

# Is reading relevant?

---

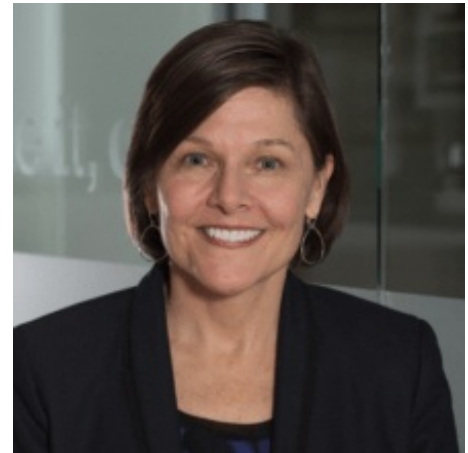
 [ednc.org/2019/07/24/is-reading-relevant/](https://ednc.org/2019/07/24/is-reading-relevant/)

by Ellen McIntyre | July 24, 2019

**Perspective**

July 24,  
2019

You've seen what I've seen. Everywhere we go now, it appears, people have their noses directed at their phones, perhaps squinting a bit, maybe vigorously two-thumb typing. We've seen hundreds walking city streets looking at their phones as they move about. Sometimes families or friends sitting in restaurants read phones instead of talk. Certainly the phones are on the tables, at the ready for any excuse to interrupt the talk.



Just this week at Norris Lake, a pristine Tennessee mountain paradise, I saw a child sitting in a canoe, and while the adult paddled, the child looked down at her phone. Most sad to me is when I see very young children plunked down in waiting rooms, meeting rooms, restaurants, even parks, with devices to keep them busy, or at least keep them from interrupting adults. Devices make great babysitters because they work. Kids know the programs they love and access them easily and dive in. I often have people come to my office with young children in tow, and I welcome that. But they too are usually on a device.

What *are* they looking at? I always check to see, and invariably, it is a game of some sort. Something somewhat addictive, and once started, they rarely look up.

There was a time when some people bragged about their 2-year-olds knowing how to turn on and engage with an iPad. It was cute; they looked so adult. Look how smart! There was a time when children using devices seemed to be the answer to bad education. Schools with 1:1 technology in which every child worked from a device, had constant access to endless information, and where instruction could be "personalized" just for them was viewed as progressive education.

Sure, internet access and computer skills are essential in schools and homes, and we know that technology combined with good teaching can be powerful. Luckily today, parents and teachers are warned about too much screen time. Our devices now even keep track for us how much time we spend on them. But any observant person knows this problem is still prevalent with little evidence it's easing up. Today, seeing a tiny child with a computer is not cute or fun, it is worrisome.

The constant access, unending use, and addictive practices beg the question: What is getting crowded out? What are kids *not* doing if they are on devices a good part of the day? My fear is that they are not *reading*.

Sure, kids do a little reading online, well, some of them who go beyond simple games. But that is not the kind of reading that *develops minds*, makes brains work better, creates better readers, writers, and thinkers, and engenders empathy. Reading can do all that and does, but it is a certain kind of reading that makes people smarter and more compassionate. It is *reading long texts*. Mary Ann Wolf, in her brilliant book, "Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World" suggests that the way we read online, moving quickly from one topic to the next, skimming and scanning, changes our ability to read deeply.

What is the relationship between technology use and reading complex, long texts? Does all the technology use affect our abilities to read challenging texts? Or does it simply crowd out the time we might have spent reading? Daniel Willingham's friendly book, "The Reading Mind," tackles this and other questions about how the mind reads. He summarizes the scant research on this question by basically saying that what most kids are doing on their phones and computers is not reading, but browsing, downloading videos and music, and communicating on social media. He disagrees that our brains are being changed from reading digital material instead of articles or books. His synthesis of research suggests that reading has not been displaced by digital technologies, but that is "because *most people already read so little* that there wasn't much to be shoved aside when new technologies became available."

Both Willingham and Wolf — and any adult educator I know — still know that reading whole, long, challenging texts are essential for developing minds, along with staying informed, providing pleasure, understanding the human condition, and other byproducts of reading. I worry there will be yet another divide among us, those who read and those who don't, with the latter group missing out on all the benefits that reading long texts bring. Without question, parents and teachers need to recognize into which group their children fit ... and steer them, and themselves, into the one that reads.

-----

About the Author - Ellen McIntyre is the Dean of the Cato College of Education at UNC Charlotte and a specialist in early literacy teaching and learning. She started the UNC Charlotte summer reading camp in 2016. McIntyre also serves as a Trustee of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

This article was printed online at <https://www.ednc.org/2019/07/24/is-reading-relevant/>