



News, Views and Jobs for All of Higher Education

Aug. 23 [Reality Check](#)

## Students Read Less. Should We Care?

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

A new survey of literary reading in America by the National Endowment for the Arts, "[Reading At Risk](#)" has once again raised the alarm about the cultural decline of America. This one provides the news that we read much less literature, defined as fiction and poetry, than we did some 20 years ago. Indeed, the decline is substantial (10 percent), accelerating and especially worrisome because the malady of literature non-reading particularly afflicts the younger members of society, that critical 18-24 year old group (which shows a 28 percent decline in this survey).

### Related stories

- [Taking Both Sides on Textbook Prices](#), Aug. 16
- [Undercover Freshman](#), July 13
- [College in the 40s](#), June 13
- ['The Phantom Professor'](#), May 11
- [The Death of English](#), May 9

Academicians rushed in to [analyze, comment and explain](#) this decline, but some of the commentary both in the report itself and in the academic discussion it provoked seemed to miss the mark. The predictable villains of the visual media, the electronic media and the Internet all came in for blame. Truth is, I am not sure that the data represent a cause for alarm.

I know I should worry. I am a historian, after all, and if people will not read fiction, surely they will read less history. And I'm a teacher, and like everyone else in the humanities, I know students just do not read like they used to do.

The trouble is, I am not sure the changes in our cultural context are necessarily a bad thing. I read many airplane novels, and I have to say that if the younger generation is doing something else with their time, not much is lost. I read *New Yorker* fiction when I feel the need to be literarily virtuous, but the pieces tend to be mostly depressing stories about lives that do not work out in rather low-level ways.

Then I go online. Here I find a complicated world filled with the good, the bad, and the ugly. Alive and constantly changing, engaged and engaging, requiring my constant decisions about what is worth reading or seeing and what is not. From the lowest pornography to tours of the treasures of the Library of Congress, from the stupidest blogs of the radical fringes, to the most sophisticated discussions of the decline of America's reading habits, everything is there.

What is missing of course is the prescriptive, gate-keeping censorship of the academic and other cultural mandarins, sorting out what is good for me and what is not. The college students who now show up in my classroom come with an informational sophistication unimaginable in my generation. They find what they want, they use what they find, and they discard immense amounts of information made available to them.

Are they naïve about authority, methodology, logic and accuracy in these endless streams of information? Sure, they are. Who should teach them how to sort this stuff? We academics, sophisticated readers ourselves who all too frequently escape into trendy obscurantism rather than engage the real world information flow that constitutes the actual cultural context of our time.

We, the literate part of the American population, need to reconnect with the actual cultural context, rather than fight micro-academic battles of almost no interest to people outside the elite tiers of the academy. We need a better metric than reading print books, stories and poems to define the active imagination and the creative industries of our time. Why is a trashy airplane best seller more of a valuable cultural artifact than the telenovelas watched with enthusiasm and discussed in endless analytical detail by the large and growing Spanish speaking part of America? Why do we assume depressing short stories or over-hyped formulaic bestseller novels represent more significant cultural artifacts than the film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Star Wars* series, or the computer game community's imaginative products?

The decline in reading may well reflect the decline in formal study of the humanities in American universities. However, the problem is not the students but the material we teach, the sectarian nature of our controversies, and our general reluctance to put the humanities in the center of our culture rather than relegating them to fragmented enclaves along the partisan byways of academic enthusiasms.

We lose influence on campus to the sciences on one side because they appear and act as if they know exactly what they are doing, how they do it, and for what purpose they do it. We lose influence on campus to the professionally oriented disciplines on the other side because they have a purpose and a method anchored directly in the center of the real world their disciplines address.

We in the humanities, and very frequently as well in the social sciences, often do not know and do not agree on what we think we are doing. We have few common standards and we ask little of our students who have time for non-academically related campus activities. We wonder why our voices carry such little weight when our culture seems to need us so desperately to sort out fundamental issues of values and judgment.

Our weakness on campus as humanists and social scientists reflects our frequent disconnect from the major issues that drive our culture and society. We know a lot, about many topics and issues. We have complex and specialized languages that define our place in political and intellectual sectarian spaces. While the best among us teach interesting courses to many students, most of us publish and build our prestige in the academy with mostly unreadable prose using such terms of art opaque to any but the specialists.

Although our scientific colleagues are often even more incomprehensible than we are, they have found ways to demonstrate the utility of their work so that a whole industry translates their science into terms ordinary citizens can understand. Some of our humanistic and social scientific colleagues find audiences outside the academy, but many people find it hard to distinguish between the opinionated rant of an e-zine commentator and the reasoned logic and well-researched judgment of a humanistic scholar. Often the rant is easier to read and more accessible than the reasoned argument.

What to do? I am not sure, but the first thing would be to pay close attention to what people are reading, what they are seeing, and how they do engage the common culture. The message of "Reading At Risk" is that something other than literature in print form engages more and more of our fellow citizens, and we might want to try to learn how to speak to them in the voices they want to hear.

Where better to learn how to do this than with our 18- to 24-year-old undergrads?

John V. Lombardi, chancellor and a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, writes *Reality Check* every two weeks.

## Comments

There currently are no comments on this item.

Got something to say? [Add a comment.](#)

© Copyright 2005 *Inside Higher Ed*