and civic life.

The report finds troubling implications for the U.S. Economy. Employers now rank reading and writing as top deficiencies in new hires. 38% of employers find high school graduates "deficient" in reading comprehension, while 63%

18-34 year olds, whose reading rates are the lowest for any adult age group under 65, show declines in every area of cultural and civic participation. Poor readers are more likely to be unemployed, and deficient reading skills are endemic in the nation's growing prison population.

The report takes into account the growing role of other media in young Americans' lives. For example, it finds that 15-24 year-olds spend at least two hours per day watching television, while they spend only ten minutes reading. At the same time, home Internet use has soared among the same age group. But the report strongly suggests that new media are displacing the intellectual engagement of reading with mere entertainment.

"*To Read or Not To Read* is not an elegy for the bygone days of print culture, but instead is a call to action—not only for parents, teachers, librarians, writers, and publishers, but also for politicians, business leaders, economists, and social activists," writes NEA Chairman Dana Gioia. "The general decline in reading is not

Table 2: Percentage of 18-24 Year Olds Reading Literature			
	1982	1992	2002
Percentage Reading Literature	60%	53%	43%
Change from 1982		-7%	-17%
Rate of Decline from 1982		-12%	-28%

Source: National Endowment for the Arts

rate this basic skill as "very important."

In addition, "Written Communications" now tops the list of applied skills found lacking in high school and college graduates alike. One in five U.S. workers read at a lower skill level than their job requires. These deficiencies are forcing employers to spend billions of dollars training their workers to read and write at remedial levels.

But perhaps the most troubling finding of the report is the link between reading proficiency and a healthy, culturally vibrant, and informed citizenry. Good readers play a crucial role in enriching the nation's cultural and civic life. They are more than three-times as likely to patronize cultural institutions. They are more likely to play sports, and they exercise on a more regular basis. They are also much more likely to vote, and they are more inclined to volunteer for charitable work. The study found that 43% of literary readers volunteered for charitable work on a regular basis, as opposed to only 16% of non-readers. Moreover, volunteerism rates dropped significantly by level of general reading-proficiency: proficient readers were more than three times as likely to volunteer as were non-proficient readers.

Table 3: Rated "Very Important" by Employers	
Reading Comprehension	63%
English Language	62%
Writing in English	49%
Mathematics	30%
Foreign Language	11%

Source: The Conference Board, Are They Really Ready to Work? 2006

merely a cultural issue, though it has enormous consequences for literature and the other arts. It is a serious national problem." AWP

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