

Open to Change: Does Summer Reading Do What It's Supposed To Do?

By Claire Nichols

Every summer, most academically rigorous schools give students a heaping pile of work to complete. Included in this is *summer reading*: the required reading of books, usually with related writing prompts. Specific required books are typically classics that are important for any educated person to understand. Often, there are *choice books*, too; students are provided with a list of books to choose from, in addition to the required books.

Many students, however, face challenges during the summer in tackling what can be an intimidating amount of work. Some students travel for extended periods of time. Some work demanding summer jobs or attend grueling sports camps. Some are involved with positive but time-consuming community projects. Some do combinations of those.

A former Altamont student who graduated last year but wished to remain anonymous says, "I describe myself as an avid reader. But summer reading made me lose my love for reading." She thinks students are intimidated by the five-book requirement and that "It's too much *forced* reading." She adds, "The [choice book] list should be more expansive" so students are more likely to find a book that they'll enjoy.

But another student, who recently left Altamont for another school, wrote, "It keeps me engaged with something to do over the summer." At Altamont, this student had been required to read five books during summer break, but after switching schools, she had to read only one. And that single book was a *required* novel. She adds, "There's no choice of what to read, so that's kind of sad."



The Acta Diurna recently conducted an opinion poll on the summer reading program. As of this writing, 97 students had responded. The average approval rating of the program in general was 4.67 on a scale of 1 to 10. Overall, students wanted more freedom of choice in what they had to read. More than 50% of respondents thought there were too many books assigned over the summer.

An open-ended question asking for suggestions yielded multiple responses asking for the book count to decrease from five to four. Another student suggested having only two books to read over the summer, one required, the other a choice book. Further, feedback suggests that students do not want their choice book to be confined by a limited list; they wrote that the set lists limit the freedom to read what they want and could even result in an aversion to reading over the long term.

I agree with the student who advocated for just two summer reading books. Instead of writing a single paragraph per book, we could do more long-form writing in response. Writing is an incredibly important skill that must be well-developed. More short-passage reading and analysis would be beneficial, too. This would help students get more practice for the AP exams and standardized tests important for college applications. Passage-reading can further help students by giving them skills to analyze articles accurately and efficiently.

Regardless, no academic program or approach is permanent. Things change. Altamont's summer reading program could be one of those things. And that's okay.