

6-17-2010

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Lori, "Key To Children Reading More Is Fostering Joy Of Reading Slowly" (2010). *UNH Today*. 3359.
<https://scholars.unh.edu/news/3359>

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Media Relations

Key To Children Reading More Is Fostering Joy Of Reading Slowly

June 17, 2010

DURHAM, N.H. – As the nation’s school children begin their summer vacations, parents hoping to keep their children engaged in the learning process may want to encourage them to slow down and savor a good book.

Thomas Newkirk, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, suggests that students get more enjoyment out of and have greater success with reading when they slow down. Newkirk discusses slow reading in a recent issue of *Education Leadership* in the article, “The Case for Slow Reading.”

That’s good news considering American school children have made little to no progress in reading proficiency, according to the latest information about the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the largest nationwide reading test. Some experts believe the culprit is the decline in the amount of reading children do for pleasure as they devote more free time to surfing the Internet, texting on cell phones, or watching television.

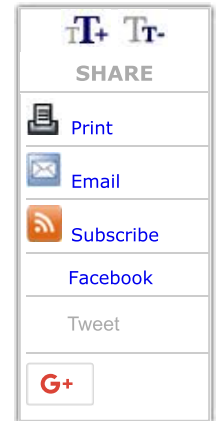
A confessed slow reader, Newkirk says there is real pleasure in slowing down. “We can gain some pleasures and meanings no other way.”

“Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in severely abbreviated messages and through clicks of the mouse. Like the slow food movement, we can make a case on the basis of pleasure. The term *taste* applies to both literacy and eating. And to taste, we have to slow down,” Newkirk says.

According to published reports, the reading test, mandated by Congress, was given to 338,000 fourth- and eighth-grade students last spring. On average, eighth-graders scored 264 on a 500-point scale in reading, compared with 263 in 2007, the last time the test was given. Fourth-graders scored 221 on the 2009 test, the same average as two years earlier. The national assessment in reading has been administered every few years since the early 1990s, with average scores in reading rising only 4 points at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels over those nearly two decades.

Newkirk proposes several strategies for “slowing down and reclaiming the acoustical properties of written language—for savoring it, for enjoying the infinite ways a sentence can unfold—and for returning to passages that sustain and inspire us. Many of these strategies are literally as old as the hills.”

- **Memorizing:** Memorization is often called “knowing by heart,” and for good reason. Memorizing enables us to possess a text in a special way.
- **Reading Aloud:** Reading aloud is a regular activity in elementary classrooms, but it dies too soon. Well-chosen and well-read texts are one of the best advertisements for literacy. By reading aloud, teachers can create a bridge to texts that students might read; they can help reluctant readers imagine a human voice animating the words on the page.
- **Attending to Beginnings:** Writers often struggle with their beginnings because they are making so many commitments; they are establishing a voice, narrator, and point of view that are right for what will follow. These openings often suggest a conflict. They raise a question, pose a problem, create an “itch to be scratched.” Readers need to be just as deliberate and not rush through these carefully constructed beginnings. As teachers, we can model this slowness.
- **Rethinking Time Limits on Reading Tests:** We currently give students with disabilities additional time to complete standardized tests; we should extend this opportunity to all students. Tests place too high a premium on speed, and limits are often set for administrative convenience rather than because of a reasoned belief in what makes good readers.



- **Annotating a Page:** In this activity, students probe the craft of a favorite writer. They pick a page they really like, photocopy it, and tape the photocopy to a larger piece of paper so they have wide margins in which they can make notations. Their job is to give the page a close reading and mark word choices, sentence patterns, images, dialogue—anything they find effective. A variation of this activity is a quote and comment assignment in which students copy out passages by hand that they find particularly meaningful and then comment on why they chose those passages. Copying a passage slows us down and creates an intimacy with the writer’s style—a feel for word choice and for how sentences are formed.
- **Reading Poetry:** Even in this age of efficiency and consumption, it is unlikely that anyone will reward students for reading a million poems. Poems can’t be checked off that way. They demand a slower pace and usually several readings—and they are usually at their best when read aloud.
- **Savoring Passages:** Children know something that adults often forget—the deep pleasure of repetition, of rereading, or of having parents reread, until the words seem to be part of them.

Thomas Newkirk is a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. He is the author and editor of a number of books, including “Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones: Six Literacy Principles Worth Fighting For” (2009), “*Teaching the Neglected ‘R’*” (2007), and “*Misreading Masculinity*” (2004), which was cited by *Instructor Magazine* as one of the most significant books for teachers in the past decade. Newkirk is a former teacher of at-risk high school students in Boston, former director of UNH’s freshman English program, and the director and founder of its New Hampshire Literacy Institutes. He has studied literacy learning at a variety of educational levels, from preschool to college.

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Broadcast Media: Tom Newkirk is available for broadcast interviews via satellite Thursday, June 17, 2010, from 6 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. ET. To arrange for interviews, contact Jackie Dowling with MultiVu at 201-360-6774

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