

Is Digital Reading a Friend or Foe for Students?

Article

Altamura, L., Vargas, C., & Salmerón, L. (2025). Do new forms of reading pay off? a meta-analysis on the relationship between leisure digital reading habits and text comprehension. *Review of Educational Research*, 95(1), 53-88.

What did they do?

Researchers completed a meta-analysis on the relationship between leisurely digital reading habits and reading comprehension. They analyzed 40 effect sizes using a multi-level analysis that viewed data from over 450,000 participants in primary grades up to the university level and over the span of 2000-2022. There were two goals outlined for this study.

The first goal is to determine if reading online helps you understand content better. There are two mindsets. The second goal of the meta analysis is to determine if there are any factors, such as age or type of reading, that might influence how much online reading helps comprehension.

What did they find?

The study found digital reading habits affect comprehension, with the educational stage of students playing a key role. Digital reading had a negative effect on younger students (primary & middle grades) but a positive effect on older students (high school & undergrad). Though the results found a positive association between digital reading and comprehension, leisure digital reading habits may not produce better reading comprehension compared to traditional print leisure reading. The way people read digitally might be different from how they read printed materials. This could affect how well they understand what they're reading. Another point to consider is that the Shallowing Hypothesis suggests digital reading might not be as engaging or helpful for developing critical thinking skills due to text being shorter, faster-paced, and of lower writing quality. All things considered, much of this research is new and researchers are still determining how much online reading affects reading comprehension and if there are any situations where it might be more or less helpful.

What could this mean for teachers?

Teachers need to make the following considerations when using digital text:

- Consider the age of the student: Younger students (primary & middle grades) might struggle with comprehension when relying heavily on digital reading materials.
- Adjust instruction or build in scaffolds when students are reading digital text to promote comprehension.
- Be aware of the "Shallowing Hypothesis" which suggests digital texts might not promote critical thinking as effectively. It might be important to determine the text complexity prior to instruction and integrate supplemental materials to prompt a deeper level of thinking.

