



remember reading?

Lazy summer days are on the way, and so is your chance to get swept up in a great book. Out of practice? Here's how to rekindle the habit and get your kids on the same page.

Between urgent work e-mails, status updates, tweets, and (*ahem*) magazines, you read all the time, right? But when was the last time you lost yourself in a book?

The experience of becoming fully immersed in plot and character, “hearing” the words as you read, then carrying those words with you for a while—called “deep reading” by many literacy experts—offers benefits beyond the fun factor. When you’re engaged in this set of operations, your brain isn’t simply taking in surface information. “It’s connecting information to your own background knowledge and helping you form your own

creative thoughts,” says Maryanne Wolf, a professor of child development and the director of the Tufts University Center for Reading and Language Research, in Medford, Massachusetts. Scientists have confirmed this with neuroimaging. For a 2009 study published in *Psychological Science*, 28 men and women read fiction while researchers used functional MRIs to track their brain activity. As participants reached different points in a plot, their brains reacted just as they would have had the events in the story been actually happening in their real lives. In other words, when you’re reading a novel or a narrative memoir with

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full attention, you don't only understand the story, you *experience* it. And there's no feeling quite like it.

Unfortunately, says Wolf, who is also the author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, this critical form of engagement may be on the decline, probably due to our digital habits. Wolf says that the way we read on screens—that is, scanning for key words or skimming until we hit the meat of a story—has bled into the way we read everything, including works of literature. As a result, we may not be getting as much out of reading for pleasure as we once did.

the secret benefits of books

"Reading is a refuge. It stops you from multitasking and lets you become absorbed into another world," says David Mikics, a professor of English at the University of Houston and the author of *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*. According to a 2010 study conducted by market-research firm MindLab Intelligent Insights, reading an engrossing book to yourself for as little as six minutes reduces stress by 60 percent.

What's more, the very act of reading literature can have a positive impact on the way you relate to people. Deep reading, it turns out, may strengthen our sense of empathy. "The network of brain regions activated during story comprehension are the same that help you understand what people are thinking and feeling," says Raymond Mar, an associate professor of psychology

at York University, in Toronto. In three separate studies (two on adults and one on young children), Mar found that the more fiction that people read, the better they are at empathizing with others. An October 2013 study by researchers at the New School for Social Research, in New York City, yielded similar findings: Reading literary fiction (Emily Brontë, Ann Patchett, Jonathan Franzen)—over popular fiction, nonfiction, or nothing at all—temporarily increases people's ability to detect and understand the feelings of others.

Another perk (though this one isn't exactly breaking news): Kids who read for pleasure excel academically—not only in language arts but, as recent research from the Institute of Education, in London, found, in math as well.

getting your (reading) groove back

Here are four expert strategies that make it easy for both kids and adults to launch a steady practice.

1. Choose books that you're drawn to. It's not important that you reach for a challenging book, only that you reach for a book, says literary critic Phyllis Rose, the author of a new memoir about an extreme reading experiment, *The Shelf: From LEQ to LES*. "If you like detective novels, read a detective novel," she says. Fan of chick lit? Read that. Don't feel pressured to read what everyone else is reading. If you're up for a serious author but a bit out of practice, ease in with a collection of short stories. "You'll still be drenched in the author's personality," says Rose.

As for kids, let them choose their own leisure reading. Offer suggestions at or just above their reading level, but don't steer your child away from any book he or she has chosen for fun. Also resist the urge to foist heavy classics on kids before they show interest. "You don't want your kids to ever feel bad about what they're reading," says Mary Leonhardt, a former high school English teacher and the author of *Parents Who Love Reading, Kids Who Don't: How It Happens and What You Can Do About It*. "In fact, sometimes a 'junky' series is good, because it gets kids hooked on the habit of reading."

As Starr LaTronica, the president of the Association for Library Service to Children, in Vestal, New York, explains it, kids can't become deep readers until they become natural readers. That means that there's value in just about anything kids read, including graphic novels and comic books. "You have to have well-developed visual literacy to interpret these stories," says LaTronica. "And some are tremendously sophisticated."

2. Fill your shelves with books. Aside from offering easy access to reading material, a generous array of books has a positive impact on kids. Using data on more than 73,000 people in 27 countries, a 2010 study published in the journal *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* found that people whose parents' homes contained about 500 books opted for 3.2 additional years of schooling than did those whose childhood homes contained no books. Even owning 20 titles made a difference in a child's pursuit of education. This rule held true regardless of the parents' income level or educational background.



3. Don't wait for bedtime.

"I'm not sure where we all got it in our heads that reading mainly happens before bed, but kids and parents should ideally read throughout the day as well," says Heather Ruetschlin Schugar, an associate professor of literacy at West Chester University, in Pennsylvania. Keep baskets of children's books in every room and a couple in the car, so that you're ready for impromptu reading sessions. While you're waiting for an older sibling to finish up with baseball practice, read together. As for reading to yourself, remember that your kids need to see you reading, and if you do it only after you crawl into bed, they'll miss it. "It's key to show your children how much you enjoy reading, that it's not a chore," says LaTronica. "Laughing out loud while you're reading and reading to your kids builds a common family culture."

4. Be willing to abandon ship.

Many of us inexplicably feel committed to finishing every book that we start. But nothing can turn a person off reading like getting stuck with a bad book. So do as Rose does and give each new book 50 pages to win your heart. That's enough to give you a sense of the author's voice and style and get a taste of the plot. If you're not absorbed by then, put it away and choose something else. Maybe you'll be drawn to it later and maybe not. Either way, no judgment.

making it fun

One of the most important parts of reading, at least as far as pleasure is concerned, is savoring the experience, from subtle turns in the plot to quirks in the characters. So don't be afraid to reread chapters that you've already

read. It's natural and normal to be confused by characters' names and complex plots. "Looking back doesn't mean that you're losing ground or you're absentminded. It means that you're paying attention," says Mikics. And take plenty of time as you read; it's not a race. You want to experience "all the words that the author has chosen," says Rose, "and ideally hear the sound of every word in your head."

That brings up the question, naturally, of whether it's wise to *actually* hear someone's voice in your head—in other words, to listen to audiobooks. The scientific conclusion: "When it comes to novels and light nonfiction, listening to an audiobook is almost equivalent to reading," says Daniel Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. "The cognitive process of understanding and following the story is very similar." While research on audiobooks is sparse, a 1977 study showed that college students who had listened to a short story were able to describe it just as accurately as those who had read it. However, people sometimes multitask while listening to books. It's easy to jog, drive, or clean the house at the same time. "There's a cost to that," says Willingham. "Adjusting to terrain, negotiating traffic—that takes your attention away from the narrative, which makes it less likely that you'll be truly transported by a book." So if you want to hear your book rather than read it, remember to sit back, relax, and just listen.



e-reader: friend or foe?

The jury is still out on whether consuming books on a tablet or an e-reader fully replicates the experience of reading printed pages. Picture books seem to be the biggest challenge, because some come loaded with modern bells and whistles (embedded videos, photo galleries, interactive glossaries, quizzes) that distract from the text. When Ruetschlin Schugar and her husband, Jordan Schugar, Ph.D., an English instructor at West Chester University, asked children in grades three to eight to read printed books and interactive e-book apps, they discovered that the kids' understanding of content was significantly higher when they read conventional books.

This doesn't mean that you should keep little kids away from interactive e-books altogether. Just think of e-books

as a separate category. "We see the act of reading on tablets as something different from reading traditional books, not better or worse," says Ruetschlin Schugar.

As for whether *you* should read on an e-reader (or let your tween or teen have free rein on one), there's better news: When the Schugars asked college students to read conventional books and e-books (sans all the razzmatazz), they found no statistically significant difference in the students' understanding of the texts. So if you like your e-reader, download a new novel and get lost in it. (Interestingly, people who own one tend to read more books than people who don't, according to research by the PEW Internet & American Life Project.) If you do whatever you can to read more often, you just might turn this summer into a reading season that lasts a lifetime.

—additional reporting
by Julia Edelstein

totally novel reading lists

4 BOOKS TO READ ALOUD TO KIDS WHO CAN ALREADY READ

Chosen by Starr LaTronica, the president of the Association for Library Service to Children.

When you read aloud, you create an “association between reading and love—love for the child and also for the world of books,” says Maryanne Wolf, the director of the Tufts University Center for Reading and Language Research. So do it not only when your kids are babies but also when they are in elementary and middle school. Each of these books features rich prose and a plot that can be appreciated on multiple levels.

1 | *The One and Only Ivan*, by Katherine Applegate. The novel is inspired by the true story of a gorilla who lived in a shopping mall for 27 years and is told from the primate’s point of view. *Ages 8 and up.*

2 | *Alvin Ho: Allergic to Girls, School, and Other Scary Things*, by Lenore Look. Alvin, the hero of this popular series, is a second grader who is reserved at school but rambunctious at home. *Ages 6 and up.*

3 | *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis. A fictional Michigan family visits relatives in Alabama and lands in the epicenter of the civil rights struggle and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. *Ages 11 and up.*

4 | *Chickadee*, by Louise Erdrich. The fourth book in a series by an author best known for her adult novels (like *The Round House*, winner of the National Book Award), *Chickadee* concerns the struggle of eight-year-old Native American twin boys who are separated by tribal bullies. *Ages 9 and up.*

3 CLASSIC WORKS OF LITERATURE THAT YOU CAN UNDERSTAND WITHOUT AN ENGLISH TEACHER

Chosen by literary critic Phyllis Rose.

Intimidated by certain “serious” authors? Rose suggests three impressive books that you can handle sans *CliffsNotes*.

1 | *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens. Almost anyone can relate to this coming-of-age tale, set in 19th-century England. “Some of the greatest characters in literature—people just like those you meet every day—are found in this book,” says Rose.

2 | *In Our Time*, a collection of short stories by Ernest Hemingway. Rose says that the story “Indian Camp” has “more bang per line than almost any other.”

3 | *The Forsyte Saga*, by John Galsworthy. This series, which consists of three novels, centers on an upper-middle-class family in England and its shifting social status between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Rose calls it “a brilliant portrait of family dynamics” that’s actually “fun to read.”

3 NOVELS FOR FAMILY BOOK CLUB

Chosen by Elizabeth Khuri Chandler, a cofounder of the literary social network Goodreads.com.

Many kids feel more motivated to read when they have someone to chat with about their books. Happily, the titles below are rife with conversation-starters. “When reading to kids, look for opportunities to discuss, and learn from, the challenges that the characters face in the story,” says Chandler.

1 | *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio. A smart, funny read about a fifth grader with a facial deformity who is about to start going to a mainstream school for the first time in his life. *Ages 9 and up.*

2 | *Howl’s Moving Castle*, by Diana Wynne Jones. A charming fantasy about a young girl’s quest to break a magic curse. After you read it, watch the animated Hayao Miyazaki film together. *Ages 8 and up.*

3 | *Number the Stars*, by Lois Lowry. Inspired by a period of several weeks in 1943, when the people of Denmark smuggled nearly 7,000 Jews out of the country, this historical novel is a sensitive and appropriate introduction to the Holocaust for young readers. *Ages 9 and up.*



what book made you love to read?

We asked *Real Simple*’s Facebook fans this question and got thousands of responses. See the most popular picks at realsimple.com/greatbooks.

SEE ALL KINDS OF GOODNESS!



1 1/2 SERVINGS OF FRUIT PER POUCH!¹



STAY HYDRATED WITH ONLY 30 CALORIES!²



A FULL SERVING OF FRUITS & VEGGIES!³

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¹Each pouch provides 3/4 cup fruit juice, which is 1 1/2 servings of fruit according to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines. As part of a well-balanced diet, eat a variety of fruits every day and be sure to make most of your fruits whole fruit.

²Consume a variety of beverages every day.

³Each pouch provides 1/2 cup fruit and vegetable juice, which is one combined serving of fruits and vegetables according to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines (3/4 from fruit juice and 1/4 from vegetable juice). Be sure to make most of your fruits and vegetables whole fruits and vegetables.