

# It's Not Only Whether Children Read That matters. It's Also What They Read (at Least According to PISA)...

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It is widely considered important that young people read regularly. [A wide range of previous research](#) has linked reading during childhood to improved language skills and higher levels of academic achievement more generally<sup>1</sup>.

But does it matter what they choose to read? Does flicking through a magazine or reading a daily newspaper have the same benefits for young people as becoming engrossed in a novel? A lot less evidence currently exists about this issue.

In my [recent research paper](#)<sup>2</sup> – published earlier this year – my co-author [Gemma Moss](#)<sup>3</sup> and I decided to explore this topic in detail.

The data we used was drawn from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. This asked 15-year-olds how frequently they read the following different text types:

- Fiction books
- Non-fiction books
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Comic books

Within our paper, we examine how the frequency young people read each of these different types of materials is linked to young people's PISA scores. Critically, our analysis controls for a wide array of other factors (such as gender, socio-economic status and school attended) to try and rule out alternative explanations for our results.

A summary of our key findings can be found in Figure 1. This illustrates how PISA scores differ between teenagers who read each text type regularly (i.e. almost every day) versus those who almost never read that type of text.

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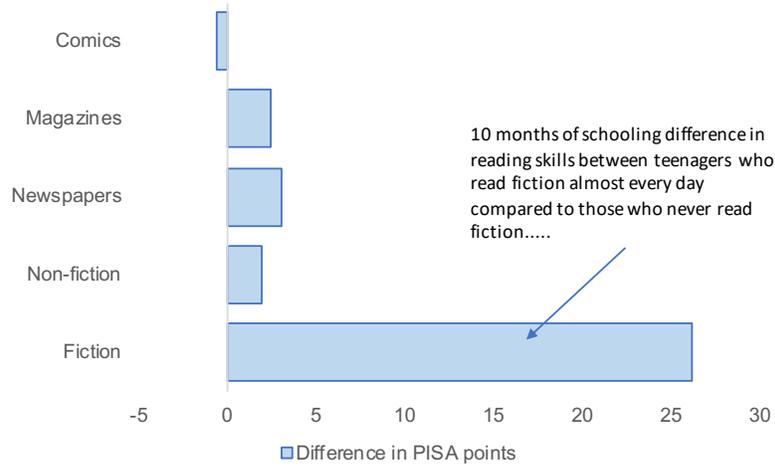
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<sup>1</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3180>

<sup>2</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3498?af=R>

<sup>3</sup> <https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/browse/profile?upi=PJGMO52>

**Fig. 1** The advantage of reading different text types for teenagers reading skills.



*Note: Ten PISA test points is roughly equivalent to an effect size of 0.1 or around four months of additional schooling. Results refer to difference between teenagers who read the text type almost every day compared to those who read the text type almost never.*

As this graph illustrates, teenagers who frequently read newspapers, magazines, comics and non-fiction books do not achieve higher PISA reading scores than those who do not. Yet the same is not true for young people who read fiction books or novels. Specifically, teenagers who read fiction almost every day score around 26 points higher on the PISA reading test than those who never read such books. This difference in achievement is large – the equivalent of around 10 months of additional schooling according to the OECD.

Is this result simply due to young people who read fiction books just reading for a greater amount of time in total? After all, dipping in and out of a magazine, comic or newspaper takes a lot less time than trying to slog through a novel like *War and Peace*. Interestingly, our analysis provided no evidence that this was the case. We continued to find just as strong “fiction effect” even after we controlled for young people’s total weekly reading time.

This finding has important implications. Parents and teachers should not encourage teenagers to “just read something”, no matter what this is. Rather, they should focus their efforts on encouraging young people to engage more with novels and other lengthy fictional texts that encourages deep reading for sustained periods of time. This is likely to be particularly important for boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the group we find to be reading this type of text the least, and who also have comparatively poor reading skills.

This text has been posted on the blog [international-education.blog](https://international-education.blog) and it is available in different languages on [international-education.blog](https://international-education.blog)

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