

How Literature Is Good For You

Reading fiction is considered by many people to be a waste of time. After all, reading stories is not a creative activity, nor does it seem educational. Surely we can't learn anything useful from made-up stories?

Science, however, would disagree. Just like games and puzzles can keep our brains active, so does reading. By using our brains, it is possible to slow down age-related mental deterioration. Recent research also suggests that a good story can change our brain structure, both in the short term and in the longer term: reading about the actions and feelings of a character in a book seems to trick our brains into believing we have experienced them ourselves. However, behavioural research still needs to be carried out to confirm these scientific findings.

While we wait for science to confirm the benefits of reading, keen readers do not need to be convinced. They know reading is good for you. When we read, we have to take in a lot of information about the characters and their stories, and we have to remember these details in order to want to keep reading. The more we read, therefore, the more we exercise our memories.

Reading is not a passive activity: we increase our vocabulary by repeatedly being exposed to certain words, we use our critical thinking skills to decide if the story makes sense, and when we read mysteries or detective stories, we use our analytical skills to try to work out the solutions to the mysteries or crimes.

Reading and writing are also closely interlinked, and the more we read a variety of styles, the more likely it is that our own writing will improve. Looking at it this way, it does seem that reading literature is good training for higher education.

We also build knowledge when we read: we can have a virtual experience of the cultures of countries we have never visited and we can learn about the customs of the past: the fashions, the food, pastimes and other aspects of life. And even when the stories are rooted in the here and now, we can find out more about topics that we may not come across in our daily lives, for example, about the lives of people from different social or educational backgrounds or the attitudes of those with different interests to ours. Stories add to our understanding and knowledge of the world, so they appear to be educational after all.

Last but not least, reading lets us escape into another time and place - into another world. Admittedly, reading is not a creative activity, but why should we always have to produce something? In the real world, where people work hard and life can be challenging, isn't it wonderful that we can find relief in a fictional world and forget our own troubles for a little? This escape surely helps us to cope better with our own lives.