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FYC 13100

Professor Clauss

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good job, [REDACTED]
a focused,
fair summary
(5)

Writing Exercise 5: Summarizing "The Dumbing of America"

Susan Jacoby's article, "The Dumbing of America" explains that over the course of the past few decades, Americans have slowly fallen victim to anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism and low expectations. ✓

Her main argument is that public ignorance and "dumbness" has slowly become the norm. According to Jacoby, "Dumbness, to paraphrase the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, has been steadily defined downward for several decades." One example she lists is the triumph of video culture over print culture. Because people are not reading as much, they are becoming more ignorant of what is going on around them. Although she provides an example from a book that says focusing on a video for long periods just shows concentration, she emphatically disagrees. In support of this claim, she cites a study done by the University of Washington, which concluded that "babies between 8 and 16 months recognized an average of six to eight fewer words for every hour spent watching videos." ✓

The fact that people have stopped reading for long periods, if at all, leads her into her next point which is that public ignorance is due in part of people to concentrate for long periods of time. Because they do not concentrate, they are unable to remember critical news stories, where important places are, and get confused easily when watching political advertisements. She expands on this idea with an example of how the length of political ads has changed over the past 50 years. According to a study done by Harvard, the average length of an ad has gone down from 42.3 seconds in 1968 to just 7.8 seconds by 2000. ✓

Adding on to the idea of a shrinking public attention span is that there has been an erosion of general knowledge in the United States. One main example of the difference here is given from her example concerning the importance people place on knowing about what is happening in the war we are involved in. She explains that back during WWII, maps sold out in stores across the country, at the calling of Roosevelt to listen and follow along during his fireside chats. Roosevelt made an effort to educate the country about the difficulties of fighting a war on such a large front and the length of the supply lines. Now however, many Americans do not think it is important to know where the countries in the news are located, or that it is important to know a foreign language.

Finally, Jacoby's last argument is that not only is there a lack of knowledge, but also that there is a serious arrogance about that lack of knowledge. The problem she states, isn't the lack of knowledge, rather it is that many Americans feel that it simply isn't important to know those facts to begin with. Since people are not informed about the issues, and they feel it is unimportant to educate themselves, discussion on important topics grinds to a halt. One shocking fact Jacoby uses to illustrate this is that roughly 1 in 5 American adults, according to the National Science Foundation, believe that the sun revolves around the earth. ✓

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In conclusion, she argues that the fix for this problem will not be simply inflating standardized test scores and filling the heads of students with specific answers to specific questions. She believes that the first things that need to be changed are the low levels of discourse and the common practice of "aiming low."

