

ENGLISH 204
FINAL EXAM
SPRING 2003-2004



Time Allowed: 3 hours

Directions: Texts A & B both discuss the issue of aliteracy. Critique Text A, synthesizing information from B to support your thesis.

Text A:

The No-Book Report: Skim It and Weep
by
Linton Weeks, *The Washington Post*, Monday, May 14, 2001

1. Jeremy Spreitzer probably wouldn't read this story if it weren't about him.
2. He is an aliterate—someone who can read, but chooses not to.
3. A graduate student in public affairs at Park University in Kansas City, Mo., Spreitzer, 25, gleans most of his news from TV. He skims required texts, draws themes from dust jackets and, when he absolutely, positively has to read something, reaches for the audiobook.
4. "I am fairly lazy when it comes to certain tasks," says Spreitzer, a long-distance runner who hopes to compete in the 2004 Olympics. "Reading is one of them."
5. As he grows older, Spreitzer finds he has less time to read. And less inclination. In fact, he says, if he weren't in school, he probably wouldn't read at all.
6. He's not alone. According to the survey firm NDP Group—which tracked the everyday habits of thousands of people through the 1990s—this country is reading printed versions of books, magazines and newspapers less and less. In 1991, more than half of all Americans read a half-hour or more every day. By 1999, that had dropped to 45 percent.
7. A 1999 Gallup Poll found that only 7 percent of Americans were voracious readers, reading more than a book a week, while some 59 percent said they had read fewer than 10 books in the previous year. Though book clubs seem popular now, only 6 percent of those who read belong to one. The number of people who don't read at all, the poll concluded, has been rising for the past 20 years.
8. The reports on changes in reading cut to the quick of American culture. We pride ourselves on being a largely literate First World country while at the same time we rush to build a visually powerful environment in which reading is not required.
9. The results are inevitable. Aliteracy is all around.

Some of this shift away from words—and toward images—can be attributed to our ever-growing multilingual population. But for many people, reading is passé or impractical, or, like, so totally unnecessary in this day and age.

11. To Jim Trelease, author of "The Read-Aloud Handbook," this trend away from the written word is more than worrisome. It's wicked. It's tearing apart our culture. People who have stopped reading, he says, "base their future decisions on what they used to know."
12. "If you don't read much, you really don't know much," he says. "You're dangerous."

Losing a Heritage

"The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them."

-- Mark Twain

13. One thing you can say for illiteracy: It can be identified, nailed down. And combated. Scores of programs such as the Greater Washington Literacy Council and the International Reading Association are geared toward fighting readinglessness in the home, the school and the workplace.
14. Aliteracy, on the other hand, is like an invisible liquid, seeping through our culture, nigh impossible to pinpoint or defend against. It's the kid who spends hours and hours with video games instead of books, who knows Sim Cities better than "A Tale of Two Cities."
15. It's the thousands of business people who subscribe to executive book summaries—for example, Soundview's easy-to-swallow eight-page pamphlets that take simply written management books such as "Secrets of Question-Based Selling" by Thomas A. Freese and make them even simpler.
16. It's the parent who pops the crummy movie of "Stuart Little" into a machine for his kid instead of reading E.B. White's marvelous novel aloud. Or the teacher who assigns the made-for-TV movie "Gettysburg" instead of the book it was based on, "The Killer Angels" by Michael Shaara.
17. There may be untold collateral damage in a society that can read but doesn't. "So much of our culture is embedded in literature," says Philip A. Thompsen, professor of communications at West Chester University in West Chester, Pa. Thompsen has been watching the rise of aliteracy in the classroom for 20 years, and "students today are less capable of getting full value from textbooks than they were 10 years ago."
18. He adds that these aliterate students are "missing out on our cultural heritage."

19. American historian Daniel Boorstin saw this coming. In 1984, while Boorstin was serving as librarian of Congress, the library issued a landmark report: "Books in Our Future." Citing recent statistics that only about half of all Americans read regularly every year, he referred to the "twin menaces" of illiteracy and aliteracy.
20. "In the United States today," Boorstin wrote, "aliteracy is widespread."
21. Several of the articles in the report alluded to the growing number of non-readers. In one essay, "The Computer and the Book," Edmund D. Pellegrino, a former president of Catholic University who is now a bioethicist at Georgetown University, observed: "The computer is simply the most effective, efficient and attractive form for transmittal of processed information. Added to the other nonbook devices like films, tapes, television and the popular media, the computer accelerates the atrophy of the intellectual skills required for personally reading the books from which the information is extracted."

Solving the Problem

Kylene Beers has talked about the evils of aliteracy for so long and so loud, she's losing her voice. Today she's in the lecture hall of Oakton High School bending the ears of 100 or so middle school teachers.

22. If someone graduates from high school and is aliterate, Beers believes, that person will probably never become a habitual reader.
23. There is some good news on the reading front, according to Trelease and others. The Harry Potter series has turned on a lot of young readers and megabookstores, such as Barnes & Noble and Borders, are acrawl with people.
24. But there is plenty of bad news, too. Lots of aliterates, according to Trelease, say they just don't have time to read anymore. "The time argument is the biggest hoax of all," he says. According to time studies, we have more leisure time than ever. "If people didn't have time, the malls would be empty, cable companies would be broke, video stores would go out of business. It's not a time problem, it's a value problem. You have 50 percent in the country who don't value reading."
25. Like Beers, Trelease believes that youngsters should be encouraged to read aesthetically. Reading aloud to children, according to Trelease and other reading specialists, is the single best way to ensure that someone will become a lifelong reader.
26. "Even Daniel Boorstin wasn't born wanting to read," Trelease says. "Michael Jordan wasn't born wanting to play basketball. The desire has to be planted."
27. Trelease and Beers and others are scrambling for ways to engage aliterates. For all kinds of reasons. "What aliteracy does is breed illiteracy," Beers explains. "If you go through school having learned to read and then you leave school not wanting to read, chances are you won't put your own children into a reading environment."

28. "What you have to do is play hardball," says Trelease. He suggests running public awareness campaigns on TV. "That's where the aliterates are."
29. Trelease says we should try to eradicate aliteracy in the way we went after tobacco. We should let people know, Trelease says, "what the consequences are to your family and children if you don't read."
30. "Aliteracy may be a significant problem today," says Philip Thompson. "But on the other hand, a narrow view of literacy—one that defines literacy as the ability to read verbal texts—may be a significant problem as well."
31. Many of the messages that we have to interpret in day-to-day life, Thompson says, "use multiple communication media. I think it is important to realize that as our society becomes more accustomed to using multimedia messages, we must also expand our thinking about what it means to be 'literate.'"

Text B:

Fighting Illiteracy and 'Aliteracy'

by

Linda Dahdah, *Daily Star*, Wednesday, March 31, 2004

Author aims to make standard Arabic fun for children

1. In the late 1980s, Margo Malatjalian came across a report issued by UNESCO showing surprisingly high rates of illiteracy.
2. When she read the information, Malatjalian, who lived in Jordan, had already established cultural centers for children in cooperation with the Amman municipality and had her own publishing company, Child World Promotions.
3. As she had always been active in this field through education programs, teaching theater and drama, as well as working on Jordanian children's TV programs, she decided to take some immediate action.
4. With the help of David Doake, a professor in reading and literacy development, she embarked on a study that found reading was not part of tradition in the Arab World.
5. "There is lots of story telling but reading is not part of our growth," said Malatjalian.
6. Strong willed, Malatjalian decided to go to the root of the problem by making literacy development her main concern. She started traveling around the region, praising the importance of early reading and defending literacy through workshops which targeted children, teachers and parents.

7. She comes to Lebanon regularly to lead a series of workshops in private schools across the country. The main topics? Creating and using supplementary material from the standard Arabic language curriculum from kindergarten to the third or fourth grade.
8. The whole point is “to support the Arabic language by making it more interesting through the use of new poetry, new and more attractive stories and literature—by using arts and integrating drama in education, songs and music,” Malatjalian said.
9. Rita Nakhle, a third grade Arabic teacher at International College in Ain Aar, said that Malatjalian’s books were interesting because they used standard Arabic that was easy to understand. “Plus it is real poetry, accompanied by nice pictures,” she said.
10. According to Malatjalian, Arabic becomes difficult when people don’t read Arabic books regularly.
11. “There are prerequisites for reading that are hardly met when cultures are not only faced with illiteracy but also a huge scourge that lies in the aliteracy of educated people. (aliteracy applies to people who are able to read but are not interested in reading.)
12. “Nowadays one of the most popular books might be Chef Ramzi’s, and I don’t think this has anything to do with literature,” Malatjalian said.
13. If books are ever bought, what usually sells are detective stories, cooking, fiction and sex, the author said.
14. Besides, naturally, children imitate their parents, so when there is no reading environment inside the house, children will not read. Moreover, according to Malatjalian, it has been shown that children who come from a reading household do much better at school.
15. A whole reading environment should therefore be created—a prime responsibility of the parents, she said. When the state is not helping at all, the public should react.
16. “During my discussions with parents, they said that there’s no help as there is no public library in Lebanon or perhaps there’s one, but they don’t even know where it is and how to get there. What prevents them from organizing reading sessions? We cannot count on the state’s help so it’s up to each mother and father or others to play his or her part and act,” said Malatjalian.