

EDITORIAL

Why Slow Reading Still Matters in Humanities Education

Marguerite Johnson^{1,*}

¹Classics and Ancient History, School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia

Correspondence: marguerite.johnson@uq.edu.au

Arguments about reading often settle too quickly into a familiar contrast: deep attention belongs to printed books, while digital media produce distraction. That contrast is historically and pedagogically weak. Readers can skim print and attend carefully to a screen. Digital tools can interrupt concentration, but they can also support comparison, annotation, accessibility, and the discovery of textual patterns. The central issue is not the medium alone. It is whether educational design gives students time, purpose, and methods for sustained interpretation.

Slow reading should therefore be understood as a practice rather than a pace measured by words per minute. It involves returning to a passage, testing an interpretation against detail, noticing form, distinguishing a text's claim from the reader's assumption, and remaining with uncertainty long enough for alternatives to emerge. These activities are central to humanities inquiry because language rarely offers meaning without mediation.

Computational analysis and distant reading have expanded what literary and cultural scholars can ask of large collections. Patterns across thousands of documents can reveal conventions, absences, and historical changes that no individual reader could identify alone. These methods should be taught as genuine additions to the humanities, not as threats imported from elsewhere.

Yet scale can create an illusion of completeness. A corpus is selected, cleaned, and categorized; a feature is defined; an output is visualized. Each step contains interpretive decisions. Slow reading is

one means of auditing those decisions. Returning from a pattern to particular passages can show whether a category is meaningful, whether irony confounds classification, or whether the most easily digitized material has displaced less accessible voices.

Close and distant reading thus need not compete. They can operate as a sequence of challenge and correction. Large-scale analysis asks where to look; slow reading asks what the located evidence can responsibly support. A strong humanities curriculum should teach students to move between these levels and to explain why they changed scale.

Interpretation has an ethical dimension because texts often carry the words of people separated from readers by time, language, power, or experience. Rapid extraction encourages quotation as proof of a prior claim. Slow reading asks what has been left outside the quotation, how a genre shapes what can be said, and whether the reader is imposing a familiar category on unfamiliar circumstances.

This is especially important when students work with testimony, translated writing, colonial records, or cultural materials produced under unequal conditions. Careful attention cannot eliminate distance, but it can make interpretive authority more accountable. It teaches that confidence should be proportionate to evidence.

The value is also civic. Humanities education should not promise that reading automatically produces empathy or virtue. It can, however, cultivate habits needed for public reasoning: following a complex argument, distinguishing de-

scription from evaluation, tolerating ambiguity, and revising a judgment in light of contradictory detail. These habits are difficult to assess through speed or immediate recall.

If slow reading matters, it must be built into courses rather than assigned as a private virtue. Useful practices include: selecting shorter passages for repeated analysis rather than assigning volume without purpose; requiring annotations that identify questions, formal choices, and changes of mind; comparing translations, editions, or media versions so that mediation becomes visible; asking students to reconstruct the strongest competing interpretation before defending their own; and pairing computational findings with a documented return to representative and anomalous examples.

Assessment should reward the quality of evidential reasoning. A student who revises an initial interpretation after discovering a complication has demonstrated learning, not failure. Reflective notes can make this process assessable without reducing interpretation to a checklist.

Slow reading is not a retreat from contemporary knowledge systems. It is a method for using them responsibly. Search, summary, and computation can extend scholarly reach, but they cannot decide what a passage means in its historical and formal situation. Humanities education should preserve spaces in which attention is practiced collectively and interpretations remain answerable to language. The future of reading is not simply faster or slower. It is more explicit about when speed serves inquiry and when it prevents us from seeing what is there.