

Read Slowly to Benefit Your Brain and Cut Stress



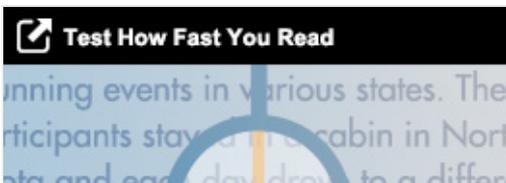
Members of a Wellington, New Zealand, club gather weekly to read slowly. *Frida Sakaj*

Once a week, members of a Wellington, New Zealand, book club arrive at a cafe, grab a drink and shut off their cellphones. Then they sink into cozy chairs and read in silence for an hour.

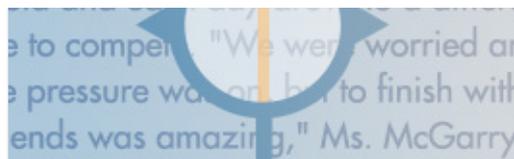
The point of the club isn't to talk about literature, but to get away from pinging electronic devices and read, uninterrupted. The group calls itself the Slow Reading Club, and it is at the forefront of a movement populated by frazzled book lovers who miss old-school reading.

Slow reading advocates seek a return to the focused reading habits of years gone by, before Google, smartphones and social media started fracturing our time and attention spans. Many of its advocates say they embraced the concept after realizing they couldn't make it through a book anymore.

"I wasn't reading fiction the way I used to," said Meg Williams, a 31-year-old marketing manager for an annual arts festival who started the club. "I was really sad I'd lost the thing I used to really, really enjoy."



Slow readers list numerous benefits to a regular reading habit, saying it improves their ability to concentrate, reduces stress levels and deepens their ability to think, listen and empathize. The

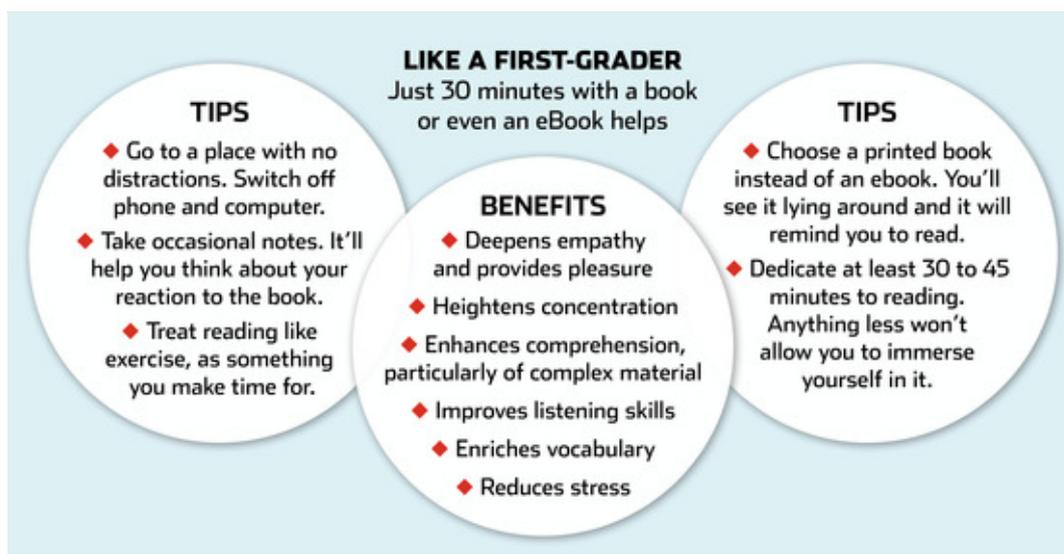


movement echoes a resurgence in other old-fashioned, time-consuming pursuits that offset the ever-faster pace of life, such as cooking the "slow-food" way or knitting by hand.

The benefits of reading from an early age through late adulthood have been documented by researchers. A study of 300 elderly people published by the journal *Neurology* last year showed that regular engagement in mentally challenging activities, including reading, slowed rates of memory loss in participants' later years.

A study published last year in *Science* showed that reading literary fiction helps people understand others' mental states and beliefs, a crucial skill in building relationships. A piece of research published in *Developmental Psychology* in 1997 showed first-grade reading ability was closely linked to 11th grade academic achievements.

Yet reading habits have declined in recent years. In a survey this year, about 76% of Americans 18 and older said they read at least one book in the past year, down from 79% in 2011, according to the Pew Research Center.



Attempts to revive reading are cropping up in many places. Groups in Seattle, Brooklyn, Boston and Minneapolis have hosted so-called silent reading parties, with comfortable chairs, wine and classical music.

Diana La Counte of Orange County, Calif., set up what she called a virtual slow-reading group a few years ago, with members discussing the group's book selection online, mostly on Facebook. "When I realized I read Twitter more than a book, I knew it was time for action," she says.

Screens have changed our reading patterns from the linear, left-to-right sequence of years past to a wild skimming and skipping pattern as we hunt for important words and information.

More academics and writers are advocating a return to absorbing, uninterrupted reading—slow reading, as they call it. WSJ's Jeanne Whalen discusses with Tanya Rivero. Photo: Getty

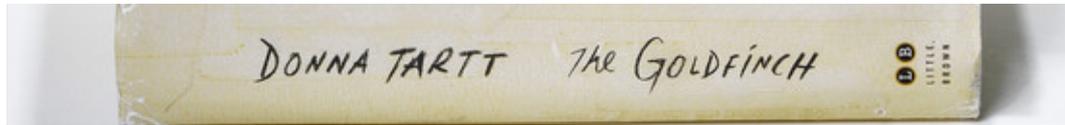
lines, eventually sliding their eyes down the left side of the page in a vertical movement toward the bottom.

One 2006 study of the eye movements of 232 people looking at Web pages found they read in an "F" pattern, scanning all the way across the top line of text but only halfway across the next few

None of this is good for our ability to comprehend deeply, scientists say. Reading text punctuated with links leads to weaker comprehension than reading plain text, several studies have shown. A 2007 study involving 100 people found that a multimedia presentation mixing words, sounds and moving pictures resulted in lower comprehension than reading plain text did.

Slow reading means a return to a continuous, linear pattern, in a quiet environment free of distractions. Advocates recommend setting aside at least 30 to 45 minutes in a comfortable chair far from cellphones and computers. Some suggest scheduling time like an exercise session. Many recommend taking occasional notes to deepen engagement with the text.





F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal

Some hard-core proponents say printed books are best, in part because they're more visible around the house and serve as a reminder to read. But most slow readers say e-readers and tablets are just fine, particularly if they're disconnected from the Internet.

Abeer Hoque, who has attended a few of the silent reading parties in Brooklyn, N.Y., said she plans to read a book on her phone next time, but turn it to airplane mode to stop new emails and social-media notifications from distracting her.

When Ms. Williams, who majored in literature in college, convened her first slow reading club in Wellington, she handed out tips for productive reading and notebooks for jotting down favorite words and passages. Each time they meet, the group gathers for a few minutes to slowly breathe in and out to clear their minds before cracking open their books, as in yoga.

Roughly 20 to 30 readers have shown up for Sunday evening sessions, Ms. Williams says. Most new members fill out a brief survey on their experience with many describing it as calm, peaceful and meditative, she says.

Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version of this article neglected to give the first name of Meg Williams. (Sept. 15, 2014)

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