

A recent study reveals that people, especially young people, are reading far less literature—novels, plays, and poems—than they used to. This is troubling because the trend has unfortunate effects for the reading public, for culture in general, and for the future of literature itself. While there has been a decline in book reading generally, the decline has been especially sharp for literature. This is unfortunate because nothing else provides the intellectual stimulation that literature does. Literature encourages us to exercise our imaginations, empathize with others, and expand our understanding of language. So by reading less literature, the reading public is missing out on important benefits. Unfortunately, missing out on the benefits of literature is not the only problem. What are people reading instead? Consider the prevalence of self-help books on lists of best sellers. These are usually superficial, poorly written, and intellectually undemanding. Additionally, instead of sitting down with a challenging novel, many persons are now more likely to turn on the television, watch a music video, or read a Web page. Clearly, diverting time previously spent in reading literature to trivial forms of entertainment has lowered the level of culture in general. The trend of reading less literature is all the more regrettable because it is taking place during a period when good literature is being written. There are many talented writers today, but they lack an audience. This fact is bound to lead publishers to invest less in literature and so support fewer serious writers. Thus, the writing as well as the reading of literature is likely to decline because of the poor standards of today's readers.

Now listen to part of a lecture on the topic you just read about. It is often said that people are reading less literature today than they used to. What should we make of this? Well, first, a book doesn't have to be literature to be intellectually stimulating. Science writing, history, political analysis, and so forth aren't literature, perhaps, but they're often of high quality. And these kinds of books can be just as creative and well-written as a novel or a play—they can stimulate the imagination. So don't assume that someone who isn't reading literature isn't reading a good book.

But let's say that people aren't just spending less time with literature, they're also spending less time with books in general. Does that mean that the culture is in decline? No. There's plenty of culturally valuable material that isn't written: music and movies, for example. Are people wasting their time when they listen to a brilliant song or watch a good movie? Do these non-literary activities lower cultural standards? Of course not. Culture has changed. In today's culture there are many forms of expression available other than novels and poems, and some of these creative forms speak more directly to contemporary concerns than literature does. Finally, it's probably true that there's less support for literature today than in earlier generations. But don't be too quick to blame the readers. Sometimes it's the author's fault. Let's be honest: a lot of modern literature is intended to be difficult to understand. There's not much reason to suppose that earlier generations of readers would have read a lot of today's literature either.

Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they cast doubt on specific points made in the reading passage.

Some people say that the Internet provides people with a lot of valuable information. Others think access to much information creates problems. Which view do you agree with? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.