

Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years

April 18, 2018

Every two years, education-policy wonks gear up for what has become a time-honored ritual: the release of the Nation's Report Card. Officially known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, the data reflect the results of reading and math tests administered to a sample of students across the country. Experts generally consider the tests rigorous and highly reliable—and the scores basically stagnant.

Cognitive scientists have known for decades that simply mastering comprehension skills doesn't ensure a young student will be able to apply them to whatever texts they're confronted with on standardized tests and in their studies later in life.

One of those cognitive scientists spoke on the Tuesday panel: Daniel Willingham, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia who [writes](#) about the science behind reading comprehension. Willingham explained that whether or not readers understand a text depends far more on how much [background knowledge and vocabulary](#) they have relating to the topic than on how much they've practiced comprehension skills. That's because writers leave out a lot of information that they assume readers will know. If they put all the information in, their writing would be tedious.