



## The Advisory Alliance 60-Second Email™

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*In this month's 60-Second Email™, we examine the decline of reading in the US and its impact on people and on business.*

The man at the auto parts store truly thought he was doing my wife a favor. The brake light had come on in her car, and she stopped by the store to pick up some brake fluid. The man was kind enough to offer to top up the fluid for her; my wife gladly accepted.

On her way home, however, she noticed that the light had come on again, and she asked me to have a look at it when she arrived home. The fluid level was still low. I topped it up. She was taken aback. The man hadn't poured it into that reservoir. He had poured it into this one. With a pit in my stomach, I looked to the reservoir where my wife was pointing, and examined its cap: it read "Power Steering Fluid".

According to my wife, the man at the store had dipped his finger into the reservoir, smelled the fluid on his fingertips, and declared that, yes, this was the brake fluid. He obviously didn't read the cap. My wife, who was standing back a few feet from the engine, assumed he knew what he was doing. She had also assumed that he was literate.

In its recently released study "To Read or Not to Read", the National Endowment for the Arts relates some disturbing findings. Based on extensive national studies by U.S. federal agencies, with additional information from academic, foundation, and business surveys, the NEA reports "there is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates."

Consider the following findings:

- Nearly half (48%) of all Americans 18 - 24 read no books for pleasure.
- Those who are 15 to 24, spend, on average, just 7 - 10 minutes per day reading for fun, but spend 2 to 2 1/2 hours per day watching TV.
- Watching TV is the number one leisure pastime for US men and women of all ages.
- In 2005, only 35% of 12th Graders were deemed "proficient" in reading. Even more sobering was that this represented a decline of 5% from 1992 when it was just 40%.

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- Similar declines were seen in college graduates. In 2003, only 3 out of 10 graduates with bachelor's degrees were proficient in reading prose, a decline of almost 10% from 1992's level of 40%, or 4 out of 10.

And what's the impact on business? According to the NEA, it's significant:

- Of all applied skills, written communication (which is very much connected to reading ability) is the top skill that employers see lacking in both high school and college graduates.
- More than 7 in 10 employers view high school graduates as deficient in writing in English.
- Almost 4 in 10 see graduates deficient in reading comprehension.

The personal impact is similarly high:

- Readers who read below a Basic level tend to drop out: In 2003, 50% of Below Basic readers did not complete high school.
- Basic readers have a harder time getting a job: Basic readers are twice as likely as Proficient readers to not have a full-time or part-time job.
- Basic readers are over-represented in prisons: 56% of US inmates read at or below the Basic level.
- Proficient readers have better jobs: They are 3 times more likely than those who read at a Basic level to be employed in management, business, financial, and professional jobs.
- Proficient readers earn more: They are 2 1/2 times more likely than Basic readers to earn more than \$850 a week.

With all the talk about our economy becoming a knowledge-based economy, it's sobering to consider the above findings. Knowledge acquisition and skill-building aren't armchair spectator sports. So are we becoming a nation of passive learners, expecting to be informed and entertained by others at every turn? Is it sheer coincidence that as the Internet and its gamut of online on-demand edu-tainment has boomed, we are reading less, and we are reading less well?

You can access this and previous 60-Second Emails™ via this link to our website:  
<http://www.advisoryalliance.com/newsletter.php>

Best wishes to all for a great 2008,

*David*

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