

## Does Social Media Make Us Smarter?

On any given day, the average American teenager spends more than 7.5 hours online and uses his or her cellphone 60 times. While these numbers strike fear in the hearts of parents, there are some real benefits to a technology-saturated life: young people spend far more time consuming new information, honing verbal concision, and interacting with a diverse audience than they have at any point in history.

Social media might render us mean and unhappy, but it also makes us more intelligent, according to a new study. Research suggests social media can improve verbal, research, and critical-thinking skills, despite popular concern about the damaging effects of the internet on impressionable youths.

Stanford professor Andrea Lunsford collected 877 freshman composition papers from 1917 to 2006 to study the ways technological advances have changed the quality of writing. Often the biggest complaint about “digital natives” is lazy prose – a tendency to use abbreviations and poor grammar – but Lunsford’s research suggests that’s a myth. She discovered there was virtually no change in the number of errors in composition papers over the past century. She also found that by 2006, papers were six times longer, more thoroughly researched, and more complex than those written in 1917.

Of course, major advances in education over the past century need to be accounted for when reviewing Lunsford’s findings. But there is one change inextricably tied to social media: Young people spend far more time writing outside the classroom than ever before.

They spend hours on extracurricular composition in the form of tweets, texts, emails, comments, photo captions, and discussion boards.

Sites with character counts, like Twitter, are particularly beneficial because they teach users to be economical with language. Digital connectedness can also provide students with a greater sense of purpose in their work. Writing for an engaged, responsive audience often motivates people to make their work more compelling, even if they’re just composing a 140-character tweet.

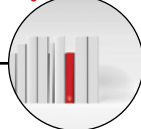
That’s not to say social media doesn’t have negative effects. Even Thompson and Lunsford recognize that the impact of technology on young minds is complicated. One clear casualty of the digital revolution is our attention spans. Ten years ago the average attention span was 12 minutes. In just a decade it’s been reduced to five seconds.

Research also suggests that Facebook can contribute to feelings of sadness and dissatisfaction. But these symptoms of social media, while unfortunate, are not inconsistent with Lunsford’s and Thompson’s findings. After all, if history is any indicator, unhappiness and intelligence are not mutually exclusive.

(Adapted from *www.theweek.com*)



activities



### ↓ WRITING

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