

FROM BOOKS TO BLOGS

Writing and reading are forever changing. (This is why reading tests and comparisons based on past results are so unreliable.) What is written and read, and by whom, differs considerably from one period to the next.

In the Middle Ages, for example, reading was a profession; (you could become a reader, as you could a lawyer, or a priest). Reading was regarded as so difficult to do, and was so surrounded by mystique, that only the talented few were considered capable of mastering it. They had to go to a monastery to learn how to read - and it took fourteen years. (And one measure of the differences in reading is, that many of today's young readers are expected to read at about much the same level, as the professionals did then.)

Of course all this changed after the invention of the printing press.

By the 19th century, when books were being mass produced, when there were huge circulating libraries, and mass literacy – everyone was expected to be able to read. Laws were even passed in England making literacy compulsory. Partly because the industrial age needed a literate workforce – to follow instructions, and do the 'paper work'.

Not that laws were always required. When there was no radio, movies, television, internet, mobile phones etc, reading was one of the most popular leisure activities, and big books with complex plots and layers of meaning – and which took a long time to read – became very attractive. Reading went from being a profession to becoming quite an art.

The nineteenth century novel was so long, it had to be published in three volumes - and small print! The sentences went on and on – and learning to concentrate - to get to the bottom of those layered sentences, to recall past incidents, and to be able to remember character and plot details –was essential.

Evening entertainment in middle class society, was often a family reading of the latest, best selling novel – Jane Austen or Charles Dickens. The best reader in the family read aloud, to the rest.

But in the 21st century, there would be very few of us who could get through these extraordinarily long and complex stories. Who could remember at the end of those long sentences, what the point was at the beginning. (We would have to re-read, and re-read; we would be impatient and want the writer to get to the point.) It's a long time since such highly specialised deciphering skills were needed – and we haven't developed them in our daily lives.

On the other hand, 19th century families wouldn't have had the skills that we have today. They wouldn't be able to follow the constantly changing scenes on TV or movie screens; they wouldn't be able to google; they would be disoriented by cut and paste; they couldn't make sense of text messages, or see the point of links -- or scan a website.

Nineteenth century readers learned to do one thing at time. They focussed completely on the story, taking it all in; they followed the narrative, line after line, page after page, chapter after chapter, volume after volume. Whereas today's new technology users are multitasking, doing many things at once – and only one of the activities is 'taking in information'.

Where 19th century families were engaged in a long, drawn out process, (novel reading went on for nights, weeks), and where *remembering* all the details of the story was vitally important, 21st century 'reading' is about skimming and selecting, about mixing and moving.

Memorising and recalling – which were the basis of 19th century literacy – have almost nothing to do with the digital literacy of the 21st century,

Today there is really no such thing as online *reading*. What you are doing online is *using*. A combination of writing and reading, and connecting.

You are taking charge of the information that is there – and responding to it (as in email/chat): you are changing it (cut and paste), and collaborating with others (links), as well as creating new information (web page, blogs etc).

Using is not a silent or solitary activity; you don't sit still and concentrate on the images on the screen, so that you can remember them; all the concentration goes on actively making the connections and putting the pieces together – to come up with something new.

It's a different information medium from print, and it calls for different skills. What once worked on a page usually won't work on a screen. And it is not just that a three-volume novel would be impossible to read online – it's any novel! Or any chapter. Or even a long sentence that depends on memory – on getting the information into your head.

Twenty first century users know - heads are not reliable places for storing all that changing information; THAT'S WHAT THE SAVE KEY IS FOR.

Text on a screen is another image. It's not for memorising - it's for using. It needs to stand out. To be instantly recognisable, so it can be quickly scanned, assessed, and selected (or not), or saved for further use.

This is not a matter of dumbing down, but of paring down. Horses for courses. Producing such text (and using it) in the 21st century, is no less a skill than reading was in the Middle Ages, or than reading and writing were throughout the print period. The 19th century, with all its novels, might have been the golden age of print literacy - but literacy in the 21st century is digital. And calls for different but equally demanding - or even more demanding - skills.

So we move from books (print) to blogs (screen). To the immediacy of personal and short responses. On every conceivable topic. With all those hundreds and thousands of links. Which are about signalling meaning quickly - not about burying it deep down, in complicated and elegantly styled sentences, to provide an intellectual challenge or literary games for sophisticated novel readers. That was amusement and entertainment for another age.

Today's fascination is with the speed of connection, the new combinations that can be made. About text, which by definition is here today - but gone tomorrow. And which make an enormous contribution on the way.

But only for those who have become digitally literate.