

Why Print Matters: What Research Shows About Reading, Comprehension, and Cognitive Engagement

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As schools increasingly balance print and digital reading experiences, educators are asking an important question: How do different reading formats support different kinds of learning?

Research suggests that print and digital reading environments each offer distinct benefits for students. Digital reading can expand access to information, support accessibility needs, facilitate rapid topic exploration, and create opportunities for interactive and personalized learning. Print reading continues to play a crucial role in supporting sustained attention, immersive reading, and deep comprehension, particularly when students engage with longer or more complex texts (Delgado et al., 2018; Clinton, 2019; Mangen & van der Weel, 2016).

Rather than positioning print and digital formats in opposition, emerging research suggests that students benefit most when educators intentionally align the reading medium with the learning goal. Wolf (2018) argues that students should become “expert, flexible code-switchers,” able to navigate both digital and print environments while understanding the strengths of each. This distinction matters at a moment when many educators are working to strengthen reading stamina, rebuild independent reading habits, and increase student engagement with full-length texts. The evidence suggests that strong literacy systems should leverage the unique strengths of both formats while ensuring that students continue to have meaningful opportunities for sustained, deep reading.

The Problem

Studies examining reading comprehension, attention, memory, and cognitive engagement consistently find that print reading supports forms of sustained and immersive reading that remain foundational to literacy development (Delgado et al., 2018; Clinton, 2019; Mangen et al., 2013).

Researchers often describe “deep reading” as the ability to engage thoughtfully and continuously with a text through sustained attention, reflection, inference-making, critical analysis, and the integration of ideas across pages and chapters (Wolf, 2018; Mangen & van der Weel, 2016). These processes become increasingly important as students encounter longer and more complex texts across grade levels and disciplines.



Research also suggests that students themselves recognize differences between reading formats. In a study comparing digital and print reading, “students overwhelmingly indicated that they believed they learned better when reading in print” (Singer & Alexander, 2017).

This finding aligns with broader research suggesting that print reading may better support sustained attention, comprehension, and engagement with longer texts.

For younger readers in particular, print books may provide important cognitive and developmental support. Physical books offer tactile and spatial cues that can help readers track progress, revisit information, and build stronger comprehension and memory of what they read (Mangen et al., 2013). Print reading may also reduce distractions and support the kind of focused attention required for sustained reading development (Wolf, 2018).

At the same time, digital and print reading are both essential components of modern literacy instruction. Students need opportunities to learn, read, research, and communicate across formats and platforms. Different reading tasks may call for different tools. Digital environments can support rapid access to information, research, multimedia learning, accessibility, collaboration, and interest-driven exploration, while print environments may be particularly well suited for sustained reading, reflection, and engagement with longer texts.

“*Students overwhelmingly indicated that they believed they learned better when reading in print.*”

—Singer & Alexander



As schools continue expanding digital learning opportunities, they must remain equally committed to ensuring students have meaningful access to print books, classroom libraries, and sustained reading experiences. These opportunities play an important role in helping students build reading stamina, engage with longer texts, and develop the deep reading skills that underpin long-term literacy success.

What the Research Shows

Research comparing print and digital reading consistently finds that students often demonstrate stronger comprehension when reading in print, particularly when engaging with informational, longer, or conceptually demanding texts.

(Delgado et al., 2018; Clinton, 2019).

A major meta-analysis by Delgado and colleagues (2018), which examined findings across 54 studies involving more than 170,000 readers, identified a consistent advantage for print reading comprehension. Clinton (2019) similarly found a small but reliable benefit associated with print reading across multiple studies. While researchers continue to examine the factors contributing to these differences, the findings suggest that reading medium can influence how students process, retain, and understand information.

Emerging research in cognitive science suggests that the physical experience of reading may play an important role in comprehension. Print books provide tactile and spatial information including page location, physical navigation, and visual cues that can help readers build a mental map of a text and remember where information appeared (Mangen et al., 2013). These features may support memory, comprehension, and the integration of ideas across longer texts.



Digital reading also offers important advantages when aligned with certain learning goals. For example, they can provide rapid access to information, support research and inquiry, facilitate accessibility, and allow students to quickly immerse themselves in topics of interest through interconnected texts and multimedia resources. These strengths make digital reading particularly valuable for exploration, information gathering, and interest-driven learning.

Increasingly, researchers suggest that the question is not which format is universally better, but how schools can intentionally align reading medium with instructional purpose. Wolf (2018) argues that students should become “expert, flexible code-switchers,” able to navigate both print and digital environments while understanding the strengths and limitations of each. Different reading formats may support different learning goals, but the evidence consistently points to the importance of preserving opportunities for deep, sustained reading experiences that support comprehension, reflection, and critical thinking (OECD, 2021; Wolf, 2018).

Why This Matters

Reading comprehension is not simply a product of decoding words on a page. It depends on a reader’s ability to sustain attention, integrate information, make inferences, and engage deeply with ideas over time. These skills become increasingly important as students encounter more complex texts across content areas and grade levels.

Students who spend more time reading build stronger vocabulary, background knowledge, fluency, and comprehension over time (Sparks et al., 2014; Ferrer et al., 2023). Reading volume remains one of the strongest predictors of literacy development, making access to engaging texts and meaningful reading opportunities critically important.

At a time when many educators are working to strengthen literacy outcomes and increase student engagement with reading, ensuring access to print materials remains particularly important. Classroom libraries, school libraries, independent reading opportunities, and access to high-interest books can all contribute to reading volume and literacy growth.



This does not suggest that schools should choose between print and digital reading. Rather, it highlights the importance of understanding what each format does best. Digital environments can support research, inquiry, accessibility, and interest-driven exploration, while print reading is valuable for sustained attention, deep comprehension, and engagement with longer texts. Students benefit when educators intentionally leverage the strengths of both formats while preserving opportunities for immersive reading experiences.

The Opportunity

The evidence increasingly suggests that schools should be intentional about matching reading format to learning purpose. Different reading formats offer distinct advantages, and educators can support stronger literacy outcomes by thoughtfully leveraging the strengths of both.

This includes:

- Expanding student access to engaging, high-interest print books
- Investing in classroom libraries that support daily reading and book discovery
- Protecting time for sustained engagement with full-length texts
- Using digital tools strategically to support accessibility, research, collaboration, and differentiated learning
- Creating classroom cultures where books and reading remain visible, accessible, and valued

For younger students especially, maintaining meaningful access to print books and immersive reading experiences remain particularly important as they develop foundational literacy skills, reading stamina, and positive reading identities (Wolf, 2018; Mangen et al., 2013).

Strong literacy systems do not treat print and digital reading as competing priorities. Instead, they recognize that different formats may support different learning goals and that students benefit from opportunities to read deeply, broadly, and flexibly across both environments.



In Conclusion

Digital and print reading are not competing priorities in literacy instruction. Both play important roles in helping students access information, build knowledge, and engage with text in different ways.

Rather than asking schools to choose between print and digital reading, the opportunity is to understand how each format can best support student learning. Digital environments can facilitate research, information gathering, accessibility, and interest-driven exploration, while print reading is crucial for deep comprehension, sustained attention, and engagement with longer texts. By intentionally aligning reading format with instructional purpose, educators can help students develop the skills needed to navigate both environments effectively while preserving opportunities for the immersive reading experiences that remain essential to literacy development.

Students benefit most when schools intentionally combine the strengths of both formats, leveraging digital tools where they are most effective while continuing to preserve the immersive, sustained reading experiences that print uniquely supports.



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