

The Future Arrived Unread

In a preschool classroom outside Dallas, the teacher of the 3-year-olds knows what to expect when a new school year begins. The children cry. They cry for their mothers, mostly, and the crying fades as routines take hold. Last year, one girl cried for something else. She wanted her tablet. The district issues one to every child, but this teacher keeps them locked away. She knows how many hours her students already spend on screens at home. The girl was 3, and she missed her device the way other children miss a parent.

She was born into a country that reads less every year. Fewer than half of American adults now finish even one book annually, and the share who read for pleasure on a given day has nearly halved in two decades. The time did not disappear; it migrated to screens, where the average teenager spends over 4 hours a day on social media. A book now competes with devices engineered to be irresistible, and it is losing: more Americans placed a bet last year than read a book.

None of this means people have stopped reading words. If anything, they read more of them than ever: messages, captions, comment threads, notifications. What is vanishing is the long form, the kind of reading that asks you to hold an argument or a story in your head across 300 pages.

Cognitive scientists describe the gap as the difference between decoding and comprehension. Americans can still sound out the words; increasingly, they struggle to do anything with them. In one study, university students majoring in English, people who had chosen literature as their field, were asked to read the opening page of a Dickens novel. Most struggled to follow it, and some misread the figurative language so badly that they concluded the story took place when dinosaurs still existed. At Harvard, a student recently fed a difficult novel into ChatGPT to convert it into easier English.

Media theorists have a name for a society like this. Not illiterate, since the skill survives, but postliterate: a culture that can read and mostly chooses not to.

The strange part is that all of this was predicted more than 60 years ago. In 1962, Marshall McLuhan announced that television was carrying the West into a post-literate age. In 1985, Neil Postman argued that a screen-fed society would come to treat everything, politics included, as entertainment. For decades, both men looked like alarmists, and universal literacy seemed less a goal than a destination the world was traveling toward on schedule. It now appears they got the diagnosis right and the date wrong. Some scholars have begun describing the five centuries since Gutenberg invented the printing press as an interlude: a bright, unusual stretch between the age of speech and the age of the feed.

What follows the interlude is already visible. Historians of oral cultures note that ideas obey different rules when speech, rather than script, carries them. Slogans beat careful arguments, and a speaker's charisma counts for more than his consistency, since nobody keeps a record of

last month's claims. Anyone who has spent an hour on social media will recognize the style. The most influential voices in American culture are no longer novelists or columnists but podcasters and streamers, and in one recent poll, almost 60 percent of Gen Z said they would become social media personalities if they could.

Still, there are good reasons to distrust the doomsaying, starting with its age. In 1900, the same anxiety was aimed at the newspaper, accused of destroying serious thought; a century earlier, respectable opinion held that novels were rotting the minds of young women. Every new medium arrives with a funeral announcement for the old one, and the funeral is usually premature. Even now, the corpse looks lively. Print sales are higher than a decade ago, hundreds of independent bookstores opened last year, and a celebrity book club can move more copies than a literary prize.

But look closer at who is buying. Reading is not dying so much as concentrating. Roughly 20 percent of adults now account for more than 80 percent of the books read. The average reader reads more than ever; there are simply far fewer of them. Reading is turning into a niche pursuit, somewhere between birdwatching and collecting vinyl: a passion for enthusiasts rather than the general public. Carry a thick novel onto the subway and you risk being accused of performative reading. When an activity needs defending in public, it has stopped being ordinary.

South Korea knows this split well, and the irony runs deep. Korean printers were using movable metal type nearly a century before Gutenberg, and King Sejong later created an alphabet designed so ordinary people could learn it easily. Literacy here was never an accident. It was a national project. Yet Korean students today read enormous amounts, and almost all of it is assigned: textbooks, workbooks, exam passages. When reading is treated as a means to a score, the habit often ends the day the last exam does, and fewer than half of Korean adults now finish even one book a year. The country that printed books before Gutenberg may now offer an early glimpse of what comes after.

Which brings us back to the most famous library in history. The Library of Alexandria is remembered as a casualty of fire, but the truth was probably slower and sadder. Papyrus decays, and keeping the collection alive meant scribes copying the scrolls again and again. At some point, the city stopped paying. The library was not destroyed. It was abandoned. Our situation is the reverse: nothing digital decays, and every book ever scanned will outlast us all, a search away. The scrolls no longer need scribes.

Today the words are safe. The people willing to spend time with them are another matter.

- 1) How much do you read these days compared with ten years ago?
- 2) When was the last time you finished a whole book, and what was it?
- 3) Do you find it harder to concentrate on long texts than you used to?
- 4) Why do you think people dismiss predictions about big social changes until those changes have actually arrived?

- 5) Why do some predictions about the future come true while others, like flying cars or the paperless office, never do?
- 6) If people read less, is it a real loss for society, or just a change, like the decline of letter writing?
- 7) Why do you think reading has turned into an identity statement rather than a normal activity?
- 8) Does exam-driven reading build a foundation for life, or does it teach people that reading is something to escape?
- 9) If AI can summarize or simplify any book, does reading the original text still matter?
- 10) Thirty years from now, will people read more, less, or simply differently?

Fade	(v)	to gradually become weaker, quieter, or less noticeable until it disappears	The sound of the train slowly faded as it disappeared into the distance.
Take hold	(phr v)	to start to have a strong effect or become firmly established	Once the new habit takes hold, getting up early stops feeling so difficult.
District	(n)	an area of a city or country, often one with its own local government or purpose	The school district decided to give every student a laptop starting this year.
Lock away	(phr v)	to put something in a safe or secure place so others cannot reach it	She locked the documents away in a drawer before leaving the office.
Share	(n)	the part or proportion of a total that belongs to one person or group	Younger workers now make up a larger share of the company than they did five years ago.
Migrate	(v)	to move from one place, area, or thing to another	As prices rose, many shoppers migrated from physical stores to online shopping.
Irresistible	(adj)	so attractive or tempting that it is impossible to refuse or resist	The smell of fresh bread from the bakery was almost irresistible.
Place a bet	(exp)	to risk money on the result of a game, race, or uncertain event	He placed a small bet on his favorite team to win the final.
Long form	(n)	a longer, more detailed version of writing or content, rather than a short one	Some readers still prefer long form journalism to quick news updates on their phones.
Decode	(v)	to work out the meaning of written or coded symbols; to read letters as words	Young children first learn to decode simple words before they can read whole sentences.
Sound out	(phr v)	to say the individual sounds of a word slowly in order to read or pronounce it	The teacher helped him sound out the difficult name one letter at a time.

Figurative	(adj)	using words in an imaginative way that is not meant to be understood literally	When she said her heart was broken, she was speaking in a figurative sense.
Illiterate	(adj)	unable to read or write	The charity runs evening classes for adults who were never taught to read and remain illiterate.
Alarmist	(n)	someone who warns people about dangers that are exaggerated or unlikely	Critics called him an alarmist, but many of his warnings later turned out to be true.
Interlude	(n)	a short period of time between two longer events or situations	The quiet weekend was a pleasant interlude between two very busy months at work.
Charisma	(n)	a natural charm and appeal that attracts and influences other people	The new leader had enough charisma to fill a room the moment she walked in.
Columnist	(n)	a writer who regularly produces articles giving their opinion in a newspaper or magazine	A well-known columnist wrote a piece criticizing the government's new education plan.
Personality	(n)	a famous person, especially one who appears often on television or online	The show invited a popular internet personality to host the awards ceremony.
Doomsaying	(n)	the act of predicting that terrible things are going to happen	Despite all the doomsaying about the economy, the company had its best year yet.
Premature	(adj)	happening or done too early, before the right or expected time	It would be premature to celebrate before we have seen the final results.
Performative	(adj)	done mainly to be seen by others rather than out of genuine feeling	Some people felt his public apology was performative rather than sincere.
A means to an end	(exp)	something done only to achieve a result, not for its own value	He saw the boring office job purely as a means to an end, a way to save money for travel.
Glimpse	(n)	a quick or partial view of something, or a brief idea of what it is like	The documentary gave viewers a rare glimpse into life inside the factory.
Casualty	(n)	(figurative) a person or thing that suffers or is lost as a result of something	The small bookshop was another casualty of the shift toward online shopping.
Decay	(v)	to be gradually destroyed or broken down by a natural process over time	Without proper care, the old wooden houses slowly began to decay.

Scribe	(n)	a person in the past whose job was to copy documents and books by hand	Before printing existed, a scribe might spend months copying a single book.
Again and again	(exp)	many times; repeatedly	He practiced the same piece again and again until he could play it perfectly.
Outlast	(v)	to continue to exist or last longer than something or someone else	These stone buildings were made to outlast the people who designed them.

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