



What Does the State of the Union's Readability Say About American Literacy?

On January 12 at 9:00 p.m. Eastern Time, President Obama will deliver his last State of the Union address.

Before the big day, many might be interested in an academic analysis that could provide a little context for the speech and a little insight into the state of our union's literacy.

January 8 was the 226th anniversary of the very first State of the Union address delivered by (no surprise here) George Washington.



The requirement that the executive deliver such a report is set out in Article I, Section 3 of the Constitution, which reads in relevant part, "He shall from time to time give to the Congress information of the state of the union, and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."

Our first president delivered his premier presentation to members of Congress gathered in New York City. The speech was short — the shortest in history, coming in at just over 1,000 words — and didn't feature any of the pomp and protocol associated with the modern versions of the event.

In contrast, the length of Barack Obama's 2015 State of the Union address was 6,718 words.

While that is some six times longer than Washington's first address, both of these reports were practically memos compared to President Harry S. Truman's 1946 State of the Union address, which ran 25,000 words, or the final (1981) address of Jimmy Carter, who went out in a blaze of glory, going on for 33,667 words! (Fortunately, the latter address was written, not spoken.)

The topics covered today, of course, are much more varied and cover much more ground than anything Washington would ever include in his incipient address. It is the content, though, where we might learn a little more about the audience than about the speaker.

Taking George Washington's first State of the Union and Barack Obama's first State of the Union as samples, the author of this article ran the first three paragraphs of both discourses through an application that analyzes the readability level of any text. The results reveal less about Washington and Obama and more about the relative literacy of those to whom they spoke — the people and the people's representatives in Congress.

More accurately, the [Web-based application](#) analyzes the selected text and reveals the grade level that one would have to have reached in order to understand the vocabulary used in the text. The website explains the scale this way:

A grade level (based on the USA education system) is equivalent to the number of years of education a person has had. A score of around 10-12 is roughly the reading level on completion of



high school.

Now for the results.

George Washington's first State of the Union address received an average grade level score of 17.9. That means that in order to understand the vocabulary in the first State of the Union in 1790, a reader would need bachelor's degree and nearly two years of graduate school.

As for Barack Obama's first address, the reader would need a vocabulary equal to that of someone in the second semester of the ninth grade.

Some will view the wide gulf between the sophistication of the language used in these speeches as somehow indicative of the education or vocabulary of the lecturers. I don't think that is the most important takeaway of these results, however.

For several generations now, Progressives have manipulated the curriculum and standards applied to elementary and secondary schools. These "reforms" have left the American people less well-read and less literate generally than their ancestors whose education was less formal, but far more ambitious and arduous than anything even offered in the most challenging schools today.

Whether at home or in a schoolhouse, the goal of education in the early days of our nation was to instill virtue in the students. The Founders were taught that free societies were sustained by a virtuous populace, and that, if a society were to abandon a study of the classics, that same society would eventually abandon the virtues championed by the classical authors.

Teachers concentrated their lessons on the works of those classical authors on which students would be tested prior to admission to college. A brief survey of the entrance requirements for colonial colleges will testify to the enlightenment of our Founding Fathers — as well as to the astounding decline in the educational standards of our day.

In 1750, Harvard demanded that applicants be able to extemporaneously "read, construe, and parse Cicero, Virgil, or such like classical authors and to write Latin in prose, and to be skilled in making Latin verse, or at least to know the rules of Prosodia, and to read, construe, and parse ordinary Greek as in the New testament, Isocrates, or such like and decline the paradigms of Greek nouns and verbs." Of note is the fact that John Trumbull, the illustrious artist, passed Harvard's exacting entrance exam at only 12 years of age.

Alexander Hamilton's alma mater, King's College (now Columbia), had similarly stringent prerequisites for prospective students. Applicants were required to "give a rational account of the Greek and Latin grammars, read three orations of Cicero and three books of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and translate the first 10 chapters of John from Greek into Latin."

James Madison had it no easier when he applied for entrance to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) in 1769. Madison and his fellow applicants were obliged to demonstrate "the ability to write Latin prose, translate Virgil, Cicero, and the Greek gospels and a commensurate knowledge of Latin and Greek grammar."

Today, by contrast, the bar is just a bit lower.

Common Core standards require students to read less literature and more nonfiction. And, judging from the list of approved texts, it's not the sort of nonfiction most parents would appreciate.

On two separate occasions, the *New York Times* has published information regarding the reduction in



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reading the classics of Western literature in favor of an increase in the study of selected government publications and psychological treatises.

In its report from June 20, 2015 entitled “English Class in Common Core Era: Tom Sawyer and Court Opinions,” the *New York Times* states:

In Harrison, N.Y., 10th graders [read articles](#) about bipolar disorder and the adolescent brain to help them analyze Holden Caulfield. In Springdale, Ark., ninth graders studying excerpts from “The Odyssey” [also read](#) sections of the G.I. Bill of Rights, and a congressional resolution on its 60th anniversary, to connect the story of Odysseus to the challenges of modern-day veterans. After eighth graders in Naples, Fla., read how Tom Sawyer duped other boys into whitewashing a fence for him, they follow it with an [op-ed article](#) on teenage unemployment.

Why the change in curriculum? “The rationale is that most of what students will be expected to read in college and at work will be informational, rather than literary, and that American students have not been well prepared to read those texts,” the article claims.

When it comes to classroom content, the *Times* reveals that under the Common Core scheme, teachers won’t be “teaching an entire novel,” but they will be using technical reports and government-sponsored white papers to ensure that teachers are “teaching the concepts that that novel would have gotten across.”

In other words, rather than reading Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, students will read some report published about Caesar’s psychic pain when he crossed the Rubicon or how Brutus was suffering from some sort of maniacal mental disorder that motivated him to murder the consul-cum-king.

The New American’s Alex Newman commented on the “[real agenda](#)” behind the implementation of these state-sponsored standards:

Totalitarian leaders from Hitler to Stalin and everywhere in between have always sought to centralize and control education. The reason is simple: Whoever molds the minds of the youth can eventually dominate the population, even if it takes a generation or two. That is why tyrants in recent centuries have demanded compulsory, government-led education. Hitler made clear that he wanted to use “education” as a tool to mold German children in accordance with the National Socialist regime’s despotic and murderous ideology. So did Stalin, and numerous other infamous tyrants and mass-murderers. As Karl Marx noted in his *Communist Manifesto*, government-controlled schooling is essential to achieving the goals of socialism.

In his masterpiece *On Liberty*, renowned British philosopher and parliamentarian John Stuart Mill succinctly explained the inherent problems with government schools. “A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government ... it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body,” he wrote.

So, if you tune in to the State of the Union address this week, remember that behind the boasting, behind the bombast, there lurks a designed degradation of the literacy standard of our country that could lead our union into a pretty rotten state.



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