

# This Is Why Reading Is So Important for Your Brain



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Reading books isn't just filling your head with knowledge—it's nourishing it, and here are the benefits you can reap from it. You can take fish oil supplements or eat lots of turmeric. You can invest in a language class, puzzle books, or a few hours of exercise every week. There are countless methods to (allegedly) **improve your memory** with brain training exercises. But one of the cheapest, easiest, and most time-tested ways to sharpen your brain is right in front of your face. It's reading.

The fact that reading is good for your brain isn't surprising—there's a reason parents are always on their kids' cases to put down the device and pick up a good book. But there's something astounding about how such an ordinary activity can improve your brain in so many ways.

## ***Reading helps the brain to work harder and better***

The most basic impact occurs in the area associated with language reception. Processing written material—from the letters to the words to the sentences to the stories themselves—snaps the neurons to attention as they start the work of transmitting all that information. That happens when we process spoken language, too, but the very nature of reading encourages the brain to work harder and better. “Typically, when you read, you have more time to think,” says **Maryanne Wolf**. “Reading gives you a unique pause button for comprehension and insight. By and large, with oral -language—when you watch a film or listen to a tape—you don't press pause.” And the benefits of reading continue long after you've put down that great book. A 2013 study published in the journal **Brain Connectivity** found that some of those benefits associated with reading persisted for five days. “We call that a shadow activity, almost like a muscle memory,” says **Gregory Berns**, PhD.

## **Reading energizes the brain**

OK, you say, it's hardly surprising that the language part of the brain would get a workout from reading. But reading also energizes the region responsible for motor activity. That's because the brain is a very exuberant play actor. When it is reading about a physical activity, the neurons that control that activity get busy as well. You may not actually be riding a horse when you're reading *Black Beauty*, but your brain acts as if it is.

## ***Not all reading is created equal***

It's important to note that not all reading is created equal. Preliminary findings from a series of experiments conducted at Stanford University indicates that close literary reading, in particular, gives **your brain a workout**. MRI scans of people who are deep into a Jane Austen novel showed an increase in blood flowing to areas of the brain. This is compared to the very limited effects seen in participants who casually skimmed a paragraph at a bookstore.



## The effects of reading on a screen

The ability to read closely is something that has value. In her new book, **Reader, Come Home**, Wolf notes that even she, as someone who reads for a living, has found her ability to concentrate on the written word fading as more of what we read is on a screen. “Unfortunately, this form of reading is rarely continuous, sustained, or concentrated,” she writes. That sets up a vicious cycle. Without the sustained exercise of our reading “muscles,” the brain loses its ability to control the intricate processes that allow us to read deeply.

Of course, there’s an easy solution. Turn off your phone and your computer, set aside a good hour or two—and just read.