

To Read Is to Voyage Through Time

by Susan Ostrowski,
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Parallel to the growing interest in brain fitness, studies on the benefits of recreational reading have been popping up in numerous publications. Research shows that leisurely reading keeps our brains sharp and helps us understand different points of view. If reading is beneficial for adults without cognitive impairment, then we may assume that reading is also beneficial for people living with dementia (PLwD).

But can people living with dementia read? For most PLwD, the answer is “Yes!” Although many older adults can no longer read typical books, newspapers, or magazines, this does **not** mean they cannot read. Reading is an automatic, deeply rooted skill in the procedural memory and usually remains functional, to some degree, even into the late stages of a neurodegenerative disease.

Much research has been done on the benefits of “functional reading” (i.e., signage and lexical visual aids) for PLwD. But scant research has explored the benefits of *recreational* reading for PLwD.

At [Reading2Connect](#), we have discovered that when short articles are adapted specifically for PLwD, then the long-term skill of reading emerges. The complex processes of sounding out words and understanding text may not be rapid, fluent, or consistent, but older adults can generally read a short, illustrated book and comprehend enough of it to enjoy all of the benefits of reading for the sheer pleasure of reading.

Creating a dementia-friendly book requires awareness of an older adult’s visual, attention, language, and memory needs. Although every older adult’s cognitive profile is unique, there are some common print adaptations that can make written language accessible to most seniors living with cognitive changes.

The basic adaptations involve very white paper, bold text, wide margins, short and direct sentences, and—most of all—abundant, colorful images. Of course, there should be nothing juvenile about an adapted book; the integrity of adult literature should be retained. (When writing adapted books, I have one rule: Never give an older adult a book that you would not enjoy reading yourself.)

To see what highly readable, adapted literature looks like, you may view our dementia-friendly books on our [website](#).



So, what are the benefits of recreational reading for PLwD? When older adults are able to enjoy a book on their own, they are often calmed and soothed by this very familiar, lifelong activity. When the book is of interest to them (and that is *key*), then their curiosity and intrigue are kindled. Their imaginations wander beyond their immediate environment. (As Fernando Pessoa wrote, *“Literature is the most agreeable way of ignoring life.”*)

Meaningful literature with illustrations reminds seniors of their life stories and the people they love. A meaningful, adapted book can connect them to who they are, keeping their lives in a context. They feel grounded and whole. Most importantly, interacting with a book is something they can do in their own way, at their own pace. They experience agency, competency, and dignity.



Developing high quality reading material for older adults takes time and work. But losing access to culture, literature, and information should not be a part of aging. Losing the ability to pursue one's interests should not be a part of aging. Accessible reading material is a right, and older adults deserve nothing less.

Groucho Marx once said, *“I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.”* So the next time you see an older adult planted in front of a TV, consider creating some personalized reading material for him/her. Their minds and hearts will thank you.

[Click here](#) to watch a video and see some testimonials.

[Click here](#) to see videos of people using the program.

Susan Ostrowski holds a master's degree in special education specializing in remedial reading and a master's degree in speech pathology. She has worked as a speech pathologist for 25 years. Exploring and reviving the reading capacities of seniors in long-term care is a life-long passion for Susan. She co-founded an organization called Reading2Connect, which creates dementia-friendly books and trains care partners to bring recreational reading—reading for the pleasure of reading—back to older adults in all settings.

Writing on the topic of reading and dementia, Susan has contributed to multiple publications, including the American Speech and Hearing Association Perspectives Journal, the iAdvance Senior Care Magazine, the Pioneer Network Blog, and the Thieme Medical Publishers Communication Sciences Case Study textbook.