

The Need to Read

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In the science fiction books I read as a kid, reading had often been replaced by some more efficient way of acquiring knowledge. Mysterious "tapes" would load it into one's brain like a program being loaded into a computer.

That sort of thing is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Not just because it would be hard to build a replacement for reading, but because even if one existed, it would be insufficient. Reading about *x* doesn't just teach you about *x*; it also teaches you how to write.

[1]

Would that matter? If we replaced reading, would anyone need to be good at writing?

The reason it would matter is that writing is not just a way to convey ideas, but also a way to have them.

A good writer doesn't just think, and then write down what he thought, as a sort of transcript. A good writer will almost always discover new things in the process of writing. And there is, as far as I know, no substitute for this kind of discovery. Talking about your ideas with other people is a good way to develop them. But even after doing this, you'll find you still discover new things when you sit down to write. There is a kind of thinking that can only be done by writing.

There are of course kinds of thinking that can be done without writing. If you don't need to go too deeply into a problem, you can solve it without writing. If you're thinking about how two pieces of machinery should fit together, writing about it probably won't help much. And when a problem can be described formally, you can

sometimes solve it in your head. But if you need to solve a complicated, ill-defined problem, it will almost always help to write about it. Which in turn means that someone who's not good at writing will almost always be at a disadvantage in solving such problems.

You can't think well without writing well, and you can't write well without reading well. And I mean that last "well" in both senses. You have to be good at reading, and read good things.

[2]

People who just want information may find other ways to get it. But people who want to have ideas can't afford to.

Notes

[1]

Audiobooks can give you examples of good writing, but having them read to you doesn't teach you as much about writing as reading them yourself.

[2]

By "good at reading" I don't mean good at the mechanics of reading. You don't have to be good at extracting words from the page so much as extracting meaning from the words.

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