

An Open Letter to High School Students about Reading

The value of reading as preparation for college should never be underestimated, not even as the focus of higher education turns to STEM majors and career preparation.

By Patrick Sullivan

Dear High School Students,

Greetings!

A few years ago I wrote an open letter to ninth graders about college readiness, trying to provide beginning high school students with a college professor's perspective on what being ready for college really means (see "[An Open Letter to Ninth Graders](#)" in the January–February 2009 issue of *Academe*). As it turns out, "being ready" involves a lot more than taking a particular sequence of courses or achieving a certain GPA. My original letter received a very enthusiastic response from high school teachers and students. Some teachers even had their students write their own letters back to me in response to what I said. It was great getting feedback directly from high school students.

There were many areas of agreement expressed in the letters I have received from students over the years, but one rather consistent area of resistance was about reading. In my letter, I told students that if they wanted to be ready for college they needed to love reading, they needed to read for pleasure, and they needed to do a lot of reading overall. A number of the students I heard from did not like this advice one bit.

I have a few more things I'd now like to share with you about getting ready for college—and, believe it or not, they all involve reading.

In the years since I published that open letter, I have done a great deal of research on reading and learning, and I am in the process right now of coediting a scholarly book about reading, *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom* (NCTE). As I mentioned in my first letter, I am the coeditor of two books about college readiness—*What Is "College-Level" Writing?* (2006) and *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2* (2010)—so I've spent a great deal of time thinking about what high school students need if they want to be successful in college.

My research has confirmed that "deep" reading and reading for pleasure may be the most important things you can do to prepare for college.

One study that has shaped my thinking on this subject was conducted by Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown. Their research showed that reading for pleasure produces important benefits across a variety of academic disciplines (including math) and that "reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time." Obviously, these cognitive gains will help you regardless of your major or career aspirations. This study was based on data gathered from six thousand students in the United Kingdom. It may seem counterintuitive that reading can help you with math, but if we think of reading as an activity that by its very nature—regardless of what you are reading—helps us develop more sophisticated ways of understanding the world, then it makes good sense.

As the French novelist Marcel Proust noted, "It is through the contact with other minds which constitutes reading that our minds are fashioned." Exposure to new vocabulary, new ideas and conceptual understandings, new ways of forging relationships between ourselves and others and ourselves and the world, and new forms of reasoning help us do this.

Another important study that has helped shape my understanding of the importance of reading to college readiness was conducted by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. These researchers found that the influence of language skills developed through reading, conversation, and family life “never ceases to be felt” across an individual’s life span. And the benefits go much deeper than vocabulary: “Language is not simply an instrument of communication: it also provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic,” depends partly on the complexity of the language a student possesses. Some of this is passed down like an inheritance by one’s family, and some is gained through effort, application, and focused attention to reading. Reading, then, can literally help determine the way we are able to think.

As I mentioned in my first letter, science has begun to play an important role in our understanding of learning, and some fascinating discoveries have been made in this regard related to reading. We now know that the brain actually *changes* as a result of engaged, effortful learning and that when we challenge ourselves to learn something new, the brain forms new neural pathways. These new pathways make us smarter. As psychologist Carol Dweck has noted, “More and more research is showing that our brains change constantly with learning and experience and that this takes place throughout our lives.”

The discovery of the brain’s “neuroplasticity” has important implications for you as students. New evidence suggests that intelligence and IQ are not fixed but rather can be strengthened through effort and activity. In fact, researcher Maryanne Wolf has shown that reading itself has had a profound impact in shaping human history and the development of the human brain: “Reading is one of the single most remarkable inventions in history; the ability to record history is one of its consequences. Our ancestors’ invention could come about only because of the human brain’s extraordinary ability to make new connections among its existing structures, a process made possible by the brain’s ability to be shaped by experience. This plasticity at the heart of the brain’s design forms the basis for much of who we are, and who we might become.” Wolf suggests there is great value in students engaging in challenging reading activities—reading that is “time-demanding, probative, analytical, and creative.” This is important research for you to know about as you think about getting ready for college and establishing the kind of approach to your work that you will choose to take in high school.

There has also been a great deal of research recently on the difference between “deep learning” and “surface learning.” Much of this research focuses on how students engage with the texts they read for school. A key variable in this research is how students position themselves as *readers* in classrooms. Some ways of engaging with texts provide very powerful opportunities for growth, while others provide very limited opportunities. In one study, sociologists Judith C. Roberts and Keith A. Roberts found that many students see “reading” as simply forcing one’s eyes to “touch” each word on the assigned pages, and many students candidly admit that they do not even read assigned materials at all. Many students often read only to *finish* rather than to *understand* what they have read. Students may favor this kind of approach to learning because it requires minimal effort. Obviously, however, with minimal effort comes minimal rewards.

“Deep learning” and “deep reading” require a very different kind of engagement and investment from you, but they produce significant gains that can help develop college-level skills and dispositions. Instead of memorization, recall, and shallow engagement, “deep reading” requires reflection, curiosity, humility, sustained attention, a commitment to rereading, consideration of multiple possibilities, and what the education scholar Sheridan Blau has called “intellectual generosity.” These are characteristics highly valued in the workplace, and they can be of great service to you in all areas of your life. Why not start developing them now?

Reading researchers have also found that we read for all kinds of different reasons, and readers often have to adjust their reading strategies for different purposes and contexts. When we read for pleasure, we often read a text just once, and rather quickly, focusing on the enjoyment and the pleasure. When we read a complex text or sophisticated research, we may still focus on the enjoyment of encountering new ideas and challenging content, but we often have to change our approach and read more carefully, more slowly, and more deliberately. We also have to assume that we will likely need to reread key passages in order to understand them fully. I do this myself almost every day in my professional life as a scholar and teacher, even though I am a fairly skilled reader.

Strong readers expect to make situational adjustments in how they read, depending on context and purpose—and on what they are reading and why they are reading it. This understanding can be a very useful component of your repertoire of college-level reading skills and strategies.

I also have to admit, in the interests of full disclosure, that we as teachers have probably helped create some of the aversion to reading that many students feel. Educator Kelly Gallagher has called this process “readicide”—“the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools.” Gallagher suggests that readicide is caused by educational practices that value the development of test-takers over the development of lifelong readers. I’m afraid that this statement may, alas, be true. It certainly helps explain the disturbing results of a large research study conducted by the American College Testing Program (ACT),

which found that barely half of all high school graduates possess college-level reading skills.

Two recent reports about reading from the National Endowment for the Arts—*Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*—confirm the disturbing scope and nature of this problem. You need to know about this research, because it can provide guidance—and motivation—for you as you prepare for college. So much of college is built around reading. You want to be going in as strong readers who enjoy reading and can handle the volume and complexity of college-level reading material.

So what am I recommending? I recommend that you start to find a way right now to enjoy reading and to make it an important part of your life. A great deal of research has been done on the importance of free choice in building engagement with reading, so choosing what you are interested in is a great way to start. You can read whatever books or articles you want. Of course, we all enjoy reading social media, but we're not going to count that. Let's focus, instead, on books and articles. This kind of reading requires sustained concentration that will help you develop a number of important cognitive skills, including the capacity to focus your attention for longer periods of time and the ability to monitor and direct your reading processes (metacognition). These skills will be vitally important to you in college and beyond.

I wish you the very best in your high school years and great success as you transfer to college and put these essential reading and thinking skills to work. If you'd like to discuss anything that I've said here, please feel free to write me a letter or send me an e-mail. I would enjoy hearing from you.

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