

Why Most Students No Longer Read the 'Great Books'

For about a hundred years now, various educators have tried to promote a return to the study of the "Great Books" in schools. But they have largely failed to gain much traction.

"Great Books" is the name given to the so-called Western canon of literature—those books throughout history that have been influential in shaping Western Civilization. Some of the titles of the Great Books include Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Euclid's *Geometry*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*. ([Here's a link](#) to one of more famous lists of the Great Books.)

Until the nineteenth century, it used to be common for students to be familiar with many of these works by the time they finished college. And then, they used to finish college [at the age of 18!](#)

However, in the first half of the nineteenth century American schools began to move away from a Great Books focus. Today, only a small minority of students happen to encounter more than two or three of the Great Books in their educational careers.

There are a number of reasons why:

1) **A scornful attitude toward the past.** The Great Books were dumped in the first place because it was thought that the ancients no longer had anything "relevant" to teach us. The same attitude still prevails in schools today.

2) **The snowball effect.** The decline in knowledge of the Great Books is not easily reversed. Most of the teachers in today's schools have not themselves learned the Great Books, which means that they would have a difficult time effectively

teaching them to others. As the Latin saying goes, *Nemo dat quod non habet*—"No one gives what he doesn't have."

3) **The Great Books are hard.** Sorry, but most students aren't capable of grasping the content and complex themes in the Great Books. Previous centuries understood this, which is why higher learning (in the teenage years and beyond) was reserved to a minority of people. But today, our society labors under the romantic illusion that all students should be scholars. To stack the deck in favor of that illusion, schools have had to considerably dumb down the curriculum, which means that they've had to give the boot to the Great Books.

4) **The Great Books are boring.** Students today grow up in an environment where their expectation is that "all is entertainment," including their educations. Teachers are usually in a difficult situation of having to find books that will hold the ever-shortening attention spans and satisfy the narcissistic cravings of these students. The majority of the Great Books—while they do communicate important truths—are not centered on arrow-wielding teenage female heroines who save the world.

5) **The Great Books are taught in English.** I think this is part of the reason they seem boring. English is too familiar to students, and when certain works from the past are translated into their native tongue, the prose and style seems too stilted and is off-putting. But when students study these works in conjunction with learning Greek or Latin, and read them in their original language, then engaging with them becomes like solving a puzzle. The fact is that translating the Latin opening words of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*—*Omnia gallia in tres partes divisa est*—is naturally going to be more interesting than simply reading "All Gaul was divided into three parts" in English.

Thus far, the push for a return to the Great Books may not have had the widespread impact on American education that its

original purveyors had hoped for. That said, there are some inklings that a more popular movement is afoot. Americans are increasingly waking up to the shortcomings of the present education system, [a growing number](#) of K-12 schools are adopting a classical curriculum, and over 100 colleges now have a Great Books Program.

But the recovery of Western education is still going to take a while.

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