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National Endowment for the Arts Announces New Reading Study

Follow-up to Reading at Risk links declines in reading with poorer academic and social outcomes

November 19, 2007

Washington, DC -- Today, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) announces the release of *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*, a new and comprehensive analysis of reading patterns in the United States. *To Read or Not To Read* gathers statistics from more than 40 studies on the reading habits and skills of children, teenagers, and adults. The compendium reveals recent declines in voluntary reading and test scores alike, exposing trends that have severe consequences for American society.

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"The new NEA study is the first to bring together reliable, nationally representative data, including everything the federal government knows about reading," said NEA Chairman Dana Gioia. "This study shows the startling declines, in how much and how well Americans read, that are adversely affecting this country's culture, economy, and civic life as well as our children's educational achievement."

To Read or Not To Read expands the investigation of the NEA's landmark 2004 report, *Reading at Risk*. While that report focused mainly on literary reading trends, *To Read or Not To Read* looks at all varieties of reading, including fiction and nonfiction genres in various formats such as books, magazines, newspapers, and online reading. Whereas the earlier report assessed reading among adults age 18 and older, *To Read or Not To Read* analyzes reading trends for youth and adults, and readers of various education levels. *To Read or Not To Read* is unique for its consideration of reading habits alongside other behaviors and related outcomes including academic achievement, employment, and community involvement.

Among the key findings:

Americans are reading less - teens and young adults read less often and for shorter amounts of time compared with other age groups and with Americans of previous years.

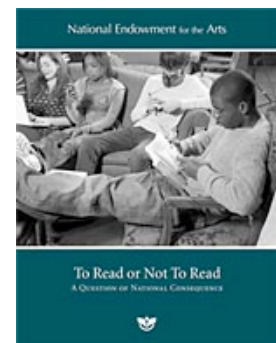
- Less than one-third of 13-year-olds are daily readers, a 14 percent decline from 20 years earlier. Among 17-year-olds, the percentage of non-readers doubled over a 20-year period, from nine percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004.¹
- On average, Americans ages 15 to 24 spend almost two hours a day watching TV, and only seven minutes of their daily leisure time on reading.²

Americans are reading less well - reading scores continue to worsen, especially among teenagers and young males. By contrast, the average reading score of 9-year-olds has improved.

- Reading scores for 12th-grade readers fell significantly from 1992 to 2005, with the sharpest declines among lower-level readers.³
- 2005 reading scores for male 12th-graders are 13 points lower than for female 12th-graders, and that gender gap has widened since 1992.⁴
- Reading scores for American adults of almost all education levels have deteriorated, notably among the best-educated groups. From 1992 to 2003, the percentage of adults with graduate school experience who were rated proficient in prose reading dropped by 10 points, a 20 percent rate of decline.⁵

The declines in reading have civic, social, and economic implications - Advanced readers accrue personal, professional, and social advantages. Deficient readers run higher risks of failure in all three areas.

- Nearly two-thirds of employers ranked reading comprehension "very important" for high school graduates. Yet 38 percent consider most high school graduates deficient



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in this basic skill.⁶

- American 15-year-olds ranked fifteenth in average reading scores for 31 industrialized nations, behind Poland, Korea, France, and Canada, among others.⁷
- Literary readers are more likely than non-readers to engage in positive civic and individual activities – such as volunteering, attending sports or cultural events, and exercising.⁸

"This report shows striking statistical links between reading, advanced reading skills, and other individual and social benefits," said Sunil Iyengar, NEA Director of Research and Analysis. "*To Read or Not to Read* compels us to consider more carefully how we spend our time, since those choices affect us individually and collectively."

While no single government agency or entity can solve the problem of declining reading rates, the NEA national reading program, the Big Read, is one response to these findings. The Big Read is designed to restore reading to the center of American culture by providing citizens with the opportunity to read and discuss a single book within their communities. In 2007, nearly 200 communities nationwide are participating in the Big Read, reading one of 12 classic American novels such as *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. The NEA presents the Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest. For more information, visit www.neabigread.org.

To Read or Not To Read assembled data on reading trends from more than 40 sources, including federal agencies, universities, foundations, and associations. Primary sources include the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the University of Indiana, Bloomington, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

NEA Office of Research and Analysis

The NEA Research Division issues periodic research reports and briefs on significant topics affecting artists and arts organizations. *To Read or Not to Read* is available in print and electronic form in the Publications section of the NEA website, www.arts.gov.

About the National Endowment for the Arts

The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established; bringing the arts to all Americans; and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Arts Endowment is the largest national funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

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1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
 2. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *American Time Use Survey* (2006)
 3. U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005*
 4. U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005*
 5. U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (2007)
 6. The Conference Board, *Are They Really Ready to Work?* (2006)
 7. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003*
 8. National Endowment for the Arts, *The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts, Involved in Life* (2006)

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