

## **A Reading Crisis? The Challenges and Affordances of Reading Generally and Reading Fiction Specifically**

**University of Stockholm, Sweden**

**10-11 October, 2024**

Arranged by

**PhDnet “Literary and Cultural Studies”, Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Germany**

**The Department of Slavic and Baltic Studies, Finnish, Dutch and German,**

**and the Department of English, Stockholm University, Sweden**

This conference has the overarching aim to investigate the status and function of the long-form reading of literature, but also of theoretical texts, particularly within literary, cultural, and foreign language studies. The conference will emphasize the continued relevance of reading primary texts and secondary sources in research, critical analysis, and preserving historical and cultural knowledge.

Not surprisingly, recent research has shown that especially long-form reading is in steep decline not just within education but also within a variety of other personal and professional realms (André Schüller-Zwierlein et al. 2022; Baron and Mangen 2021; PISA 2018; Iannone 2005). According to an international study (Mizrachi et al. 2018), students regarded a text longer than 7 pages as a long text. In our contemporary multimedia reality—governed by the attention economy of social media, and dominated by the logic of speed and effortlessness—reading texts that exceed social media character becomes an arduous, slow, and energy consuming task. This development is not just a matter of concentration (or lack thereof), that is, the discrepancy between two different modes of attention: hyper and deep attention (Hayles 2007). In addition, it concerns the amount of time invested by the reader for a certain desired outcome. This is a crucial factor especially within the educational sector.

The contemporary omnipresence of digital media and the constant flow of information clearly indicate to the media consumer that the time-consuming activity of reading literature constitutes an obsolete and unnecessarily slow process of consuming narratives. Why spend two days reading Orwell’s *1984*, when you can see the movie in a couple of hours? Why spend time close reading a poem and determine its aesthetic qualities and its formal features, when you can retrieve the answers to those questions by a millisecond Google search? Why spend many hours reading a

demanding Shakespeare play, when you can absorb a 15-minute YouTube summary analyzing the plot for the media consumer? Students using multimedia appear to be 'saving' a great deal of work hours by not reading, but why does our society—especially institutions of education—continue to highlight the importance of reading? Is the type of media really important?

In the set-up of this international conference involving scholars and PhD-students from several European universities, we are interested in exploring what aspects of the actual activity of reading may be indispensable or irreplaceable, and if so, from what perspective. Specifically, we address the following questions:

- What is it with the **reading** generally, and the reading of fiction specifically, that makes it **worth maintaining** as an important component of, for instance, **education** (language studies and other subjects)?
- How can we ensure that the act of **reading** texts remains a **meaningful and enriching experience** for students?
- How can **educators** effectively convey **the value of reading in the digital age**?
- What are the available **methods of teaching** required if reading is still to have a central place in society?
- What are the possible **methods of examination** that could **promote the reading** of fiction and other types of long-form reading?
- What is it that makes **reading** a source of **pleasure and a leisure**, and how can we enhance this experience for individuals of all ages in an age dominated by screen-based entertainment and fast-food for the brain?

By addressing these questions and spin-off queries, the conference seeks to initiate and further explore the discourse on the status and function of long-form reading within education and thereby in our contemporary world in general. Keynotes will be given by **Jesper Olsson** (Uppsala University) and **Merja Polvinen** (University of Helsinki).

We welcome proposals for **individual papers**. Individual papers will be allocated a time slot for 20 minutes, plus 10 minutes for discussion.

We plan this conference as a stimulating and **in-person** event; online presentations, unfortunately, cannot be accepted.

Please submit your proposal via e-mail **phdnet@gcsc.uni-giessen.de** with the subject line "Abstract submission". Please submit an abstract of max 250 words, 3–5 keywords and a short bio of the presenter (150 words max).

Submission of proposal opens **January 9, 2024**.

Deadline for submissions is **March 17, 2024**.

Notifications of acceptance will be sent out at the latest by **April 30, 2024**.

For the members of the European PhDnet "Literary and Cultural Studies", the event begins with a workshop on **October 9, 2024**.

For all accepted contributors, the dates of the conference are **October 10-11, 2024**.

Works cited:

- Baron, Naomi S., and Anne Mangen. "Doing the Reading: The Decline of Long Long-Form Reading in Higher Education." *Poetics Today*, vol. 42, no. 2, Jan. 2021, pp. 253–80.
- André Schüller-Zwierlein, et al. "Why Higher-Level Reading Is Important." *First Monday*, vol. 27, no. 9, Jan. 2022.
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- PISA 2022, *Summary | PISA 2022 results*, <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/>
- Iannone, Carol. "Reading Literature: Decline and Fall?" *Academic Questions*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2005, pp. 6–15.
- Mizrachi D, Salaz AM, Kurbanoglu S, Boustany J, on behalf of the ARFIS Research Group. "Academic reading format preferences and behaviors among university students worldwide: A comparative survey analysis." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 13, no. 5, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0197444>
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes." *Profession*, 2007, pp. 187-99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595866>.