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# The benefits of leisure reading

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Leisure reading is not only a potential source of enjoyment for children; it's also good for them.

## What is leisure reading?

'Leisure reading' is the term used to describe the activity of engaging with a written text for one's own pleasure. The amount of time someone spends leisure reading reflects how much they decide for themselves that they want to read, as opposed to the kind of reading that might be required for study purposes. Reading that is undertaken for either of these reasons (i.e. for fun or by necessity) is captured by the all-encompassing term 'print exposure'.

Because there is an element of autonomous text selection involved in leisure reading, it is generally studied in situations where readers can engage with text mostly independently. This is not to say that children can or should only read for enjoyment once they reach a certain threshold of proficiency. The kind of shared and adult-led reading practices that are employed with younger or still-developing readers are not, by definition, unenjoyable. They just don't fit neatly into the 'leisure reading' category.

## Why is leisure reading important?

In children and adolescents, leisure reading is closely linked to reading proficiency. In other words, those who read more in their spare time are generally better at it than those who do not. The direction of causality is understood to go both ways: if you're good at reading, you're more likely to want to read more, and if you read more, then you're likely to improve.

In this article, the focus will be on the amount-to-ability direction of causality. There are at least four ways through which leisure reading may be expected to improve an individual's reading proficiency.

### 1 Word recognition automaticity

According to [Share's \(1995\)](#) self-teaching hypothesis, "each successful decoding encounter with an unfamiliar word provides an opportunity to acquire the word-specific orthographic information that is the foundation of skilled word recognition" (p. 155). It is by repeatedly applying their decoding knowledge to text that developing readers strengthen and refine their sight word representations. Unfamiliar words turn into familiar-ish words, which turn into words that can be recognised instantaneously (e.g. [Ricketts et al., 2011](#)).

The 'frequency effect' provides a clear illustration of this item-based learning: the more a word exists in print (i.e. the more times we can assume someone has been exposed to it), the quicker that word is generally recognised ([Brysbart & New, 2009](#)).

### 2 Vocabulary

One of the main ways leisure reading is assumed to impact on reading proficiency is via the mediator of vocabulary. In fact, books should be considered particularly important for this purpose because they contain a



higher proportion of low-frequency words than what might otherwise be heard in spoken language ([Korochkina et al., 2024](#)). As such, written text plays a key role in exposing children to unfamiliar words and morphemes, while also giving new contexts for familiar words.

Knowledge of a word's meaning is not stored in long-term memory as an isolated dictionary entry, but rather as part of a vast semantic network that is continually refined in response to exposure to its use. "You shall know a word by the company it keeps," as stated by Firth (1957; cited in [Nation, 2017](#)). By seeing a word situated in its written context, the reader may abstract information about that word, such as its part of speech (e.g. noun or verb) and its relationships with other words. This implicitly learned knowledge then informs what we know of as that word's 'meaning'. And this knowledge, in turn, helps the reader comprehend the overall text.

There is a great deal of evidence to indicate that, under experimental conditions, a reader's knowledge of unfamiliar word meanings improves through incidental exposure to print ([Cain et al., 2003](#); [Shefelbine, 1990](#); [Valentini et al., 2018](#)). Whether this extends to incidental exposure to print via leisure reading is a slightly different question. It's also a more difficult question to answer because of the free-choice factor inherent to leisure reading. How can researchers assess a student's learning in response to a text while also allowing the student to decide when, where and even whether

to read that text? Only one research group has attempted this to date, and their results conform to those from other more controlled studies: reading facilitates vocabulary learning ([van der Kleij et al., 2020](#)).

### 3 Syntax

Implicit knowledge of syntax and grammar is also assumed to be learned through exposure to print, although this learning is incremental and not straightforward to measure in a pre-/post-test experimental setting. Nevertheless, there is correlational evidence that syntactic structures that are more frequent or predictable are generally read more quickly ([Levy et al., 2012](#)). This finding is similar to the frequency effect noted earlier. It supports the idea that reading more may be expected to result in better syntactic knowledge, since written text contains more complex (and a greater diversity of) sentence types than spoken language ([Hsiao et al., 2022](#); [Montag, 2019](#)).

Relatedly, individuals who read more tend to produce more complex sentences ([Montag & MacDonald, 2015](#)) and demonstrate more mature online processing of sentence and pronoun ambiguity ([Arnold et al., 2019](#); [Farmer et al., 2017](#)).

### 4 Background knowledge

Another area that potentially mediates the causal relationship between leisure reading amount and reading proficiency is domain or background knowledge. The important role that written text has in improving readers' knowledge is built into the commonly used phrase, 'reading

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to learn'. The logical extension of this phrase is the idea that those who engage more with written text, learn more.

Ultimately, this knowledge is then expected to feed back into the reader's comprehension of subsequent texts on the same topic and/or of the same text type. According to [Hirsch \(2003\)](#), "to make constructive use of vocabulary, the reader ... needs a threshold level of knowledge about the topic being discussed" (p. 17). He gives the following sentence by Einstein as an example:

*It will be seen from these reflections that in pursuing the general theory of relativity we shall be led to a theory of gravitation, since we are able to produce a gravitational field merely by changing the system of coordinates.*

The words all make sense, but a reader with no background knowledge about Einstein's research (e.g. me) cannot bring enough context to them to give them meaning.

### What now?

I hope you are convinced by now that leisure reading is a good thing – not just because you and I like to read and

it's nice when people like what we like, but also because of the various ways leisure reading can actually improve reading proficiency.

But what is there to be done with that information? If we agree it's a good thing, then how do we encourage leisure reading in students?

Following are some ways that teachers (and parents) can try to motivate leisure reading in children and adolescents:

- *Make books available.* Provide students with opportunities to browse and borrow a range of age-appropriate books. Quite simply, students cannot read what they cannot access.
- *Help with book selection.* While choice and autonomy are important motivational factors, students may also need guidance in finding a text that aligns with their interests and reading ability. This is particularly important for younger students who are just entering the world of independent reading, although, interestingly, difficulty choosing the right book has been identified as a barrier for teenagers as well ([Australia Reads, 2023](#)).
- *Create a book-positive, literacy-supportive culture.* For teachers and parents alike, this means showing an interest in and communicating about students' reading experiences ([De Naeghel & Van Keer, 2013](#)). It also means modelling reading yourselves and, as per the first dot point, having plenty of available books.
- *Build reading skills.* Success breeds motivation, which is why explicitly targeting literacy skills in the classroom is critical. I stated early on that the focus of this article was on the amount-to-ability direction of causality, but that focus isn't intended to undermine the importance of ability-to-amount effects. Without a solid understanding of how to decipher the phonic and morphological constituents of words, children will struggle to read independently. These difficulties may absolutely be expected to negatively affect their motivation and consequent reading habits ([McArthur, 2024](#)).

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