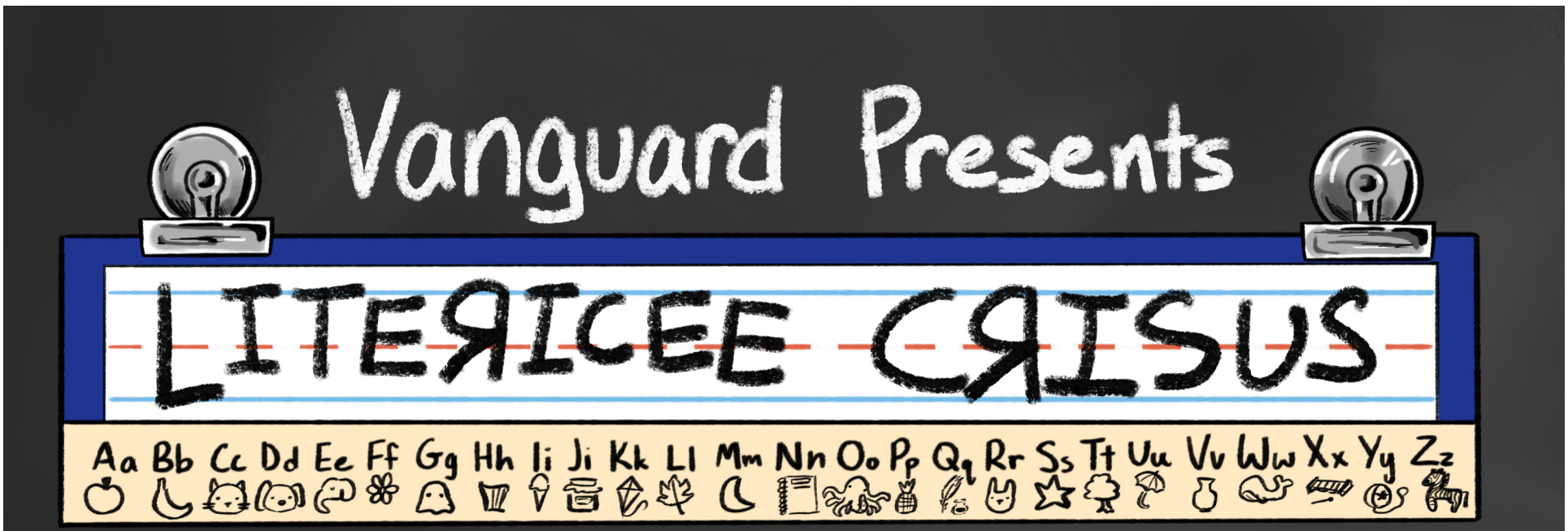


In defense of classics

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At a time when America's classrooms are increasingly ailed by challenges in foundational literacy skills, Vanguard explores how we got here, what's being done, and how we move forward.

A classic book can come with a reputation before a student even reads it. It might be described as important, influential, or something everyone should read. None of those descriptions necessarily make it sound enjoyable, but defending classics does not mean arguing that every old book is exciting. It means considering why certain stories continue to deserve our attention.

A classic is generally a book that is influential and meaningful across generations. The age of the book alone is not enough; what is important is whether people continue finding something worth discussing. "The classics are foundational canons that make up some of the most important pieces of literature that are usually taught in English classes," said English teacher Lauren Fedorko. "A lot of them are from a while back, but they are classics for that reason, and a lot of modern literature is inspired by them and created from them."

Classics are also more than just important stories in the world of literature. They act as influential pieces that connect across generations through their messages and central ideas. One generation may focus on a different part of a book than another, which allows the same book to create different viewpoints rather than leaving readers with one fixed interpretation.

A common part of the English curriculum across the United States, the classic piece "All Quiet on the Western Front" by Erich Maria Remarque, is read by 10th graders at PHS. Although it was first published in installments in 1928 and as a book in 1929, the unique perspective and insight into the lives of soldiers the story brings is still significant today. This piece especially holds real-world relevance to military personnel, such as Navy Commander Richard Dugan, due to its focus on the life of a soldier both on and off the front lines.

"When I first read it in high school, it was assigned for the curriculum, … I remember thinking, 'Wow, this book is really boring. Nothing actually happens.' And then it wasn't until I reread it … [that I] just came over with a completely different impression of the book," said Dugan. "You know, everybody thinks something different about the book, but to me, I picked out the parts in between the action, the quiet moments between the soldiers."

Although the story might not be the most interesting to every reader, its focus on soldiers' experiences gives readers a way to consider the war beyond battles and casualty figures. Remarque portrays the damage war causes to young people, including their difficulties relating to civilian life.

"You may not appreciate it right away, and that's certainly okay. … I think the great thing is that they can affect people differently at different times, … maybe it takes a couple reads or just a different point in life for it to really hit. But they're called classics for a reason," said Dugan.

Princeton High School also offers multiple pieces written by William Shakespeare in the English class curriculums. Although Shakespeare is often regarded as a more difficult style of writing to understand, it is an important form of classic literature, as many of the messages and themes expressed still hold value today.

"[Reading classics is] not only something that is for literary people to enjoy, but there is something about the rich human experience within there, … and [they are] really interesting," said English teacher Alana Smith. "The reading is non-negotiable."

The possibility of finding something new is part of the argument for why we should continue to read classics. Readers can see not only what a story says, but how it is written and what it reveals about the time it came from.

"I think it's extremely important for [students] to keep reading classic literature just because it helps build a really strong foundation … and [helps them] understand where stories come from, good writing, different types of writing, different time periods. … I think actually it's medicine for humanity," said Fedorko.

Still, defending classics should not mean treating them as beyond criticism. Students should be able to question a book's assumptions, disagree with its message, or admit that they did not enjoy it.

The value isn't that every reader will like them, or that other books do not offer as much. It is that the classics give us something worth reviewing. Giving a classic a chance means looking past what we have been told about it and deciding what it has to offer for ourselves.



graphics: **Katherine Chen**

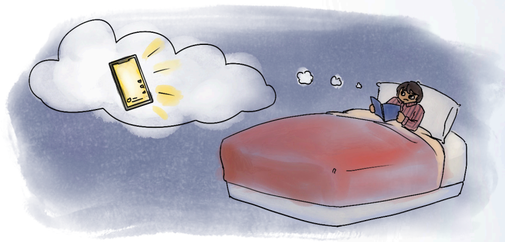
Impact of short form content on literacy

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For many teenagers, it is hard to concentrate on long videos without a clip of subway surfers playing simultaneously. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, short-form content such as TikToks and Instagram reels have become increasingly popular and has had a large impact on many aspects of our lives, especially on our attention spans.

Most short-form content is rich in visual and auditory stimuli, something which long-form books and novels do not provide. The lack of visual and auditory stimulation along with the shorter length of the content has driven many younger audiences away from it. Through this type of content, the brain receives dopamine extremely quickly, which triggers a happy feeling in our system. Since quick satisfaction is derived from short-form content, it makes long-form content, where dopamine isn't as accessible, less popular among both teens and adults.

Short-form content in almost all forms has been a major reason for the decrease of literacy rates. For example, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ratings, a premier way of testing literacy rates in children and teens, has decreased by an average of 14 points in recent cycles, which is equivalent to almost one year of schooling. The addiction to short-form content is a huge reason for this, since it is taking up many people's time that could be spent studying or reading a book. In fact, even with adults, the percentage who have said that they read for pleasure has decreased enormously.



Though reading books may not result in instant satisfaction, the practice has aspects that can't be replaced by our phones. For example, reading novels with emotional character arcs can help deepen our empathy and reduce judgement, while many types of social media increases our anxiety and increases the transfer of misinformation. Reading novels can also help to expand vocab, teach critical thinking, and change the way we think and express our ideas. Replacing nighttime screen use with a physical book can also calm the nervous system, leading to better sleep, while the blue light from screens delays the time at which your body decompresses to eventually go to sleep. Although it may take time to readjust to long-form content, regular consumption improves attention spans and strengthens cognitive reserves.

Fully shutting out short-form content may be too extreme, though, and is not completely realistic. Social media has become an instrumental part of almost all of our lives, making it increasingly hard to entirely remove these types of content from our lives. Reducing use of short-form content while re-implementing consistent reading of books is the best way to improve our literacy rates while still allowing us to live in the present time.

Student reading levels

Elliana Grenker, **Katherine Lee**, and **Maya Rogart**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Many children can recall their parents saying, "It's because of that damn phone." Multiple teachers in the Princeton area supported this idea through their firsthand teaching experience.

Teachers from school levels including elementary, middle, and high, unanimously noted that their students' attention spans have declined significantly during their teaching careers. Extensive research as well as teachers' observations have attributed this to increasing levels of short-form media consumption, with optimal user engagement on TikTok videos being the highest when videos are between 21 and 34 seconds, according to King Street Chronicle.

"It's easier for [students] to watch something short and … [in] little clips … versus a whole article," said English teacher Anna Soriano.

Jennifer Hegland, an eighth-grade English teacher at Princeton Middle School, has noticed that students have requested an increased amount of quiet reading time to help them focus.

"This speaks to the pushback that a lot of students are giving to using screens and short-form media," said Hegland. "The chronic inattention that has developed due to screen time is a societal problem, not just for students."

With shorter attention spans, students are not able to complete the same amount of work in the time that they previously were able to. Due to this, some class curriculums have shifted, adapting to the students' needs.



"It [is taking] students a little bit longer to read the same text that we used to read much faster," said Soriano. "Where I would [normally] teach a book in four weeks, now it takes me six weeks … in English III. [In] junior year, there used to be six core texts. Now there's four."

There was a general agreement between the teachers that parents and guardians play a major role in sparking children's interest in reading. The parent's function as a role model further contributes to the development and progression of their child's reading interest and skill.

"If kids see their parents reading, they're more [likely] to become readers, [because] they actively see their parents reading," said Soriano.

Though this is true, these circumstances often change around a certain age due to a shift in independence, particularly around adolescence. Children might become less directly influenced by their parent's actions.

"It is a big role for a parent," said history teacher Chip Casto, "But I think it starts to fade when they get to high school and there's a lot more freedom for a kid and a surge [of] independence.

Children, particularly those in early childhood, tend to mimic their parents' actions. According to Talker Research, 71 percent of children ranked their parents as their number one role models.

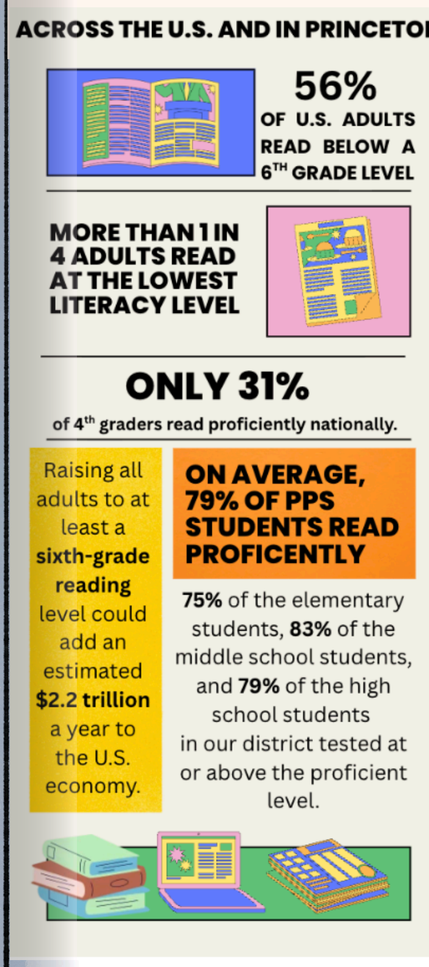
The National Literacy Trust states that 52.9 percent of children who saw their role model reading felt that it was okay to read, while 30.4 percent of children thought reading was "cool" after seeing their role model read.

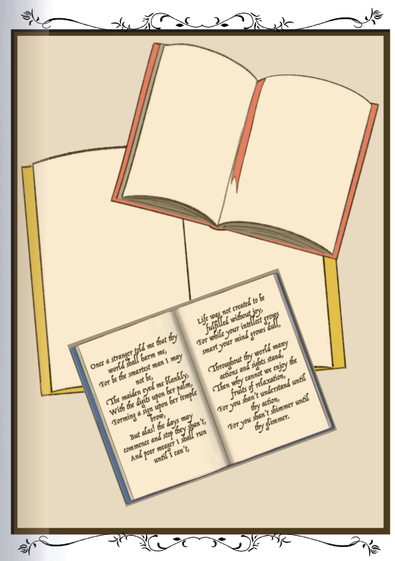
"I think if parents and guardians show the importance of reading and what you can get from it, whether it's reading for pleasure [or] reading for information, … then I think kids are more inclined to want to read or try something new," said Katherine Federico, a fifth-grade teacher at Littlebrook.

Though parents often blame the phone for their children's distraction, helping kids rebuild their focus can start when parents put down their own phones and pick up a book.

LITERACY RATES

Grace Chen and **Alya Martins**, CONTRIBUTING WRITERS





Reading habits at PHS

Olivia Fan and **Vitali Wedmid**, STAFF WRITERS

How often do you read? How many books have you read this year?

Coach Trey (Media Specialist/Librarian): "I would probably say like four or five [books]. I just told another student that I am a chronic book buyer, but [between] how much time is spent in work and coaching, I just don't have enough time to read as much as I want to."

Leo Kahn '30: "I read an hour a day. This year … since January, probably in the thirties."

Emma Enright '29: "Sometimes I read 10 minutes, or like a chapter a night of a book, if I have time."

Xinle Cordle '28: "I don't read very often. I feel like I have a lot of work to catch up on, and I don't actually have time to sit down and read. But when I do, I do end up reading a lot. … This year, I want to say I've read 10 books."

What type of books do you read? What genre?

Coach Trey (Media Specialist/Librarian): "I definitely love a lot of sports psychology, [because] I think it really helps me become a better coach. I also love a lot of history, with my background as a history major."

Leo Kahn '30: "I enjoy reading nonfiction books, historical ones in particular. I mean, they certainly are informative and use some difficult words, so I guess they are more difficult books."

Emma Enright '29: "I really like reading dystopian books or historical fiction."

What is your best reading habit or trait? What is your worst?

Coach Trey (Media Specialist/Librarian): "I'd say my worst reading habit is finding time to read, convincing myself to say, 'Hey, I need to sit down and read.' … My best reading habit is probably being open to so many different genres, so many different courses outside my comfort zone. I love going to the library or the book store and just cruising and getting something from a topic I do not usually read and deciding to check it out or I buy it. I think the beauty of reading is the exploration and trying to find stuff new."

Leo Kahn '30: "My worst reader habit is my phone. I tend to get distracted, but at night I tend to read often. Also, if my ADHD gets me hyperfocused, I can read for a long time, but then also my ADHD lets me get distracted as well."

Emma Enright '29: "Sometimes I won't read a book if I don't really like it for months and then I'll get back to it and then I'll forget everything that happened in the book. But also sometimes I really like the book and then I'll just finish it in a day."

Xinle Cordle '28: "My best reading habit is that I sit down and read through a book. I don't put my book down until I finish the chapter. And I think my bad reading habit is that I try to get books that are popular, but that I don't really like, just to say I've read it."

Any book that you have found to be the most interesting?

Coach Trey (Media Specialist/Librarian): "The most influential book of my life is probably 'The Lord of The Rings.' I remember reading and just loving [the] worldbuilding and the characters. I think it really set that foundation for that curiosity and laid the foundations of enjoying reading for me. The "Watchmen" was a great one as well; it is a graphic novel. … It is such a good story that just sits in the back of my mind."

Leo Kahn '30: "I have found that books on the Holocaust are very eye-opening, especially realistic fiction ones in the perspective of someone who witnessed the Holocaust. It is interesting and makes you really think when you get to see the life of a person in that time."

Emma Enright '29: "I really enjoyed 'The Book Thief ,' which is a historical fiction book that I really liked in seventh grade. I also really liked the 'Hunger Games.'"

Xinle Cordle '28: "'The Housemaid' [by] Frida McLadden, which is a really good book, and it's a movie."

Coach Trey: How many books have been checked out this year?

"Right now, [as of November 11], we are at 317 books. Our e-book checkouts are surprisingly higher across the district than they were as of last year and actually the last two years ... The pro obviously is that there are people checking out books whether digitally or physically and reading."

"We are constantly ordering new books; our average publication date is going up in terms of what we are bringing into the library. Obviously, there are some classics that were written in the early 1900s, but we want to make sure we are getting books that people recognize and are being published recently and getting fresher ideas into our minds."

graphics: **Katherine Chen**