

The importance of reading

[Education](#), [School](#)



I had an epiphany about reading and it changed my life.

It was a day only several years ago when I first realized the numerous benefits I could realize from reading. Of course, I had been told all my life that reading was important. I was forced to do it in class after class beginning in elementary school and on up through high school. I had never read for enjoyment, had never gone to a book store and surveyed the stacks of tomes with pleasure, had never been to the library except when it was required for researching a particular assignment. To me reading was drudgery, a chore which interfered with more important things in life, like eating and sleeping. It wasn't until I took an English class in my senior year, however, that the importance of reading finally penetrated my brain.

I realized my teacher for that English class, Mrs. Smith, was different from others I'd had in the past from the first day I walked into her classroom. While she looked like a typical, older lady with her graying hair and pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses continually perched on the end of her nose, it was her attitude that set her apart from other instructors. From her roost atop a stool at the front of the room, Mrs. Smith ruled the classroom with short legs swinging to and fro above the rungs while her arms – complete with flabby “schoolteacher arm” – would wave about to lend emphasis to her words.

Mrs. Smith could tell I was uncomfortable in her English class almost immediately. She watched me squirm in my seat during her lectures and saw the visible signs of upset when she handed out a reading assignment. I'm sure the groan I emitted was another clue to my discomfort.

The next day, Mrs. Smith decided to address this issue with the entire class, without naming me specifically as the impetus for this particular lecture. I'll never forget what she said, however. It was something along the lines of this:

“ If you are going to get ahead in this world, you need to continually inform yourself about many different matters. In order to keep yourself informed, you must read. I don't mean sitting down to read “ War and Peace” front to back, but more general reading. Take the opportunity to read anything you can. If you are sitting at the breakfast table eating a bowl of cereal, read the back of the cereal box. Take time to read a magazine article about something which interests you. Reading doesn't have to take a lot of time or be boring.”

For some reason, Mrs. Smith's words made me come to the realization that reading was beneficial in a way that other teachers had failed to do.

I took her advice. I began by reading the back of the cereal box while eating my breakfast later that week (and Trix, by the way, has the best reading material, although Cap'n Crunch comes in a close second). I started reading newspaper articles; smaller ones at first and then lengthier columns. While waiting for a doctor's appointment or to get on an airplane, I read the signs posted on the wall, the advertising posters and billboards, and magazines that were left behind. Just a little bit at a time, I told myself. Remember what Mrs. Smith told you – that reading doesn't need to take a lot of time.

Mrs. Smith's first assignment to the class included reading two short stories, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and "Everything Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor. We were to read the assigned stories and then analyze their meanings, and structure. Mrs. Smith helped us with an initial story we read in class and showed us how to read efficiently and what things to keep in mind as we read. She taught us to look beyond the obvious and delve deeper into the author's motivation, history, and the lesson, or lessons, they were trying to convey.

To my surprise, I actually enjoyed reading the two short stories. It didn't take much time to read through them the first time and, using Mrs. Smith's directives, the second time of reading brought to light many aspects of the story I had previously missed. There was a depth to the words that caused me to sit back and reflect further on what I'd read. In particular, Flannery O'Connor's "Everything Rises Must Converge" made a great impact on me with its important statement regarding racism and reverse racism. Prior to reading that story, I'd really had no idea just how prevalent such issues were in the South and how it might adversely affect people. Although O'Connor wrote the work some decades earlier, the issues raised are as important today as they were back then.

I wish I could say I became an avid reader overnight, but that's not the way it happened. I did, however, begin to take a peek at some of the books for sale in various stores. If I happened to be at the drug store, I snuck into the aisle of bestsellers and looked over the covers, reading the blurbs of praise on the front. I wasn't sure what subjects would interest me, but after reading some

excerpts online, I decided that science fiction was the best fit for me and my personality.

I tried reading “The Hobbit” but its length made it a chore so I opted, instead, for some shorter books, like novels based on the “Star Wars” movies. The volumes I chose couldn’t be classified as classical literature by any means, but I enjoyed reading them and I figured that if there were books that could hold my interest, me – the self-proclaimed non-reader – then they couldn’t be all bad. Next on my list are some of the more classical works of science fiction, like those by Isaac Asimov, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells.

I’ve learned a lot along the way in my reading adventures. I’ve gotten an insider’s view to history, as well as what the future might hold. I’ve identified with characters and been surprised at endings which left me wanting to know more.

An added benefit which I never would have guessed is that of greater confidence in writing. Attending college means that essays, term papers, and theses are required in order to pass most classes. When once I used to dread doing such assignments, I’ve found that, through reading, I am much more comfortable with the written word.

This is what literacy means to me. It is the ability to use our skills – of reading and writing and comprehension – to further our knowledge as well as the desire to do so in order that we may better ourselves. No matter if you read a mystery novel or a history book, there is something in that volume which imparts further knowledge to the reader. In some cases, it is obvious –

such as learning about the mistakes in history so future generations are not doomed to make the same mistakes. In other cases, it is not so obvious. But any book that causes the reader to think about something in a different way is doing its job by expanding our knowledge and inciting our curiosity.

As Frederick Douglass once said, “ Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” And by the way, thank you Mrs. Smith, wherever you are!