

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF BELOIT BLOG

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Have you read any good books lately? How about listened? Do you even consider listening to audiobooks as reading?

The debate regarding the value of audiobooks (also known as “talking books” or “books on tape,” for the Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers in the room) is about as old as the medium itself. Some claim that reading with your ears instead of your eyes is not actually reading and, in some cases, cheating. But is it? Studies say it isn’t cheating at all.

What is an audiobook? Simply put, it is a recording of someone reading the text of book. Several authors read their own books, but many publishers hire professional narrators – many of whom are nationally known actors with a great knack for reading a story in a way that keeps you hanging onto every word.

Thomas Edison paved the way for audiobooks with his invention of the phonograph. Recorded books gained more popularity in the 1930s when the United States Congress saw talking books as tools to help the blind and made them available for public consumption through libraries and schools. It wasn’t until the 1980s that retailers jumped on the bandwagon, and their mainstream popularity grew.

While print books are still preferred among most readers, more and more consumers are diving into audio. And, as with music, TV, and movies, the trend is moving away from physical and toward digital. According to the Pew Research Center, 20% of readers have read an audiobook. At Beloit Public Library, our patrons checked out nearly 10,000 audiobooks in 2019 alone. That’s a lot of books!

So, what is so great about audiobooks? There are many great reasons for listening, but here are just a few:

1. **You can take them anywhere.** With audiobooks, you no longer do you have to worry about how many books fit in your carryon; you can take an infinite number of audiobooks in your pocket, on your mobile device.
2. **You can multi-task while listening.** I have read more this past year than any other year, simply for the fact that I’ve been able to listen to books while I work on projects around the house. Many audiobook listeners are commuters who make the most of

3. their time behind the windshield. (With fewer people commuting to work due to the pandemic, audiobook use at most libraries was down in 2020.)
4. **You can listen at your own pace.** Some audiobooks come with the ability to adjust the speed. Whether you need to slow it down to understand the content better, or speed it up to finish it before your next book club meeting, audiobooks offer that flexibility.
5. **You don't have to plan ahead.** If you suddenly find yourself stuck waiting in the carpool lane for kids to be done at practice or in the waiting room at the dentist's office, digital audiobooks can be accessed and downloaded directly from and onto your handheld device in a matter of minutes.

Audiobooks are convenient and portable, but are they good for me? Dr. Daniel Willingham, professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, holds a PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Harvard University and has completed research on the application of cognitive psychology to K-16 education, as well as authored several articles on the topic.

His studies have shown that, when you listen to an audiobook, you actually get MORE information about the text from the narrator's rhythms and enunciations ... and from what they emphasize and where they pause. That additional information may help the reader to better understand and comprehend the subject.

So, with that, I say, go ahead and count those audiobooks as reading!

What about audiobooks for children? For adults, it's easy to understand the benefits of audiobooks, but what about for children? Does it constitute cheating when they listen to a book instead of reading it themselves?

We know that listening to a book encourages cognitive growth. It helps the understanding of language (inflection, pronunciation, and enunciation) through the narrator's modeling. It also builds a love for books and reading, introduces topics that might otherwise not be explored, and exposes readers to vocabulary beyond their reading abilities.

Listening to books and stories is encouraged from a very early age and undoubtedly creates positive outcomes. Our ancestors have been telling and passing down stories for centuries. Can reading with your ears can replace reading with your eyes? We think it's better left for teachers and administrators to determine what's best in their classrooms. We can, however, take comfort in knowing that learning and comprehension are still taking place when reading with your ears. Dr. Willingham suggests that reading with your eyes is most important through fifth grade.



But for children with ADHD and reading disabilities like dyslexia, audiobooks can be life-changing, as they allow these students to keep up with their peers and not get behind in class. Why? Because it's not the comprehension that they struggle with, but the reading itself. If this describes your child, I encourage you to incorporate audiobooks into your child's study routine. Be sure to have a printed copy of the book on hand for your child to read along as he/she listens. Slow the audio until they get the hang of it.

So, go ahead. **Check out an audiobook**, count it toward your list of books read ... and let the kids listen and learn with audiobooks, too.

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