



Cultural Decay: Now, Even Many “Elite” College Students “Can’t Read Books”

When hearing that many “elite” undergraduates “can’t” read books, first coming to mind could be that they’re not actually elite. (The term “pseudo-elite” suggests itself.) As for the word “can’t,” no, it’s not that these college students, often Ivy Leaguers, are illiterate. The issue is something different: conditioning.

Fox News reported on the story last Thursday, [writing](#):



[*Atlantic*] Assistant editor Rose Horowitz spoke to several teachers from elite schools like Columbia, Georgetown and Stanford, who each described the phenomenon of students being overwhelmed by the prospect of reading entire books.

Columbia University humanities professor Nicholas Dames described feeling “bewildered” when a first-year student told him that she had never been required to read a full book at her public high school.

“My jaw dropped,” Dames said.

Some professors do find a few students up to the task but described them as “now more exceptions” rather than the rule, with others “shutting down” when facing difficult texts.

“Daniel Shore, the chair of Georgetown’s English department, told me that his students have trouble staying focused on even a sonnet,” Horowitz wrote.

“It’s not that they don’t want to do the reading,” she said. “It’s that they don’t know how. Middle and high schools have stopped asking them to.”

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Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on October 9, 2024

Horowitch reported how a recent [EdWeek Research Center](#) survey of about 300 third-to-eighth-grade educators found “only 17 percent said they primarily teach whole texts” with nearly 25 percent saying whole books themselves are no longer the focus in their curriculum.

Standardized Stupidity?

Fox states that this problem plagues private as well as government institutions. It’s more egregious at the latter, however, partially because of *standardized exam prep*. Attesting to this just last week, too, was an intelligent and articulate ex-high school teacher named Danielle Bayard Jackson.

Responding to the *Atlantic* report, Jackson [explained](#) that she *did* read whole books with her class. Someone “snitched” on her, though, and an administrator called her in and told her standardized-test time was approaching, so she had to just “do the worksheets” the school prepared. Jackson didn’t comply, however, and instead continued the reading surreptitiously. The result?

She was again called in to the office, where she found multiple administrators assembled. Jackson’s students had *surpassed* all the other classes on the standardized exam — and the administrators wanted to know her secret! (Video below.)

(Note: My best friend, who sadly has passed on, had a similar experience while a NYC government-school English teacher. Favoring his own methods over the official teaching paradigm, his class also came out on top on the standardized test. It was one of the reasons he lost his job.)

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Story time — “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books” [#formerteacher](#)
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[🎵 original sound - Danielle Bayard Jackson](#)

A Systemic Problem

Obviously, part of the problem here lies with today’s high-tech society. Kids now are glued to electronic devices — and [“screen addiction” is real](#) — and are immersed in social media. They watch videos and communicate via short posts, often using internet abbreviations; poor grammar is status quo, too. This is how they’re conditioned; it’s the “new normal.”

Parents often don’t help, either, as Minnesota teacher Eric Kalenze illustrated with an anecdote involving a pupil. As Education Week [reported](#) in January:

While teaching a 9th grade class, Kalenze had given a class a 25-page reading assignment, and the student’s mother was concerned about whether her son would be able complete it within the demands of his individualized education program.

“His mom called and said, ‘This isn’t going to work,’” Kalenze recalled. “And I said, ‘Would you like him to be able to read 25 pages in a sitting at some point in his life?’ She said yes,



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of course.”

That student ended up being one of Kalenze’s best readers....

The issue is that in child-rearing today, there’s more pandering than parenting. I remember when I was little and was upset because I’d been assigned what I considered an intolerable number of spelling words. My mother didn’t call the teacher to complain; instead, she ensured I completed the task.

A parent’s job isn’t to gripe that because it’s tough, a legitimate assignment isn’t “going to work.” It’s to make his child do the work. Oh, there may be pouting and tears may be shed, but that’s not always bad. Pain inspires growth.

That Mental Muscle Burn

As with everything, what Education Week calls “reading stamina” is only developed via experience and training. So how do you avoid having “elite” college students who “can’t read books”?

You incrementally “increase the weight” while young.

To analogize it, the workouts I did at age 19, when I began hitting the gym, seemed difficult. But the same duration workout seemed a breeze when I was 23, so I at that point trained more arduously. It was conditioning — that is, mental conditioning.

Likewise, kids *will* grow up to find reading books impossible if they’re never forced to do it. And don’t fear the pouting. No pain, no gain: The mental muscle burn promises greater intellectual strength in the future. Limiting TV and electronic-device use also helps. What, after all, was the reality before these technologies’ advent? Eliminate the over-stimulation these devices deliver and make reading the only stimulation available, and children will seize upon it.

Another reason this matters is that reading facilitates brain development, as website NeuroLaunch [explained](#) in September. In summary: “The act of reading, seemingly simple on the surface, triggers a cascade of neurological changes that can profoundly impact our cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, and even our long-term brain health,” the site informs.

Besides, what does this youth reading deficit say about today’s overall level of discipline? What does it portend for our civilization? Would you want to fly in a plane with a pilot who couldn’t tackle an aeronautics manual or be treated by a doctor who couldn’t get through *Gray’s Anatomy*?





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