

Baron, Naomi S. *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen & Audio*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 284 pages. ISBN: 9780190084097. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Alice S. Horning

It's surprising to me that a very important and useful book for college for all writing teachers, Naomi Baron's *How We Read Now*, has so far received little attention in our field since its publication in 2021. Reading is an essential complement to writing instruction at every level so everyone who teaches writing can benefit from Baron's practical insights. The book addresses a number of key issues for classroom teachers by providing a detailed review of research on the current state of reading along with discussion of useful strategies for teaching and learning. The book's Foreword, written by Maryanne Wolf, another leading reading researcher and director of the UCLA Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice makes the case for more attention to critical reading in education generally (p. xi). The book is broken into four parts, each of which is devoted to an aspect of the contemporary reading landscape, including traditional print, the array of digital options, audio and video. This approach is noteworthy since it recognizes the increasing integration of listening and speaking with reading and writing. The first part addresses traditional reading of alphabetic texts on paper, noting that research shows that not all the conventional strategies recommended to students work effectively; the ones that do help are those that require active engagement with the text. So, highlighting and underlining are not especially useful but quizzes (in the text itself or mindfully self-imposed) and summaries that probe main ideas and details can be useful if done carefully. These print-based approaches can also be useful when dealing with an array of different types of texts in media other than traditional print, as discussed in the rest of the book.

Baron is especially good at synthesizing current research on reading in different media and her skill is on full display in the

second part, where she presents the research on digital reading. Here, most but not all studies show that reading digital materials is generally not as effective as reading traditional print. Baron relies for support on the work of the Stanford History Education researchers. This group of scholar-teachers has done a series of studies of middle school, high school and college students' critical literacy skills in working with online source materials of all kinds. Their findings show that "digital native" status notwithstanding, a majority of students lack the skills to understand and evaluate much of what they read online (Wineburg and McGrew; Wineburg et al.) That research makes clear why everyone should be paying much more attention to students' reading; writing teachers are not the only ones for whom this claim is true, but we are the ones most likely to see students early in their academic careers in required writing courses.

We are also the faculty most likely to connect to library colleagues who have much to offer to build students' information literacy. The Stanford studies, done by faculty in History Education, explore the online reading abilities of a nationally representative sample of middle school, high school and college students. In untimed tasks on the open internet, 50 to 80% of students were unable to complete critical reading and evaluation of an assortment of materials like videos, tweets and more conventional texts (Stanford History Education Group). Similar research again with national samples of students done by Project Information Literacy librarians produces similar results (Head, Whibey et al.: Head, Fister et al.).

Results of standardized testing of students, despite the known flaws and biases of such testing, also make clear that they do not perform as well on digital texts and tests as they do on paper (pp. 114-115). Baron's book reveals the importance of understanding the nature of contemporary reading and why all writing teachers should be helping students read more effectively and efficiently. Print-based skills like drawing on prior knowledge and summarizing will be useful as both teachers and students work to develop skill in search, synthesis, and appraisal of varied resources online. Maintaining the

reading of literature of all kinds as well as informational reading is going to remain important along with the ability to sustain attention for full-length texts like books. Baron concludes her review of research on reading multiple texts this way: “Online reading potentially encourages less complex and reflective thinking than reading in print, for both single and multiple document reading” (p. 121). Still, she predicts a future in which much reading will include both print and digital reading, the same “biliteracy” approach supported by UCLA literacy scholar Maryanne Wolf based on her own research (Wolf). Baron’s final point in this section is that this view is really important to “digital reading for civic good” (p. 150), because it encourages fact-checking and other antidotes to so-called “fake news” so that readers will be “better equipped ...to vote knowledgeably and to participate in civic discourse” (p. 151).

In the third part, Baron examines audio books and other audio “reading,” possibly my favorite part since I am a huge audio book fan. Audio books have a number of advantages insofar as they slow down reading and ensure that every word comes to readers/listeners, not true of print reading. Taken together with video, these alternative media do present some key challenges in that they are much more transient than printed text. For this reason, watchers/listeners must pay full attention, resisting the temptation to multitask (p. 195). Taking handwritten notes is also key with audio and video texts, which for now lack the technology to allow notetaking within the body of the material, though such notes are now possible for alphabetic texts with programs like PowerNotes and Hypothesis. A few online video/audio annotation tools are already available with more surely to come (cf. Vialogues, a free program (p. 196)). So, there are strategies and technology available for listening and watching, even though many studies show that reading is not as effective in these forms. We know from Daniel Keller’s research that students (and the rest of us) are coping with the pile up of materials online (Keller calls this accumulation, following the work of Deborah Brandt) and the speed at which material appears (Keller’s acceleration). It is really essential that faculty pay more

attention to reading. The use of mindful choices of reading strategy as recommended by University of Connecticut reading and writing scholar Ellen Carillo offers a “Monday morning” approach for all classrooms (Carillo). Her textbook offers *A Writer’s Guide to Mindful Reading* that gives students a range of options for applying a mindful framework to all kinds of reading tasks. She is preparing a research report on the effectiveness of this approach in the writing classroom.

Finally, in the last part, Baron provides her view of what is likely to happen next in the reading environment, with strategies for effective reading and learning as the technology continues to develop. Awareness of purposes for reading and conscious choices of strategy (as suggested by Carillo’s mindful reading) will always be important since they allow for appropriate choices of level of engagement and speed. Reading carefully rather than superficially skimming, avoiding distraction, and making use of different “containers” (i.e., print, digital, audio and video) can all improve reading outcomes. Finally, Baron concedes that not enough is being done to develop students’ critical thinking abilities (pp. 219-223), though reading will always be a part of this set of skills. She encourages readers to advocate strongly for more and better reading instruction across the educational spectrum with her reading “plate” following food writer Michael Pollan’s eating advice: “Read more. Focus when you do. Medium matters” (p. 230).

Monday morning advice

I want to end this review with Monday morning steps every writing teacher can take. The first of these is to make peace with the compelling need to work on reading directly and explicitly in every class. Both qualitative and quantitative research shows that vast numbers of students in classes now really do need help with reading that we can provide; if we are really committed to the level of student success the government thinks we should be achieving, and if we are really committed to making sure all students can do the work we expect, much more attention to reading is needed in every class (both Baron and Wolf make this point; my own argument

appeared in 2022). As part of this effort, you can help students more if you see reading, as I like to say, as a team sport.

- Make friends with colleagues in other disciplines and encourage them to read Baron's book, or even just this review and some of the sources on the Works Cited list at the end.
- And ditto for your librarians: go beyond the basic library instruction students might usually get by inviting a librarian into your classes, encouraging or requiring students to seek research consultations with librarians, and ask for shared approaches to information literacy that librarians will be happy to provide.
- Easy things to do in class: have students bring a book—any conventional print-based book—and read for 10 minutes at the beginning of class every day. *Encourage students to work on building the ability to sustain attention by timing their own reading experiences, extending the time they spend with a text by 5, 10, 15 minutes without checking their phones, walking away, chatting with friends and so forth.
- Teach lateral reading, tested and proven effective by the Stanford researchers, a technique for evaluating websites by leaving a site to test for authority, accuracy, currency, relevance, appropriateness and bias.
- Do any kind of exercise to provide students with an experience that makes clear the failure of multi-tasking; just putting an end to the myth of multi-tasking can help students to be better writers even if their reading per se doesn't improve.

While there are a good number of other evidence-based things to do on Monday, I will just share one revelation that happened in one of my own classes a few years ago. In a first-year writing course, I had students reading *The Shallows* (Carr), which seemed to

me at the time to be a current and lively discussion of the impact of technology on all of us. Discussion on the first couple of chapters fell absolutely flat in class. It dawned on me to ask the students if they found the reading difficult and they reported significant trouble with the vocabulary. I had them re-read and mark three words on each page that they did not understand. When they returned, I was astonished when I put these words on the board, and a number of students concurred about some of the words. I regret that I did not save the list, but I was really amazed that the students had made it to college without vocabulary I thought they should know. We did some work on getting meaning from context, on proper use of a real dictionary (i.e., not dictionary.com), and on word structure—prefixes, suffixes, roots and the like. So, working on vocabulary is something else you can do, even in mini-lessons, that offers students a concrete tool they can use in their reading and writing in your class and all others.

Finally, I contacted Naomi Baron to ask for specific advice for writing faculty that I could include in my review. Here's what she said:

Students are more aware of differences between reading in print versus digitally than we generally realize. If you take the time to ask them, they often tell you they read more quickly with digital text, multitask more, and concentrate less than when reading print. Even before the pandemic, many students reported being torn between reduced cost for digital textbooks and better concentration with print. The sharp digital tilt during the pandemic has made digital reading more the norm, for better or worse. My advice to students and faculty: Don't assume that we read – and learn – the same way in the two media. When you're reading digitally, slow down, don't multitask, and focus. (Personal communication by email September 15, 2022)

These are important suggestions that can be used when teaching

the mindful approaches advocated by Ellen Carillo. Understanding different strategies that might be used in different reading situations or for different purposes and making conscious choices among them offers one way to incorporate Baron's suggestions in class.

Baron's book offers a very useful overview of the current landscape for reading on paper and on screens of all kinds. She writes in a friendly and accessible style that is easy to read and understand, with plenty of good ideas but no preaching. Reading the book will make you a better writing teacher because it offers you, as I hope is clear from my discussion, a lot of ways to understand and integrate reading into every writing classroom, whether in K-12 or at the postsecondary level. Baron, like Wolf and others she cites, recognizes the essential role reading plays in students' education and will play in their lives as workers and citizens. The book deserves your full attention for this reason and all the others given here.

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Note: a portion of this review appears in my forthcoming book, *Making the Case for Critical Literacy: The Lost History of Reading in Writing Studies*, with permission of the Utah State University Press.