

# 3 Simple Criteria for Choosing Books

Over the years, I've heard a number of teachers and parents say a variation of the following: "I don't care what the child reads, just as long as he is reading!"

This statement always makes me uneasy. I can see the need to give a child interesting material, but I question the wisdom of letting him always choose the reading fare he likes the best. After all, we don't let children eat, wear, or say what they want. So why don't we apply this same logic to books?

I felt my unease vindicated when I came across the following advice from author [William Thayer](#) in 1893:

*"It will not do to turn the average boy or girl loose in a miscellaneous library, for very likely the bad would be appropriated with the good. Their ignorance and inexperience, if not their love of the sensational and corrupt would be almost sure to mislead. Books are companions, and should be carefully and wisely chosen. The counsel of guardians and superiors should be sought, in order to make a wise choice. It is a matter too important and serious to be disposed of thoughtlessly."*

Thayer continues:

*"If a person reads for amusement alone, it is of little consequence how he reads. He may read by the yard, ton, or acre, and the result will be the same, – intellectual dwarfishness; but if he reads for culture, as he should, his method of reading is of the greatest importance."*

So how should we as adults, parents, and teachers guide the reading habits of our young people? Three brief pieces of

advice can be drawn from Thayer:

### **1. Minimize Novels**

According to Thayer, Marie Antoinette was a woman of minimal education. Her reading fare? Novels and romances.

By contrast, Thayer offers a portrait of Samuel Lee, a day-laborer turned Cambridge University professor. His rise to success was attributed to his love of reading – a love which did not make time for novels.

### **2. Food for the Mind**

Instead of reading a heavy diet of novels, Thayer recommends following in Frederick the Great's footsteps by reading books which provide "food for the mind." Topics in this category include history and biography, books which introduce readers to foreign vocabulary, and in general, any book which encourages a love of knowledge.

### **3. Climb Higher**

I've heard it said that in order to be a good tennis player, one should regularly play with an opponent who possesses better tennis skills. So it is with books. Thayer underscores this point by quoting a man named John Foster, who once said, "A man of ability, for the chief of his reading, should select such works as he feels are *beyond his own power to have produced.*" (Emphasis added.) In other words, an individual should continually read books which challenge and cause him to grow in vocabulary, thought, and knowledge. Continually reading material at a simple level will never cause his mind to expand and grow.

In 2013, [only 38%](#) of high school seniors in America could read at or above a proficient level. Would we see much more proficiency if American teachers and parents followed Thayer's advice for selecting books – both for their children and their own selves? I rather think we would.

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