

Dear readers,

Not everyone likes nonfiction. In fact, because of the heavy push after fourth grade for students to read dry, historical biographies, the love of and ability to read nonfiction books is greatly disappearing. I can sympathize. While I've always been an avid reader, for years I never touched a nonfiction book because they all conjured up images of boring history classes where I struggled to stay awake. But I'll let you in on a secret: nonfiction books are *not* all awful.

My quiet introduction into the world of artfully-written nonfiction was rather humble. I first laid my hands on *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* in a used-items warehouse (like a giant garage sale) at the end of summer, two years ago. Amongst all the dusty, torn books from the early nineteenth-hundreds was a pale blue hardcover with a funny looking pastry on the front. For just \$1.50, I bought the book without even reading the dust jacket description.

I hid the book away on my bookshelf, not looking at it again until my AP English teacher required us all to find nonfiction books. In an attempt not to get stuck with some historical biography of a guy who did a thing once upon a time, I picked up *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, figuring that a book about the links between creative thinkers and scientific developments would be much less dry. I didn't expect that reading it would change my life.

Proust Was a Neuroscientist introduced me to two things: neuroscience, and nonfiction. I found Jonah Lehrer's analytical descriptions of creativity and brain functioning to be so interesting that after copious amounts of research, I now plan on becoming a neuroscientist. In regards to the latter, Lehrer's writing style showed me that nonfiction doesn't have to be bland recitations of facts, but can be sarcastic and witty, and his topic showed me that nonfiction books aren't just about topics you hated in school.

This was just the beginning of my dive into the world of nonfiction literature. In the past year and a half, I've read books such as *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Outliers*. I've learned more about a cause I greatly support, the organic farming movement, through reading Michael Pollan's *Food Rules* and *In Defense of Food*. I've learned how to diagnose psychopathy through the retelling of Jon Ronson's personal experiences in *The Psychopath Test*. I've found whole new topics of interest to me like travel, food, and statistics. Through reading these books I've noticed that my vocabulary has increased, my attention has increased, and I can remember details about these books months longer than I would have if they were textbooks. I'm actively learning and becoming a better analyzer through reading books I actually enjoy.

Reading nonfiction books hasn't just benefitted me, but has been shown to help students throughout the whole country. While we've known about the benefits of independent reading for a while, it's becoming known now that it's not just how *much* students read, but also *what* they read that matters.

There have been a bunch of recent studies about how nonfiction reading influences student's abilities. In the Common Core State Standards in 2010, a research study was cited showing that students who have a better grasp of nonfiction texts are more likely to earn a grade of a C or higher in college level courses (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers). Another study has shown that reading nonfiction helps students develop their background knowledge, which accounts for about 33% of the variance in student achievement (Marzano). Additionally, a Scholastic newsletter to teachers about nonfiction reading in the intermediate grades points out that "a variety of nonfiction texts may help students become better writers [...] and prepare students for tests". It also suggests that "reading a wide range of materials seems to affect students' interests in reading overall", as shown in a study by Nell Duke, an associate professor of Teacher Education and Learning at Michigan State University (Scholastic).

People in the English field seem to be in agreement. David Coleman, president of the College Board, argues that English classes focus too much on self-expression, and while that is important, it is rare "that someone says, 'Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.'" He argues that nonfiction reading helps students to develop their own expository writing skills and get a good handle on factual prose; i.e. 'practice makes perfect'. English professor Sara Mosle thinks, "what schools really need isn't more nonfiction but better nonfiction". (Mosle)

If that weren't enough evidence to convince you, then I would recommend picking up a nonfiction book and just diving in. If you're still hesitant, don't fret. There's a nonfiction book for everyone, from the tale of a man and his dog in *Marley and Me*, to the psychologist who can predict whether a marriage will last in Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*. If you're into history (and murder-mysteries), I've heard *The Devil in the White City* is fantastic, but if science is more your thing, reading about the hilarious experiments by people like Ben Franklin in *Electrified Sheep* by Alex Boese will keep you entertained for hours. Reading nonfiction can open your mind, introduce you to new topics, increase your vocabulary, improve your test scores...the possibilities are huge.

You won't regret it,

Kayla Sulewski

Works Cited

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