READING VS. SCROLLING: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS TEEN READING SKILLS

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One of the greatest challenges faced by English teachers today is nurturing deep reading skills in a world dominated by scrolling. Teenagers now spend hours on TikTok, Facebook, or Instagram, where content is short, entertaining, and instantly rewarding. While these platforms encourage creativity and connection, they also reshape the way young people process information—often making sustained reading and comprehension more difficult.

Teachers are beginning to see this shift firsthand. In many classrooms, students struggle to focus on long essays, stories, or research articles. They can read a few paragraphs but soon lose interest, often asking for summaries instead of working through the text themselves. Castillo and Lopez (2023), in a Philippine study, confirmed this observation: high school students who spent more than three hours daily on social media scored lower in reading comprehension than peers with less online exposure. The researchers described this as "fragmented reading habits," where learners skim headlines or captions but rarely engage with longer, more complex passages.

International research echoes the same concern. Delgado et al. (2022), in a large meta-analysis on digital reading, found that students who primarily read on screens—especially on fast-moving platforms—had weaker comprehension than those who read printed texts. According to their findings, scrolling encourages "surface-level processing," in which readers prioritize speed, visuals, and instant reaction over analysis and reflection. Similarly, neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf (2018) warned that this shift risks eroding the "deep reading" circuits of the brain, which are essential for critical thinking and empathy.

Faced with this reality, teachers are left with a pressing question: resist these digital habits, or adapt to them? The answer may lie in balance. Banning social media outright is unrealistic, as it remains an integral part of students' daily lives. Instead, educators can use it as a starting point. For instance, viral posts, captions, or comment threads can be brought into class for analysis. Once students are engaged, they can be guided toward longer readings that expand on similar themes. In this way, scrolling becomes an entry point to more meaningful literacy practices.

Another important approach is to reintroduce the value of "deep reading." Quick scrolling may provide entertainment, but true comprehension takes time, patience, and focus. Classroom practices such as sustained silent reading (SSR), book clubs, and reflective journaling help students rediscover the joy of being immersed in a text. Even dedicating just 15 minutes a day to uninterrupted reading can gradually rebuild attention spans and strengthen comprehension skills.

Equally essential is teaching digital literacy. Students must understand how algorithms shape what they see online and how quickly misinformation can spread in digital spaces. By encouraging them to compare social media posts with academic texts, teachers can highlight the difference between "reading for scrolling" and "reading for learning." Developing this awareness empowers learners to be more critical and mindful of their reading choices.

Ultimately, the challenge of scrolling should not discourage educators. Rather, it should inspire more creative and adaptive approaches to teaching reading. Social media may influence how today's teens interact with text, but with proper guidance, they can still develop the discipline to read deeply, think critically, and reflect meaningfully. Words are not meant to be scrolled past; they are meant to be understood, valued, and used to build lasting knowledge and connection.

19 January 2026

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