

9th Grade Reading Lists: 1922 vs. Today

(This story was originally published by Intellectual Takeout on September 2, 2016.)

Have you ever thought that high school graduates today... well, just don't seem to know or understand as much as they once did?

According to a new [research report](#) from the Urban Institute, such a thought is not simply a result of generational pride. Data from The Nation's Report Card (NAEP) confirms the assumption that recent generations of high school students are not doing as well as they once were.

Take reading scores. As the chart below demonstrates, 4th and 8th grade reading scores have experienced an increase in the years since 1992. High school seniors, however, have experienced a steady decline in reading scores over the same time period.



Is it possible that these falling scores are the result of diminished rigor in the high school curriculum?

Having recently dug up a [curriculum manual](#) for Texas high schools from 1922, I decided to explore this question by comparing its 9th grade reading recommendations with those the San Antonio Independent School District recommended for the [2015-16 school year](#).

Both syllabi included recommendations for poetry, fiction, short stories, drama, and non-fiction. Both syllabi implied that the books on the lists were simply suggestions, which might not necessarily be used in their entirety.

To give an idea of the difference between the two, I plugged the fiction titles from both lists into a [text analyzer](#) which measures reading difficulty. The results? Reading material in today's freshman literature classes measures around a 5th grade level. In 1922, however, freshman literature fare often measured at an 11th or 12th grade level.



When we see how the difficulty of reading material has declined in the last one hundred years, is it any wonder that high school reading scores have been trending downward over time?

If American students are ever going to compete on an international level, or even become the well-informed individuals who will lead the next generation, are we going to have to step up our game and get them reading beyond what a grade school child can handle?

Image Credit: Mary Miley's Roaring Twenties