

# Compare the Goals of English Classes in 1912 to Today's if You Want to Understand Why Literacy Is Plummeting

I recently spent an evening with a group of college students. Like most young people their age, they were engaged in their studies and eager to share about semesters spent abroad and future plans.

But then the topic changed. Instead of talking about pop culture or other common subjects, these young people started discussing... their favorite Shakespeare plays. And not just *Romeo and Juliet*, either. We're talking lesser-known ones like *Henry IV* (part one and two) *Julius Caesar*, and others. Clearly, these students had received a well-rounded education, not only in college, but in high school as well.

That's a bit unusual these days. But it wasn't always that way. Consider, for example, the [1912 Course of Study](#) for high schools in Oakland, California. A look at the English section reveals a hefty diet of Shakespeare both in primary and secondary readings:

- *The Merchant of Venice*
- *Twelfth Night*
- *Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *The Tempest*
- *As You Like It*
- *Julius Caesar*
- *Richard II and III*
- *Henry V*
- *Coriolanus*
- *Henry IV*
- *Macbeth*

▪ *King Lear, Hamlet, or Othello*

Lest one think that Shakespeare was the only thing studied in 1912, it's helpful to note that Homer, Longfellow, Euripides, Stevenson, Dickens, Tennyson, Thoreau, and Milton were a few of the many other authors included on the reading lists.

Furthermore, it's interesting to note the goals of the Oakland public high school's English course. They read as follows:

- 1. To arouse an interest in the best that has been written by making students **enjoy their English work.***
- 2. By means of this interest in the best, to **help develop right ideals of thought and action.***
- 3. **To train in intelligent, appreciate reading;** viz., to be able to get the writer's thought and to acquire some standards of judgment as to what constitutes true literature.*

Not bad, huh? These sound exactly like the type of goal every educational institution should have for its students: To become knowledgeable, but discerning, young people who understand how the thoughts of past thinkers apply today.

Unfortunately, such does not seem to be the goal of many modern schools. A [2017 course catalog](#) from Skyline High School, one of Oakland, California's current public schools, demonstrates this. Although students are described as reading a "variety of texts," classic, time-honored authors like Shakespeare aren't mentioned until 12th grade, and then only in an AP class.

The goals of the English courses, although vague, are also telling, and focus more on instilling a social justice mindset in students, instead of teaching them to be clear, independent thinkers. The description from the English I course explains:

*"In English I students will read a variety of texts... with a focus on analyzing the central themes of these **texts in relation to issues of cultural diversity, and emphasis on***

***social and personal meaning***, and an analysis of the way in which a work of literature is related to the themes and issues of its historical context.”

Perhaps such information explains why only a third of the nation’s high school seniors are proficient in reading. Or why only six percent of them test at an advanced level. (Yes, you read that right. *Only six percent.*)

The question is, can we expect these statistics to improve if schools avoid teaching challenging material? Or if schools continue placing more emphasis on politically correct concepts like social justice and cultural diversity rather than the thoughtful accrual of knowledge?

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