

# The Importance of Higher-Level Reading: A Manifesto

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**Higher-level reading is our most powerful tool for analytic and critical thinking. It exercises metacognition and cognitive patience, expands our conceptual capacities, trains cognitive empathy and perspective-taking – social skills which are indispensable for informed citizens in a democratic society. Signatories of this manifesto call to acknowledge the permanent significance of higher-level reading in the digital era.**

*How to turn the tide of declining reading skills is one of the urgent challenges that now confront society. To participate as informed citizens in a democratic society we need higher-level reading skills and practices that go far beyond the mere decoding of texts. Reading is not only the main road to personal development, the foundation of life-long learning and the basis of so much of our information exchange, but it is also a central dimension of social interaction and participation.*

The era of rapidly expanding screen technologies has brought enormous amounts of audio, visual and textual content to our fingertips. The digital revolution has brought many positive outcomes. For example, textual content has become more accessible in disadvantaged areas and the needs of readers with different impairments and abilities can be better catered for. We need to be careful, however, that some skills and modes of reading are not made to look like a relic from a fast-fading older informational era. This concerns, most notably, the long-form book and the higher-level reading it promotes. The digital realm may foster more reading than ever in history, but it also offers many temptations to read in a superficial and scattered manner – or even not to read at all. *This increasingly endangers higher-level reading.*

*We therefore call for a reconsideration of the role of higher-level reading in the digital era. In an ever more complex information environment, informed citizens need to be able to distinguish valid from non-valid sources, and to flexibly adjust reading behaviour to varying contexts. *The act of higher-level reading is an exercise in attention and cognitive patience, expanding vocabulary and conceptual capacities, and actively challenging readers' preconceptions.* It is especially long-form texts, such as books, that sharpen our higher-level reading skills. They train us to test different interpretations, detect contradictions, biases and logical mistakes, and to establish the sophisticated and fragile connections between texts and cultural backgrounds we need for the exchange of human judgements and emotions.*

Higher-level reading is our most powerful tool for analytic and strategic thinking. Without it, we are ill-equipped to counter populist simplifications, conspiracy theories and disinformation, and

we consequently become vulnerable to manipulation. However, educators increasingly focus on multimodal media, at the expense of in-depth engagement with textual information. Moreover, due to a propensity for efficiency, the complexity of reading is regarded as a problem to be solved by simplification rather than as a mirror of human complexity and an activity that fosters analytic and strategic thinking. Lastly, today's reading education and assessment also share a focus on basic functional and informational skills. This emphasis loses sight of the life-long importance of higher-level reading for critical thinking that is a precondition for a properly functioning democracy.

*We therefore call for **education and promotion of reading together with assessment and research** to recognize the importance of higher-level reading as a life- and society-shaping capability. Reading education and promotion needs to go beyond teaching basic functional and informational skills to school children and focus on the life-long personal development process enhanced by higher-level reading. Reading assessment needs to go beyond standardized testing and to include qualitative and descriptive data in order to provide a detailed diagnosis of the state of higher-level reading in our societies. Reading research needs to broaden its focus to include disciplines such as information behaviour research, information literacy teaching, media design, attention research and neuroscience, and to shape a systematic research programme, aligning perspectives and overcoming fragmentation*

*The future of reading affects the future of our societies. A democratic society, based on informed multi-stakeholder consensus can only succeed with resilient readers, well-versed in higher-level reading. Policy-makers in all fields need to be aware of this. For, in the words of Margaret Atwood's much quoted warning, "If there are no young readers and writers, there will shortly be no older ones. Literacy will be dead, and democracy ... will be dead as well".*

*For further reference, please visit <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/12770>.*