

The art of slow reading

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The art of slow reading Patrick Kingsley If you're reading this article in print, chances are you'll only get through half of what I've written. And if you're reading this online, you might not even finish a fifth. These are the two findings from two recent research projects, which both suggest that many of us no longer have the concentration to read articles through to their conclusion. The problem doesn't just stop there: academics report that we are becoming less attentive book-readers, too. So are we getting stupider?

Is that what this is about? Sort of. According to *The Shallows*, a new book by technology sage Nicholas Carr, our hyperactive online habits are damaging the mental faculties we need to process and understand lengthy textual information. Round-the-clock news feeds leave us hyperlinking from one article to the next – without necessarily engaging fully with any of the content; our reading is frequently interrupted by the ping of the latest email; and we are now absorbing short bursts of words on Twitter and Facebook more regularly than longer texts.

Because of the internet, we have become very good at collecting a wide range of information, but we are also gradually forgetting how to sit back, contemplate, and relate all these facts to each other. Still reading? You're probably in a dwindling minority. But no matter: a literary revolution is at hand. First we had slowfood, then slow travel. Now, those campaigns are joined by a slow-reading movement – a disparate bunch of academics and intellectuals who want us to take our time while reading, and re-reading.

They ask us to switch off our computers every so often and rediscover both the joy of personal engagement with printed texts, and the ability to process them fully. Lancelot Fletcher, the first present-day author to popularise the <https://assignbuster.com/the-art-of-slow-reading/>

term “slow reading”, argues that slow reading is not so much about unleashing the reader’s creativity, as uncovering the author’s. And while Fletcher used the term initially as an academic tool, slow reading has since become a more wide-ranging concept.

Slow reading, like slow food, is now, at root, a localist idea which can help connect a reader to his neighbourhood. Slow reading is a community event restoring connections between ideas and people. The continuity of relationships through reading is experienced when we borrow books from friends; when we read long stories to our kids until they fall asleep. But our era’s technological diarrhea is bringing more and more slow readers to the fore. Keith Thomas, the Oxford history professor, is one such reader.

He doesn’t see himself as part of a wider slow community, but has nevertheless recently written about his bewilderment at the hasty reading techniques in contemporary academia. “I don’t think using a search engine to find certain key words in a text is a substitute for reading it properly,” he says. “You don’t get a proper sense of the work, or understand its context.” “The words of the writer,” suggests sage Nicholas Carr, “act as a catalyst in the mind of the reader, inspiring new insights, associations, and perceptions. And, perhaps even more significantly, it is only through slow reading that great literature can be cultivated in the future. As Carr writes, “the very existence of the attentive, critical reader provides the spur for the writer’s work. It gives the author the confidence to explore new forms of expression, to blaze difficult and demanding paths of thought, to venture into uncharted and sometimes hazardous territory.” The internet is probably part of the problem. It accustoms us to new ways of reading and looking and

consuming. It fragments our attention p in a way that's not ideal if you want to read.

The real issue with the internet may be that it erodes, slowly, one's sense of self, one's capacity for the kind of pleasure in isolation that reading has, since printed books became common, been standard. What's to be done, then? Most slow readers realise that total rejection of the web is extremely unrealistic, but many felt that temporary isolation from technology was the answer. Some people have advocated turning their computer off for one day a week. But, given the pace at which most of us live, do we even have time? Some people think the iPad might just be the answer.

It's pleasant and fun, and doesn't remind people of work. But, for the true slow reader, there's simply no substitute for particular aspects of the paper book: the binding of a book captures an experience or idea at a particular space and time. And even the act of storing a book is a pleasure. Personally, I'm not sure I could ever go offline for long. Even while writing this article I was flicking constantly between sites, skimming too often, absorbing too little; internet reading has become too ingrained in my daily life for me to change.

I read essays and articles not in hard copy but as PDFs, and I'm more comfortable churning through lots of news features from several outlets than just a few from a single print source. I suspect that many readers are in a similar position. But if, like me, you just occasionally want to read more slowly, help is at hand. You can download a computer application called Freedom, which allows you to read in peace by cutting off your internet connection. Or if you want to remove adverts and other distractions from <https://assignbuster.com/the-art-of-slow-reading/>

your screen, you could always download offline reader Instapaper for your iPhone. If you're still reading, that is.