By James B. Levy

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All legal educators recognize that critical reading is one of the most important skills we teach our students. For that reason, one of the primary goals of the law school curriculum, particularly in the first year, is to help students develop this vital skill. But the act of reading itself has changed in recent years due to the increased use of digital technologies and the variety of new reading behaviors they have spawned. Indeed, the very definition of what it means to read is changing such that teachers and their students may now understand this very fundamental skill quite differently. Consequently, teachers are now facing new challenges when they are already under great pressure to make students practice ready at a time when many students arrive at law school less prepared than ever.

Fortunately, Professor Naomi Baron, a linguistics scholar and Director of the Center for Teaching, Research and Learning at American University, has published a new book called *Words on Screen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* that discusses these trends and their implications for the classroom.¹ Her book is an informative guide for any LRW professor interested in better understanding the reading habits of today’s students in order to address the classroom challenges they present. Though there are other books that discuss reading from a cognitive science perspective by focusing on the mental processes involved, Professor Baron’s book may be unique in its focus on how reading behaviors, the medium, and the chosen platform all converge to influence the overall reading experience.² The picture she describes of reading in the digital age turns out to be much more nuanced and idiosyncratic than one might expect.

Baron’s book discusses numerous studies, both her own and those of others, that examine the reading practices of college-aged students in particular. Since entering law students generally fall into the same demographic as the groups Baron studied, her book offers valuable insight to LRW professors about how today’s law students read. Perhaps more significantly, Baron observes that reading and writing are “joined at the hip,” by which she means that a student’s approach to reading is often reflected in how the student approaches writing as well.³ Thus, by training students to be more proficient readers, we might also be able to help them become better writers too.

For legal educators, one of the big takeaways from Baron’s book is that we cannot easily generalize about the reading habits of so-called “digital natives” or their preferred reading platforms. For instance, while college-age students are among the most obsessive users of mobile devices who always seem to be glued to their screens, poll after poll has shown that when it comes to doing schoolwork, most prefer conventional textbooks over digital ones. Far from being a dead format, print is still very much alive and kicking among the wired generation, at least for certain tasks. And though sales figures for e-books are a closely guarded industry secret, Baron reports that the demand for them among the general public has leveled off in recent years and may have even flattened.⁴ In terms of overall sales, traditional hard copy books are still vastly more popular.

³ Baron, *supra* note 1, at 25, 45.
⁴ Id., at 191.
popular than their electronic counterparts and outsell them by a large margin. To paraphrase the famous words of Mark Twain, the reports of print’s imminent death have been greatly exaggerated.

But before getting into the specifics of how today’s college-aged students read, Baron makes the broader point that technology is transforming the act of reading itself. On the one hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that, in general, young people are reading more today than at any other time in history because of the ubiquity of social media and digital devices like smartphones. On the other hand, the notion of what it means to read is evolving. For some, merely sharing a post with friends via social media means they’ve “read” it, while for others just skimming an article on a mobile device qualifies as having “read” it.

That’s not to say students come to law school not understanding or lacking the ability to engage in deep reading, just that their teachers may have to be more explicit in describing their expectations when it comes to reading assignments. It may no longer be sufficient to simply tell students to read the material carefully without providing further direction or instruction. Instead, teachers should consider spending class time explaining to students what deep reading is about by showing them, for example, how experts attack the page with highlighter and pen in hand. They may also need to spend class time showing students the other habits and behaviors expert readers, like their teachers, have so internalized that they forget students don’t share the same assumptions about what to do.

Baron observes that reading now covers a broader range of activities that includes scanning, skimming, prowling, and power-reading, in addition to deep reading. She further notes that an individual’s reading strategy is often related to the content, the medium, and the device on which it is read. Thus, a reader might skim social media posts viewed on a smartphone, yet adopt an entirely different reading style when viewing documents on a desktop computer, or reading a traditional hard copy book for work or pleasure. Of course, students’ chosen reading strategies affect the extent to which they engage in the material which, in turn, determines how much they comprehend and retain. Interestingly, Baron suggests that both the medium and device affects the reader’s expectations about the importance, difficulty, and gravity of the material. In a form of “guilt by association,” students may perceive electronic content viewed on a smartphone as less worthy—and consequently take it less seriously—than if the same material was made available to them in hard copy.

If students perceive the material as being less important, it follows that they will likely put less effort into understanding it. For instance, Baron’s research suggests that students are less likely to re-read electronic text regardless of the device used to view it compared to the same material presented to them in hard copy. Obviously, this has serious implications for legal educators since students should be re-reading nearly all of their assignments in law school to better understand the deeper, underlying meaning of that material. Indeed, the very purpose of most of these assignments is to show students that they haven’t read the material carefully enough. And with longer texts in particular, Baron found that students may be less likely to even finish an electronic document compared to a hard copy version of the same material.

Keep in mind that digital devices like smartphones and e-readers, which are now so ubiquitous, didn’t exist ten years ago. Consequently, only a short time ago none of this was an issue for LRW professors to grapple with when designing reading assignments for class. But today, there are a variety of reading devices and platforms that include

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1 See id., at 7, 191 (although the sales of e-books which didn’t even exist just a few years ago has grown exponentially since their introduction, they still only account for about 20% of total book sales in the U.S., where sales are by far the strongest, and have sold only a fraction of that in Europe and Japan).
2 Id., at 39.
3 See id., at 43.
4 See id., at 7, 191.
5 Id., at 84, 165.
6 Id., at 108.
Teachers must now think about how both the medium and device affect the student’s perception of, and interaction with, the material. 

Further complicating matters, Baron finds that readers often have very idiosyncratic tastes when it comes to their choice of medium and reading platform. So, while most readers nowadays may prefer to get their news electronically by smartphone or desktop device, for pleasure reading many still prefer traditional books. And within that broad category of pleasure reading, the same person who likes to read a hard copy version of a best-selling biography at home or at the beach might opt instead to read a romance novel on a dedicated e-reading device while traveling. And while surveys show that college-age students prefer the lower cost and convenience of e-textbooks, when it comes to reading and understanding challenging material for class, print is still king.

As alluded to previously, teachers also need to recognize that not all digital devices are created equal when it comes to the type of reading experience they provide. Generally speaking, digital devices that have an internet connection like smartphones and tablets are much more likely to create reader distractions that interfere with comprehension than those devices that lack such a connection. Among dedicated e-reading devices, those that permit readers to take notes and highlight text may increase reader engagement compared to devices without those features.

Baron further notes there are several reasons why print has advantages over its electronic counterpart in terms of reader comprehension and retention, in addition to the lack of distraction-causing interconnectivity. Chief among them, conventional books require the reader to physically engage with the printed page in ways that seem to enhance understanding even compared to dedicated e-reading devices that readers must hold to use. Research suggests that when it comes to the kind of serious cognitive engagement needed to tackle difficult material, a reading strategy that engages both the mind and the body is better than one that doesn’t. Thus, studies suggest that the physical properties of books help orient the reader within the material—for example, how far in the story she has travelled and how much farther she has to go—which puts the smaller pieces into a larger context that helps the reader understand the big picture. Related to that, the overall feel and haptics of a book help to engage the reader in ways that electronic devices do not. Finally, the reader who is able to write margin notes and highlight the printed page may be more engaged in the material both cognitively and physically than the reader using an electronic device. Research suggests that these advantages hold true even when comparing print to e-reading devices that incorporate note-taking and highlighting features.

None of this is to say that electronic devices are per se inferior to books. To the contrary, digital devices have advantages that may encourage reader engagement even more so than traditional books. The same internet connectivity that causes reader distraction, for example, can be leveraged to better engage students with hyperlinks that allow them to explore the material in more depth at their own pace. An internet-enabled device can also turn reading into a social activity with the potential to engage students in ways that traditional books could never match. Electronic devices can also make reading a multimedia experience by incorporating features like video and sound. Learning theory tells us that,

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11 See Baron, supra note 1, at 211.
12 Id., at 63.
13 Id., at 78, 80.
15 Id., at 296.
16 Haptics refers to the sense of touch and tactile experience of interacting with physical objects. Interestingly, some smartphones now include an adjustable haptics function intended to enhance the user experience.
17 See Baron, supra note 1, at 29-30.
18 Id., at 40.
generally speaking, lessons that target multiple senses like sight, sound, and touch are pedagogically more effective than those strategies that don’t. Finally, some commentators observe that, if they don’t already, e-textbooks will soon be able to gather analytical data about reader use which educators can use to improve course content and design.

All LRW professors are familiar with the saying that “there’s no such thing as good writing, only good re-writing.” That is, to teach students to be better writers, we have to train them to work through multiple drafts as a way to refine their ideas. Baron says the same is true about training students to be better readers; it’s all about showing them the importance of being good re-readers. Re-reading is a bona fide skill that can require learning new habits like focus, attention, and good note-taking, all of which can be taught. To take one example, researchers studying the practice of highlighting have found better, as well as less effective, techniques that may either enhance or detract from the reader’s deeper engagement with the text. All of the foregoing underscores the point that reading is not a passive activity, rather it is a contact sport that students can learn to do better through practice.

In sum, Words on Screen reveals that reading is a more complex activity than meets the eye. Individual reading strategies, the chosen platform, and the medium all play a role in how much students engage with the underlying ideas reflected in the text. Changing any of these variables can affect the reader’s relationship with the text and ultimately impact how much they understand and retain the content. For LRW professors, the value of Baron’s book is that it can help us become more aware of the need to train students in a range of reading styles and platforms that they can learn to toggle between, depending on the task at hand. For us and our students, being an effective reader in the digital age is about knowing how to pick the right tool for each job.

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19 Id., at 110-11.
21 See Baron, supra note 1, at 222.

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Micro Essay

Ideally, you would want a database that contains everything possible. But life is not perfect, especially when you are already stranded on a deserted island. I would take a magic citator service, which provides the subsequent history of every single primary source of law: not just cases, statutes, or regulations, but all agency decisions, trial court orders, municipal codes, and ethics opinions, etc. The one that is not only a citation index of legal resources but a “citation index” w/2 (legal-rule! or legal-standard!). May my wish come true (citator % “deserted island!”).

Alex Zhang, Head of Public Services, Robert Crown Law Library, Stanford Law School, Stanford, Cal.