

KEEPING UP IN AMERICA

by David Harman

"Learn them to read the Scriptures, and be conversant therein," the Reverend John Cotton urged his Boston parishioners in a 1656 homily on child rearing. "Reading brings much benefit to little Children."

"Benefit" was an understatement. In the harsh moral universe of Cotton's New England Puritans, ignorance was no excuse for sin: A child who died young (as many did) could expect no mercy in the hereafter merely because he had not been able to read the Bible. Massachusetts' colonial authorities had already acted on the fear that parents were not doing enough to protect their children from the "old deluder Satan." In 1647, nine years before Cotton's sermon, they required every township of 50 families or more to provide a teacher for the young.

Satan may be, in this sense, behind us, but the challenge of making Americans literate is not. Almost any adult born in America today can read well enough to satisfy John Cotton; but the preacher set a simple standard. His flock did not need to ponder the meaning of a ballot referendum, or the requirements of a Help Wanted advertisement, or the operating instructions for a word processor—all frequently written by people who may be only semi-literate themselves.

"The ability to understand an unfamiliar text, rather than simply declaim a familiar one," as researchers Daniel P. and Lauren B. Resnick put it, is today's new standard of literacy. That kind of *functional* literacy may seem almost quaint in an age of telephones and TV news, and of computers (with languages of their own) and color-coded cash register keys that make counting or reading almost unnecessary for teen-age clerks at fast-food restaurants. Time after time in the past literacy has seemed, for a brief historical moment, redundant, a luxury, not needed by ordinary folk.

Yet those Americans who could not read and write, then as now, became the servants of those who could; they were sometimes deprived of prosperity and liberty, always of autonomy and knowledge. What will become of today's students who fail to become fluent in the English tongue? Even those who achieve *technological* literacy, staking their futures on a narrow mastery of FORTRAN or UNIX or some other computer lan-



Reading instruction in turn-of-the-century America. Literacy today is more widespread, yet often shallow. Youngsters who are ill-schooled in history, civics, and science cannot comprehend the words they "decode."

guage, will be at a disadvantage. Eventually, predicts Robert Patison of Long Island University, they will wind up working for "English majors from Berkeley and Harvard."

It has been said that we live in an Information Age. The information that is important is not bits and bytes, but ideas and knowledge conveyed in clear English. All this requires a more sophisticated level of literacy. The worker of the future, warns the National Academy of Sciences, must be "able and willing to learn throughout a lifetime." By that new standard, America probably has nearly half the proportion of illiterates among its population in 1986 that it did in Cotton's time.

Traditional literacy spread rapidly in 17th- and 18th-century America, mostly through church-run schools and through informal education—parents teaching their children, masters teaching their apprentices. But it is unclear just how literate colonial America was. As Americans have been painfully reminded in recent years, schooling and literacy are not always synonymous. And in the days before the Revolution, American schoolchildren

probably spent, at most, three years in the classroom.

By counting the number of men who could sign their name to deeds and other public documents as literate (literacy for women was deemed irrelevant in most of the colonies; for slaves, dangerous), historians have reckoned that literacy in America rose from about 60 percent among the first white male colonists to about 75 percent by 1800. That figure masks a great deal of diversity. City-dwellers were more literate than country folk, Northerners more likely to read and write than Southerners and Westerners, the well-to-do better schooled than the poor. Ninety percent of New Englanders could sign their own names by the time the U.S. Constitution was ratified, yet the U.S. Army found in 1800 that only 58 percent of its recruits, drawn from the lower strata of the population, were literate.

And then one must ask *how* literate? The evidence is contradictory. The farmers, blacksmiths, tanners, and shopkeepers of colonial America did not need or possess a very sophisticated understanding of written material. For the vast majority, literacy probably meant reading the Bible, almanacs, and, occasionally, newspapers, but without necessarily being able to make inferences from their reading or to decipher more complicated texts. Historian Carl F. Kaestle of the University of Wisconsin-Madison estimates that perhaps 20 percent of adult male Americans were "sophisticated readers" by the 1760s.

Heeding James Madison

Lawrence A. Cremin of Columbia University takes a more generous view. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, he notes, "sold a hundred thousand copies within three months of its appearance [in 1776] and possibly as many as a half million in all. That means one-fifth of the colonial population bought it and a half or more probably read it or heard it read aloud."

About one thing there is no doubt. From the start, Americans, for various reasons, *valued* the ability to read and write. "A people who mean to be their own governors," James Madison declared, "must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the

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means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both." One Ohio newspaper offered a more mundane rationale in 1839, a variant on the "read to win" theme that nowadays draws thousands of Americans into Evelyn Wood speed-reading courses. A young man who delayed marrying by five years, its editor calculated, would gain 7,300 hours of "mental application," including reading, that would advance his material fortunes later in life. But moral and religious uplift remained the strongest impulse behind the spread of literacy well into the 19th century. As William H. McGuffey warned the young readers of his *Newly Revised Eclectic Second Reader* (1853), "The boys and girls who can not read . . . will never know whether they are on the right road [in life] or the wrong one."

No More Bare Bones

Almost by accident, America's industrialization during the 19th century helped boost literacy rates. Employers in the United States, as in Europe, preferred to hire factory workers who could read and write: These skills were not always needed on the job, but businessmen believed, not unlike John Cotton, that graduates were superior in "moral character" to their un-schooled and unlettered peers. Advocates of public education such as Horace Mann of Massachusetts emphasized primary-school graduates' "greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work" in arguing for an expansion of schooling. Mann and his allies had their way in part because the growth of densely populated cities and factory towns in New England during the 1830s and '40s made mass schooling more economical.*

In 1840, when the U.S. Census Bureau first asked adults whether they were literate, all but nine percent said Yes. By 1860, only seven percent admitted to illiteracy. The U.S. Army's records tell another story: They show 35 percent illiteracy among recruits in 1840, declining to seven percent only in 1880. Schooling was showing its effects.

Or so it seemed. It was the U.S. Army that delivered the first shock to the believers in a literate America. By 1917, when the United States mobilized for World War I, the Army had a new way to test the competence of draftees and recruits: standardized intelligence tests, developed by psychologist Robert Yerkes. Yerkes was astonished to find that 30 percent of the young

*As before, Massachusetts led the way. It had established the first common schools in 1647, but it was not until 1800 that the state allowed local school districts to levy taxes. Most of the existing states followed suit by the time of the Civil War. Compulsory attendance was slower in coming. Massachusetts was the pioneer again, requiring as early as 1852 that parents send their children to school; more than 50 years passed before Mississippi made compulsory education universal. Because schooling was coeducational, the male-female literacy gap quickly closed.



"I'll wait out here for you, Hal. My generation doesn't read." As this 1984 New Yorker cartoon suggests, many literate younger Americans, reared on TV, never acquire the habit of reading for pleasure.

men, while ostensibly literate, could not read well enough to understand his Alpha test form. Public reaction was muted by the fact that many of the near-illiterates were Southern blacks, hence ill-schooled, but the stage had been set in America for a new definition of literacy.

Already the "old bare bones" notion of literacy as a matter of knowing your ABCs and the Bible had been stretched. At Ellis Island, more and more immigrants were arriving from the poor countries of southern Europe, illiterate in their own languages, not to mention English. More than ever, the newcomers were also unfamiliar with the workings of democracy. Only then did the nation's political leaders begin to view the Founding Fathers' call for an informed citizenry, literate in English, as a social imperative. "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism," former President Theodore Roosevelt warned in 1915. And steel magnate Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919), convinced that free libraries were "the best agencies for improving the masses of the people," dipped into his vast fortune to help create 2,500 new public libraries.

President Herbert C. Hoover launched a U.S. Advisory Committee on National Illiteracy in 1929 to study and publicize the problem, but, like Hoover himself, it was swamped by the Great Depression. And with "one-third of a nation" ill-fed and ill-clad, more important matters filled Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal agenda. It took another world war to bring illiteracy back to the forefront. Early in 1941, before Pearl Harbor, the Army declared that it would reject draftees who failed a fourth-grade equivalency test; within a year 433,000 men otherwise fit for duty were still in civvies thanks to the test. In the summer of 1942, the Army relented, deciding that any illiterate who could understand spoken English and follow basic oral instructions was good enough to wear khakis and serve under the flag.

27 Million Functional Illiterates?

After World War II, attention shifted to children's ability to read and write. Rudolf Flesch, an émigré writer and education specialist, designed the first modern "readability" formulas that made it possible to gauge the level of reading ability required by children's textbooks. By measuring the length of words and sentences, Flesch could determine whether they were written for comprehension at a fourth-, fifth-, or sixth-grade level. In 1955, he authored *Why Johnny Can't Read*, a best seller that sparked a debate between advocates of instruction in phonics ("sounding out" words letter-by-letter) and the prevailing "look-say" method (recognizing whole words) that continues today.* Look-say not only sounded Chinese but required students to learn English (by memorizing whole words) as if it *were* Chinese. "Do you know," Flesch declared, "that the teaching of reading never was a problem anywhere in the world until the United States switched to the present method?"

Only during the past two decades has *adult* illiteracy aroused sustained public concern in peacetime. "Adult literacy seems to present an ever growing challenge," writes Harvard's Jeanne S. Chall, "greater perhaps than the acknowledged challenge of literacy among those still in school."

The U.S. Department of Education estimates that the number of *functional* illiterates grows by 2.3 million every year: some 1.3 million legal and illegal immigrants, 850,000 high school dropouts, and another 150,000 "pushouts" who graduate with inadequate reading and writing skills.

All told, as many as 27 million Americans over age 16—nearly 15 percent of the adult population—may be functionally

*A dissatisfied Flesch published *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* in 1981, charging that educators are still ignoring phonics. But most U.S. schools today use a mixture of phonics and look-say instruction.

CHEATING AMERICA'S YOUTH

When the Class of '86 graduates from high school this June, at least 100,000 functionally illiterate youths will receive diplomas. Among their classmates will be hundreds of thousands of "marginally competent" readers, unable to comprehend their own 12th-grade textbooks.

What has gone wrong? The dozens of studies that have been published since Washington sounded the alarm against a "rising tide of mediocrity" in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) agree that television, student drug abuse, and weakened families have all contributed to declining academic achievement. But the most important influence on students' performance is still what goes on inside the classroom. (See "Teaching in America," *The Wilson Quarterly*, New Year's 1984.) And the evidence here is sobering.

Time, one of the most precious commodities in the schools, is often scarce and poorly used. In *A Place Called School* (1983), John I. Goodlad of the University of California, Los Angeles, reports that some schools cram all real teaching into a mere 18.5 hours per week. (In contrast, longer hours and shorter vacations give Japanese students the equivalent of four extra years of instruction by the time they leave high school.)

In elementary schools, American students spend nearly one-third of their class time on writing exercises—but that often means merely filling in the blanks in workbooks. And as students move on to high school, the class time they devote to writing falls by 50 percent.

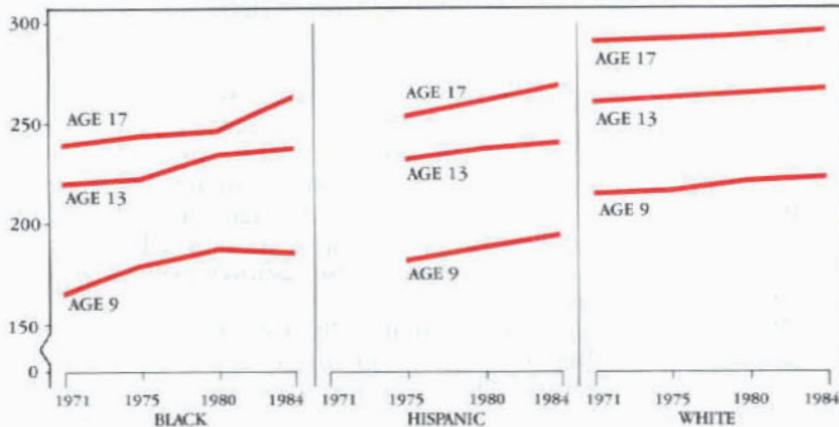
Even more disheartening is Goodlad's discovery that "reading occupy[s] about six percent of class time at the elementary level," a mere two percent in high school. Students do even less at home. High school sophomores average four hours of homework per week; their Japanese counterparts two hours *every night*.

When students do read in class, they use "dumbed down" textbooks—stripped, says Bill Honig, California's Superintendent of Public Instruction, "of any distinguishing content, style, or point of view" by publishers adhering to rigid "readability" formulas. Honig recalls that a local school district he once headed was forced to buy junior high school history books for fifth-graders "because the reading levels of the [standard fifth grade] series were pitched so low."

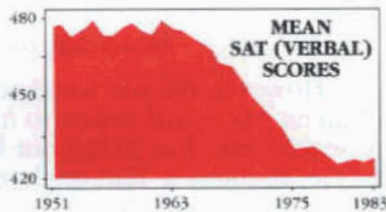
Honig contends that the "reformers" of the 1960s deserve much of the blame. In the name of "relevant" education, they added classes like Marriage Simulation and Baja Whalewatch to the curriculum and eased academic requirements. By the late 1970s, nearly one-half of the nation's high school students were enrolled in lax "general track" programs, up from just 10 percent a decade earlier.

Honig and other analysts see the recent slight upturn in students' scores on standardized tests as a sign that America's public schools have begun a turnaround. But Honig also warns that the damage done to literacy and general learning during two decades of turmoil in the schools will not quickly be undone.

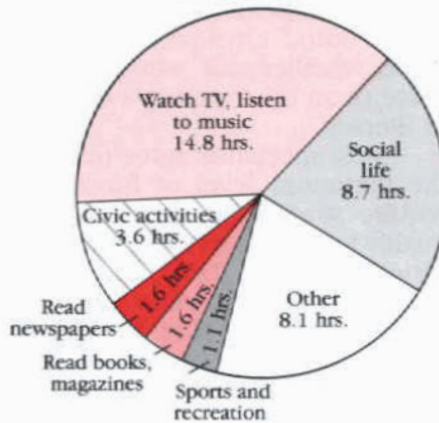
TRENDS IN READING TEST SCORES, 1971-84



Black and Hispanic youths have made significant gains in reading proficiency since 1971. Yet educators worry about the flat performance among nine-year-olds in all groups since 1980: These youngsters will have difficulty meeting the marks set by their elders. Even among white 17-year-olds, the highest scoring group, more than half cannot comprehend material designed for college-bound students. Student scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, a more general measure of academic ability, turned up slightly in 1981. At home, parents do not seem to be setting a good example for their offspring. The average American devotes less than 10 percent of his leisure time to the printed word.



HOW AMERICANS USE THEIR LEISURE TIME



Sources: National Association of Educational Progress, Education Testing Service, Survey Research Center, College Park, Maryland.

*Based on 39.5 hours of leisure time per week, in 1981 (excluding sleep).

illiterate today.* Another 45 million are “marginally competent,” reading below the 12th-grade level. To varying degrees, all are handicapped as citizens, parents, and workers.

More than a decade ago, the U.S. Senate’s Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity put the cost of such slippage to the U.S. economy—in reduced labor productivity, trimmed tax revenues, higher social welfare outlays—at \$237 billion annually. (Today, the burden of illiteracy in terms of unemployment and welfare benefits alone is about \$12 billion.) What costs Americans pay in terms of the nation’s politics and civic life are not measurable.

What does it mean to be “functionally illiterate”? The term is elusive. The number of people who simply cannot read and write today is infinitesimal: The United States is about as literate in these terms as Ivory Soap is pure. Going by the standards of 1840, this represents a smashing success.

Straining to Read the News

However, the old standards no longer apply. The 1840 sort of literacy does not suffice to master the details of contemporary American life. Just filling out federal income tax forms, for example, requires a 12th-grade education. And, if individuals are to prosper, literacy means more than just getting by. “If we are literate in 20th-century America,” writes Harvard’s Patricia Albjerg Graham, “we expand the ways in which we can learn, understand, and appreciate the world around us. [Literacy permits] us to become more autonomous individuals, less circumscribed by the conditions of social class, sex, and ethnicity into which we are born.” On a practical level, getting ahead in the world of work, whether that world is an insurance company’s clerical office or an oil company’s executive suite, requires a high level of literacy.

Most specialists agree that an eighth-grade reading ability is the minimum level of functional literacy. Twenty states now require students to pass an eighth-grade competency test to qualify for a high school diploma. This is a modest standard: the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* are written at a 10th- to 12th-grade level. Jeanne Chall cites the case of a notice she received from the New England Telephone Company. In short sentences, it told customers how to determine whether malfunctions originated in the equipment or the telephone line.

*Opinion is by no means unanimous. A National Assessment of Educational Progress study due to be published this spring will probably posit a much lower level of functional illiteracy. In *Illiterate America* (1985), teacher-activist Jonathan Kozol endorses an eighth-grade standard but estimates that 60 million adults fail to meet it. Jeanne Chall argues that a 12th-grade level is the minimum acceptable standard: Some 72 million adults fall below it.

Yet, according to Chall's readability formula, a ninth- or 10th-grade level of reading ability was needed to understand the notice. "For about 30 to 40 percent [of the customers] it might as well have been written in Greek or Latin."

Pegging functional literacy to an eighth-grade reading ability leaves many ambiguities. Specialists are not certain, for example, whether the skills that an eighth grader needs to pass a competency test are the same as those that a worker needs on the job. More troublesome is that most estimates of functional illiteracy are based on data on the number of years of schooling adults have completed, not on actual tests of their abilities. And, as educators well know, merely completing the eighth grade does not mean performing thereafter at that level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 35 percent of today's 13-year-olds (mostly in the eighth grade) read just above a "basic" level.

One major study does roughly confirm the estimate of 27 million functional illiterates. After testing 7,500 adults on their ability to accomplish everyday tasks—reading the label of an aspirin bottle, following the directions for cooking a TV dinner, writing a check—University of Texas researchers in 1975 put the number of functional illiterates nationwide at 23 million.

Dropping Out

The majority of these people are poor and/or black or Hispanic, residents of the rural South or Northern cities. The University of Texas researchers found that 44 percent of the blacks they tested and 16 percent of the whites were functionally illiterate. "Eighty-five percent of juveniles who come before the courts are functionally illiterate," writes Jonathan Kozol. "Half the heads of households classified below the poverty line by federal standards cannot read an eighth-grade book. Over one-third of mothers who receive support from welfare are functionally illiterate. Of eight million unemployed adults, four to six million lack the skills to be retrained for hi-tech jobs."

A large number of the nation's functional illiterates are high school dropouts. Among adults over 25, nearly 17 percent of blacks and 31 percent of Hispanics left school before the eighth grade. Millions more stayed in school a few more years but never reached an eighth-grade reading level. In 10 Southern states, more than 40 percent of the adult population, white and black, are dropouts. Happily, overall dropout rates (now about 25 percent) have been falling fast during recent decades, but they remain high among blacks and Hispanics in city schools, auguring ill for the future progress of these minorities.



"Computer literacy," training the young to program computers, proved to be a short-lived fad. But well over one-half of the nation's elementary schools now use the machines to help teach the three Rs.

Functional illiteracy tends to be passed from generation to generation—illiterate parents cannot read to their children, help them with their homework, or introduce them to the world of books. The NAEP reports that youngsters whose parents failed to complete high school are nearly twice as likely as their peers to be functionally illiterate.

Reflecting on the U.S. Army's experience with illiterates, an American educator once wrote: "An overwhelming majority of these soldiers had entered school, attended the primary grades where reading is taught, and had been taught to read. Yet, when as adults they were examined, they were unable to read readily such simple material as that of a daily newspaper." The educator was May Ayres Burgess, writing in 1921 about the Army's experience with the Alpha tests of draftees during the First World War. Complaints like hers had been heard before in American history, and they are being repeated today.

In 1986, as we have noted, most of the nation's 2.3 million new adult functional illiterates are either immigrants or drop-outs. But that is not to say that the schools are blameless. According to the NAEP, one million children between the ages of

12 and 17 now read below a fourth-grade level. Among minority groups, the problems are more severe: 41 percent of black 17-year-olds (and eight percent of their white peers) are functionally illiterate, hence not likely to escape from the underclass.

There are signs everywhere that such data understate the extent of the problem, that many more youths—white, black, and Hispanic—do not read well enough to make their own way in American society. Of nearly 1,400 colleges and universities surveyed recently, 84 percent had found it necessary to create remedial reading, writing, and math programs. Big Business spends millions of dollars every year on “job training,” often merely a euphemism for “bonehead” English courses. The American Telephone and Telegraph Company bankrolls \$6 million worth of remedial education for 14,000 employees. The Polaroid Corporation teaches engineers bound for management positions how to read nontechnical material. “They never learned to scan. They don’t know you can read a newspaper differently from a book or that you can read just *parts* of a book,” said a company official.

Reading Jane Fonda

Mastering the technique of reading is no guarantee of understanding the substance of what is read. That requires *cultural* literacy. Most high school seniors can probably “decode” *Time*, but one wonders how much of it they understand. A 1985 study of 17-year-olds by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) found that one-half did not recognize the names of Josef Stalin or Winston Churchill. One-third could not point to “Great Britain, or France, or West Germany, on a map of Europe.” The NEH did not ask its young subjects whether they knew who Mikhail S. Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher were, but chances are that the answers would have been discouraging. Daily newspaper circulation has remained stagnant at about 62 million copies since 1970, while the nation’s population has grown. At least one-fourth of America’s 86 million households appear to go without a newspaper.

U.S. book publishers are selling more books per capita than ever before—output totals 3.5 million copies daily—but if Jane Fonda’s best-selling *Workout Book* is any guide, not many of these exercise the mind very much. The book trade’s biggest sellers overall—the Gothic novels and mysteries and romances sold in drugstores and supermarkets—are mostly written at a seventh- or eighth-grade level.

Even with this wide selection of light fare, 29 percent of all 16- to 21-year-olds, according to a survey by the Book Industry

Study Group, say that they do not read books at all.

Along with functional illiterates, such "aliterates" do manage to scrape by. Most are gainfully employed, active members of society, even if their lives are complicated or their futures dimmed. *Glamour* magazine recently reported the case of a successful 29-year-old female real estate broker hampered by an eighth-grade level reading ability. "I'm constantly with customers who use words that go over my head. I often have to ask them to expand on what they just said. If I can't manipulate them into saying things in words I understand, I'm lost." Her fiancé helped her read letters and contracts.

"You have to be careful not to get into situations where it would leak out or be with people that would—ah—make it show," said an illiterate Vermont farmer. "You always try to act intelligent, act like you knew everything. . . . If somebody give you something to read, you make believe you read it and you must make out like you knew everything that there was on there . . . and most of the time you could. It's kinda like show biz."

"Illiterates become the greatest actors in the world," noted Arthur Colby, president of Literacy Volunteers of America.

Use It or Lose It

Colby's organization is one of many around the country that try to help functional illiterates. But widespread literacy training for civilian adults is a relatively new phenomenon. President Lyndon B. Johnson, calling functional illiteracy "a national tragedy," got Washington involved when he launched the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program in 1964 as part of his Great Society. Today, Washington spends \$100 million (matched by \$200 million from the states) for several kinds of ABE programs: adult elementary and high school equivalency classes, as well as English as a Second Language instruction. All told, ABE enrolls some 2.6 million adults annually.

In 1970, Commissioner of Education James E. Allen, Jr., launched an ambitious national "Right to Read" effort for illiterates of all ages, but Allen was fired for his public opposition to President Richard Nixon's 1970 incursion into Cambodia; his educational "moonshot for the '70s" never really got off the launch pad. In a September 7, 1983, speech marking International Literacy Day, President Reagan called for "a united effort" to eliminate adult functional illiteracy in America. Yet Washington has not chipped in any more money for the effort so far.

The private sector sponsors hundreds of literacy programs. Literacy Volunteers of America (founded in 1962) and Laubach Literacy International (1930) are the two biggest charitable ef-

READING, WRITING, AND... TELEVISION

Next to sleeping and working, watching television is the most popular American activity. The average American household turns on the "boob tube" for nearly seven hours every day, and children are the chief audience. In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health estimated that high school seniors had spent more time in front of the television (15,000 hours) than in the classroom (11,000 hours).

Does passively watching television affect the ability of children to learn to read and write? The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that children who watch up to two hours of television per day score *above* average on reading tests; but *six* or more hours of television watching is "consistently and strongly related to lower reading proficiency."

Television, however, may not actually be responsible for bad reading skills. "Poor readers," the NAEP says, "may simply choose to watch more television."

Jerome and Dorothy Singer, both Yale psychologists, argue that television viewing *does* have a negative effect. Children who watch TV for 20 to 35 hours a week, they assert, simply have little time to read. Moreover, the TV screen "holds viewer attention by piling up novelty through shifts of scene, content, mixtures of visual movement, music, sound effects, and speech." Bombarded daily by this "cluttered stimulus field," children lose the ability to reflect, relax, and focus their attention.

Other scholars disagree. Educator Susan E. Neuman of Eastern Connecticut State College argues that television is a red herring. In her view, it does not displace reading; it displaces other forms of entertainment. Watching television is just one of many factors—whether a child's parent reads to him, his personality, intelligence, schooling, and socioeconomic status—that affect reading ability.

The specialists are also divided over the much-touted merits of "educational" television. Public television's *Sesame Street* employs jokes, stories, rhymes, and puppets to make learning to read more fun. Some studies suggest that *Sesame Street* helps teach its 10 million preschool viewers to recognize numbers, letters, and words—at home, without fear of failure or embarrassment. The Singers, however, find that *Sesame Street* does more harm than good. Each 60-minute show, they say, includes up to 35 unrelated scenes. The result: "short attention spans." *Sesame Street* watchers are bored by classroom work and the "relatively calm, bland environment of most public schools."

For all that, children may be better off watching public television's *Sesame Street* or *Reading Rainbow* than *Dynasty* or the *A-Team*. Yet watching seven hours a day of *any* kind of TV does not strike most researchers as a recipe for intellectual growth among the young.



*Sesame Street's
Big Bird*

forts aimed at adult illiterates. They enroll some 75,000 students annually. Community colleges, local public libraries, churches, community-based education and development organizations (with a mixture of private and government support), corporations, and labor unions do substantial work in the field. All told, private and public literacy efforts spend less than \$1 billion annually (versus \$90 billion for higher education) and reach 4.5 to six million people.

Although perhaps one-fifth of America's adult illiterates enroll in these programs every year (not counting those who need help to climb from an eighth- to a 12th-grade level), many will have to stay in for several years to learn to read and write effectively. Dropout rates are often very high—over 50 percent in some classes. And among graduates, there is a disturbing tendency to lapse back into illiteracy, as the ability to read and write atrophies from disuse once classes end.

What works? The American military has the longest experience with combating adult illiteracy, and even it has found no magic formulas. The switch to an all-volunteer Army made the search more desperate: From 10 percent in 1975, the proportion of functionally illiterate recruits jumped to 31 percent in 1981. (By 1985, thanks in part to high civilian unemployment that improved the quality of recruits, the rate dropped back to nine percent.) The Army has achieved its greatest success with efforts like Project FLIT (Functional Literacy Training)—an intensive six-week course using operating manuals and other written material that soldiers actually need to use in the line of duty.

The Need to Read

The same kind of approach seems to work best in the civilian world. Recently, a New York City Teamsters Union local sponsored a 10-week literacy course for card-carrying municipal exterminators. It focused on teaching the students what they needed to know to pass a certification exam and function in their jobs. Perhaps as important, the teachers were exterminators themselves, peers of the students. The result: few dropouts and a 100 percent success rate on the test for the graduates.

Unfortunately, the Teamsters example is the exception rather than the rule. The government's ABE programs and many others typically use middle-class instructors and rather abstract texts. Lower-class students who see few links between what is being taught (using texts like *Memories of East Utica*) and what they consider important (e.g., writing résumés, comparing life insurance policies) often grow discouraged and drop out. Adds McGill University's Rose-Marie Weber, "Teachers [in adult liter-

acy courses] often complain about the students' apparent lack of motivation, their negative attitudes toward learning, and their failure to recognize the long-term value of literacy skills."

Weber's observation suggests why the "all-out literacy war" that some specialists advocate would be unrealistic. Literacy is not just a simple mechanical skill that people can learn and stow away. It is almost a way of life, requiring constant exercise and the acquisition of new knowledge. The x-ray technician or computer repairman who knows how to read but ignores newspapers and books and turns on the television set when he gets home is not going to achieve or sustain a high level of literacy.

Every generation seems to face its own obstacles to literacy. For the Puritans, one barrier was simply the cost and difficulty of reading by candlelight; for 19th-century Americans, the temptation to leave school to go to work. Today, we lack neither light nor leisure, and the "need to read" is stronger than ever. At the very least, every citizen ought to be able to learn *how* to read and to acquire the knowledge to know *what* he is reading.

Improving the quality of U.S. public education is an obvious (albeit expensive) first step: There is no logical reason why tax-supported high schools in America should produce graduates who can not read and write at a 12th-grade level. Continuing to do so merely consigns another generation of youths, especially low-income youths, to the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. Federal backing for successful local, "community based" literacy efforts for adults, like those of the Teamsters, San Antonio's Barrio Education Project, and the Bronx Educational Services Program, is also needed. Yet many realities of modern life—the increasing influx of unlettered immigrants, the rising literacy standards, and television's continuing competition with the printed word for Americans' attention—suggest that functional illiteracy in America can be curbed but not eradicated. The illiterate, like the poor, will always be with us.

