

# Why teens need to revive the reading culture

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Across many schools and homes, teens have steadily replaced novels, newspapers, and meaningful reading time with notifications, swapping imagination for instant, fast-paced content. Yet, as the excitement of social media dominates teenage life, the need to revive the reading culture has never been more urgent.

Today, many young people are discovering their talent in writing, and more teens are publishing books and joining book clubs. Likewise, many young people are published in various magazines and while the excitement around a book launch or publication is often high at the start, the reading rate quickly drops afterwards.

This is because social media which interests teens more offers faster, more entertaining content, making many teens to drift away from reading and, as a result, fall short in engaging with the stories and messages their fellow youth are trying to share.

## A culture fading fast

As the world evolves with advancements in technology, cultures shift as well. Ten or more years ago, just as people now rush to watch the latest movies, school libraries and bookstores buzzed with activity, with teens eagerly reading popular titles such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Pearl*, and *The Famous Five*.

Today, libraries, book launches (attended by only a select few), and bookstores with their reduced walk-ins are noticeably quiet, often only bustling during prep time, exam season, family and friends celebrating milestones, literature students attending classes, or parents buying books for their children for study purposes.

According to a 2023 study by Dr Rebecca Nambi and Dr Rovincer Najjuma (Makerere University), Ugandan adolescents' reading and writing habits, both in school and at home are deeply shaped by social and cultural contexts, rather than by formal education alone. This helps explain why fewer teens read for pleasure. Instead, many spend hours on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and online games, platforms designed to capture attention with minimal mental effort.

Yet reading is far more than an old-fashioned hobby. It is a powerful

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tool that shapes thinking, imagination, communication, and emotional maturity, skills that teens need to invest in and revive in their daily lives.

## Cognitive and academic benefits

It is important to note that teens who read regularly perform better in nearly every academic subject, not just English. This is because reading boosts vocabulary, comprehension, grammar, provides information and the ability to interpret complex questions. For instance, in most cases, learners who engage with literature develop better comprehension skills, which allows them to grasp exam passages more quickly. Similarly, their essays also show greater imagination and structure.

This reading practice trains the brain to think critically, make connections, and retain information, benefits that screens, in contrast, rarely provide, as they encourage quick scrolling and short attention spans.

## Imagination and creativity

Books open worlds that do not exist in daily life, that is, worlds where teens can dream, imagine, and create. When a teen reads, they are not just following a story, but building mental pictures, solving puzzles, predicting outcomes, and interpreting emotions.

Therefore, teens who begin reading articles or novels early often develop stronger skills in writing and are more confident in creating content and performing their own poems.

While with screens, imagination is largely handed to the viewer where everything is already visualised, books, on the other hand, force the mind to work, fostering creativity that teens need for careers in design, writing, coding, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

## Emotional and social development

Like movies or vlogs, stories allow teens to step into the lives of characters with unique struggles, cultures, dreams, and backgrounds. This exposure builds

empathy, understanding, and emotional maturity, especially today, when mental health is a critical concern.

After battling depression and the stigma she faced at school, Faith Agumya became a mental health advocate, using her story and articles, including pieces on coping with depression, to connect with and support other young people facing similar challenges.

When teens engage with such stories, they connect with themes such as friendship, inequality, loyalty, and grief with greater sensitivity. Reading helps them better understand themselves and others, fostering kindness, patience, and confidence.

## Digital balance

Whereas social media is entertaining, it sometimes comes with stress in the form of comparison, cyberbullying, pressure to fit in and anxiety from constant notifications. In most cases, teens often stay awake scrolling, something that affects sleep and rewiring mental health patterns.

However, books provide a calm, healthy escape especially during reading clubs where students put their phones away and read. Several members share that reading helps reduce anxiety, helps them focus better during class and resets their mind.

## Cultural awareness and identity

African literature stories by Chinua Achebe, Jennifer Makumbi, Okot p'Bitek, Kagayi Ngobi, and others help teens see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in literature.

In a world where global pop culture dominates, reading local stories reminds teens of who they are and where they come from.

When *Kintu* by Jennifer Makumbi became popular among Ugandan youth readers, many youth noted that it was the first time they saw Buganda heritage, lineage, and identity captured in a modern novel. Reading such stories strengthens cultural pride and keeps heritage alive.

## Life-long learning and personal growth

A teen who reads grows into an adult who thinks critically instead of relying on social media opinions. Reading builds independent thought where teens learn to analyse, question, research, and make informed decisions.

This is especially important in today's world of misinformation and fast-spreading online narratives. Teachers in several schools commend teens who read newspapers, journals, or biographies as these often ask sharper questions in class and participate more actively in debates, thinking beyond what they are told. The reading trains the brain to be curious and thoughtful, traits needed for leadership.

## Career and future advantages

Reading is key in developing many of life's skills needed in the competitive job market. These among others include good communication in writing, speaking, presenting which are essential in nearly every profession.

Therefore, teens who read regularly build stronger communication skills, confidence, and mental discipline. Whether a teen dreams of becoming a doctor, lawyer, engineer, journalist, influencer, or entrepreneur—reading gives them an edge.

Similarly, job applicants who read widely tend to express themselves better, lead teams confidently, and generate creative ideas, making reading a quiet investment with great returns.

