

What Does Reading Do For You?

I was pleasantly surprised last week when my son gave me a lecture about how people get to adjust their eyesight in the dark. He told me about pupils dilating. When I asked him how he knew about all that, he told me from a book. He is a voracious reader, and he keeps surprising us with the number of things that he learns.

I believe he will be a better man when he grows up, because he will be well read. One of my good friends once told me to always strive for knowledge. “Everything you have can be taken away; your job, family, title, salary,” he said, “but nobody can take the learning.”

Inspired by this poignant statement, I have always aspired to acquire more knowledge. And over the years, I have found that there is more to be earned by reading.

Everything you read fills your head with new bits of information. For instance, biographies not only help you understand the life and times of individuals, but also their view about the world. Encyclopedias enrich your knowledge about things. ‘The Guinness Book of World Records’ can shock you on what levels people can go to attain recognition.

The more knowledge you have, the better-equipped you are to tackle any challenge you’ll ever face. Think about recipes, references and ‘how to books’. If you read Robert Kiyosaki’s ‘Reach Dad, Poor Dad’, you will learn about principles of investing and saving that have changed many lives. The Bible, Koran and other religious books enrich your knowledge about religion.

Books give you an opportunity to travel the world, to have an experience you would otherwise not have had. In reading, I have travelled to a lot of countries without leaving my room. I know about the oil rigs in Texas, about the Yeti (abominable snowman!), the igloos without having seen snow, slave trade, racial discrimination in the USA and so much more. I have become more informed about places, events, history, cultures and people. I know about life in the Kalahari Desert. I would not know these things if I was not a keen reader.

Did you know how jeans (also known as Levis) came to be? During the gold rush in California, people travelled in droves to look for gold. One tailor, Levi Strauss, was among the hopeful prospectors. He did not find gold, but he discovered that if he made tough trousers using the canvas from the caravans, they would last longer. And thus, a global fashion revolution started. I read all about it in a book! Interesting, isn't it?

I have been asked to speak to students about thinking out of the box, and I have always used this example of Levi Strauss to approach the subject.

Reading books make you wiser. When you become a subject matter expert, people start looking for you. Your personal brand grows.

Once, when I was in secondary school, I answered a question that required use of the word 'incurable'. Nobody else in the school could answer the question, so when I got it right I became an overnight star. I don't remember where I got the word from, but it had stuck in my mind. Over the years, I have discovered that being articulate is the best recipe for success in the corporate, business and personal worlds. Reading builds your vocabulary.

Moreover, nothing beats stress like reading. No matter what you are going through in your life, family, school, personal relationships, break ups and all, it will all go away if you lose yourself in a great story. A good story takes you out of your world, and into another world, draining tension away. Reading spiritual books have a calming effect on troubled souls. Reading comedy also gets rid of tension and stress: One of the books that will forever stick in my mind is 'Hekaya za Abunuwasi', Swahili comedy.

Every muscle in your body requires exercise to keep it strong and healthy. Reading, playing mind-stimulating games and solving puzzles keeps your brain active. Mentally stimulating your brain can slow down the progress of some conditions like Dementia and Alzheimer's. By reading a description of an event or a place, your mind is active, creating an image of the event or place in your head. This is not the same for television or movies, where the image is created for you.

They say you cannot be a writer if you are not a reader. Exposure to published work has a great effect on my own writing. Earlier works I read include Hekaya za Abunuwasi, Meja Mwangi's 'Little White Man' and the works of Sidney Sheldon and John Grisham, all of which have a great impact in my writing, especially in plot development. In order to write well, you need to read every day. You'll be surprised at the words you start incorporating into your writing.

And let us not forget the most important thing about reading: It is fun! There's a genre for every person on earth; poetry, fashion magazines, business journals, biographies, religious texts, young adult books, self-help guides, street lit, or romance novels and so on. There is something for everyone!

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