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2024 Scholarship Winner

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Reading is still an important and necessary skill for communication and learning. On one hand, reading enriches our knowledge; yet it is also good for our mental health. I would like to discuss some benefits in this writing.

Firstly, reading is an effective way of acquiring knowledge because it helps us get new information and understand other cultures and ideas. For example, I read newspapers weekly. I can get different information from the newspaper. Besides, I can know more about the world through reading. There are differences to define which books are better. Helen Keller said 'Literature is my Utopia.' When you read any book, you can always learn something new. Apart from acquiring knowledge, for language development, reading diversifies our lexical and syntactical patterns and therefore helps us gain richer writing skills. It is hard for some students to write essays without researching different resources, such as books, newspapers and magazines. As a result, it is impossible to live without reading.

Secondly, critical thinking is also developed by reading as it provides us with new angles of perception. It is normal for humans to look things through one side without thinking of another side. Amala Akkineni said, "Critical thinking is the key to success." We can know the definition of right and wrong through reading books, in order to avoid making mistakes. In addition, by using skills which call us to examine and weigh the veracity of information, we learn through reading when we face different problems in our lives. We can reflect on existing things and question objectively and rationally. Apart from critical thinking, we can enrich our imagination and creativity. In fact, reading stimulates our imagination and causes us to think creatively. Reading enables us to consider things which exceed our knowledge so far or start new activities to create new things.

Thirdly, reading is also good for our mental health. Reading can even relax your body by lowering your heart rate and easing the tension in your muscles. Reading allows us to escape the stress of daily life temporarily and immerse ourselves in a captivating story. For me, I like to read when I feel tired after studying for a long time. A 2009 study at the University of Sussex found that reading can reduce stress by up to 68%. It works better and faster than other relaxation methods, such as listening to music or drinking a hot cup of tea. Therefore, reading is a good way to relax our physical health and mental health. There is an old saying, personal growth is a lifelong journey and reading is an integral companion. Pushing knowledge through reading allows us to constantly evolve by learning new skills, adopting healthier habits or gaining insights into personal development. Biographies of inspiring individual and philosophical works offer guidance, motivation and a sense of camaraderie in our quest for self-improvement.

Based on all the above ideas, there is no doubt that we should not stop reading.

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“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.” — Jorge Louis Borges

Fast forward to 30 years or more from the zenith of literature to an introspection-denuded digital era, when snacking on fragmented information has become the new norm and reading a luxury, 21st-century humans' conception of "Paradise" might be tantalizingly close to a PlayStation 5 game box. Books may be becoming the dinosaurs of today, but we should do our best to shield them from an asteroid.

We delight in the efficacy of platforms like ChatGPT for its astonishing rate of disseminating knowledge and ability to save your essay in the blink of an eye. However, stepping back, what do we truly believe in, eventually? Is it the inherent value of knowledge and morals, or just because they carry the birthmark of "authorised" or "big-data-proved"? Are we actively assimilating, or passively indoctrinated?

I once used ChatGPT to summarise the gist of *Walden*. Within split seconds, Thoreau's tour de force was disassembled piecemeal into jargon and terms. Months later, after finishing the book, a dawning realisation came over me. Sticking to the analysis of ChatGPT, I would never have reached Walden, not even a sneak peek from the dusty window of the cabin.

Perhaps that's why I fervently cherish the idea of reading, for it allows us to internalise values, and witness our thought process come to fruition. Read, pause, reflect, reread. Akin to an arduous road of pilgrimage, our minds are sharpened through the writer's train of thought. We get drawn, but never tempted by the ideas. Our belief system is dismantled and reconstructed, each time with a more solid foundation.

In this hyper-connected world, where YouTube and TikTok guarantee instant visualisation of our most fanatic dreams, we have gradually forsaken imagination through reading. Books provide a sanctuary when we sink deep in the "blah-ness" of life. We may soar on Firebolt broomsticks, or gaze into the emotionless eyes of *Frankenstein's* monster. Through reading, we sow imagination to harvest innovation, the ultimate driving force behind civilization.

Finally, may we all find solace in books. While reading, I am often aware that my identity has shrunk to the size of an atom. A mere ash cruising in the expanse of the universe, conversing with the greatest minds of all time. I still distinctly remember reading Camus' *The Plague* during the Covid lockdown. The quagmire of isolation, the existential condition of living with the consciousness of death, and the sense of rebellion against the absurdity of life, all resonated powerfully with me amidst the pandemic. Great books shed light upon our shared humanity. Holding a book, I feel so closely knitted with the past, the present and beyond. I know I am never alone. I shall never be.

Are books outdated? Never. Should we read? A doubtless yes. So, in celebrating the integrity of human minds, in fighting off the mind-numbing banality of our life, let's crawl into a cosy nook, and —

Start reading.

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Under the cerulean sky with bubbly clouds aloft, a young girl is engrossed in something she is holding. When the breeze arrives, the crisp melody of pages flipping reveals that she was actually reading, or should I say, cruising about another dimension of words and wisdom descended from our forebears?

Regrettably, this scenario is indeed becoming a fading landscape. With the rise of fast media like Instagram and Twitter, what we seek consolation in as pastimes has been replaced by electronic devices. In classrooms, students are taking out a flimsy iPad in place of a hefty textbook, which contains an even larger volume of data and knowledge inside. Online demonstration videos come in a more vivid and memorable form than mere descriptions in books. What's more? Now that many book stores are getting swept into the torrent of surging rentals and plunging sales, books are really diminishing in various walks of life. For leisure gathering, book stores are no longer a popular rendezvous for artistic minds. One would rather gobble 50 hilarious short videos on social platforms than take the time to read 'The Study of Scarlet', followed by digesting and pondering the subtle implications between lines.

The truth is: books are becoming the dinosaur of the new age, unpalatable yet an undeniable part of reality.

Even though reading books is deemed old-fashioned, time consuming and inefficient in some eyes, I believe that it is an essential exercise in our daily routine. It is exactly the slow and unbothered composure during reading, which many disdain, that provides us what we need in a high-paced era: peace. Every time we read, it is a delicate dance of various thoughts and opinions, running wild and free. Many don't realize that it is an alternative form of meditation, relieving us from all the worries and burdensome feelings from work. Besides the tranquility that dwells in the reader, self-awareness arises. Reading is a dialogue between ourselves and the author, an intimate connection that exists only in our mind. "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me" from Jane Eyre might just hit the bullseye and prompt us to reflect on our suffocating schedule. Such tiny moments of self-reflection abound while reading in a quiet corner.

Some contend that efficiency is key: why not apply A.I. to compile and analyse the information presented in a book and save ourselves the chores? Quality over quantity. Language is a subjective game. Nobody can convince me an inanimate program could ever grasp the desperation and pain in the Hamlet's soliloquy, "to be, or not to be". Mulling over these words might just send chills down my spine. This is the humane side of reading: readers from all over the world could be moved by the same book because of the emotion oozing from the paragraphs.

A kaleidoscope of cutting-edge invention will come and go. Yet a good book could never be put down for long and will live on ever more.