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NEWS

Listening to the Curriculum: The Dalton Community Considers Students' Use of Audiobooks to Complete Schoolwork

MAY 19, 2025 BY MIKA HIGGINS-WOO

Just five years ago, listening to an audiobook wasn't as ubiquitous an activity as it is today. Sure, you might have listened to an audiobook on a long road trip, or your younger sibling might have listened to one during "rest time" at preschool. But in recent years, listening to audiobooks as a replacement for reading texts assigned in school has become more common. Now, it is not unusual for the majority of students in certain Dalton History or English classes to have listened to their assigned readings as opposed to reading them.

Does listening to an audiobook count as reading? What is gained and what is lost when we *hear* information as opposed to reading it? To understand this growing phenomenon, *The Daltonian* reviewed the various arguments in favor of and against audiobook usage in general, and also interviewed some Dalton students and faculty about the use of audiobooks in our classrooms.

Most people agree that there are at least some benefits to listening to audiobooks. For one thing, audiobooks can motivate reluctant readers to enjoy a story they wouldn't otherwise have chosen to experience through traditional reading. A 2026 article in *The Guardian* reports that although significantly more women read than men, more men (33%) listen to audiobooks than women (24%), thereby suggesting that audiobooks can provide an alternate way to internalize a story for those who are less inclined to read. And a 2016 comparative study of the comprehension rates of a group of adults who listened to audiobooks and a group of adults who read traditionally found that there was *no significant difference in comprehension* between reading a book, listening to a book, or doing both (listening to while reading the same book).

Many argue (and some research shows) that the benefit of listening to audiobooks is amplified in younger children. Research by the National Literacy Trust from 2024 demonstrated that 37.5% of children and young people felt listening to audiobooks had encouraged them to do more traditional reading. Jon Watt, the chair of the Audio Publishers

Group at the Publishers Association, agrees. "Listening is the gateway to learning," he argues, and listening to audiobooks will help students foster a love of storytelling that is critical for their investment in learning and reading in the future.

But though audiobooks may increase youth interest in reading and stories, they might not be good for developing decoding and comprehension skills. Further research performed by the group behind the 2016 study of adults cited above shows that while the effect listening to audiobooks has on *adults* is neutral, it s has a detrimental effect on school-aged children learning to read, whose recall and comprehension rates for information they listened to were lower. In a segment on NPR, Andrew Limbong distills this data this way: "when you are learning to read, you really need to have the experience of reading. When we just give students auditory formats, we are not reinforcing the reading skills that are so essential to becoming a proficient reader."

Many people are drawn to listening to audiobooks because it allows them to do something else while listening in a way that they couldn't do if they were reading a book. Who doesn't want to, for example, get laundry done while listening to a Jane Austen novel? Dalton English teacher Sean Mattio, however, believes there is a danger to this kind of multi-tasking. He has found over his years of teaching that "many people listen to audiobooks while engaging in some other activity such as cleaning or scrolling mindlessly." Mattio believes that this behavior "lends itself to distraction and not fully taking in what you're listening to," and thus is not an experience as full as if one were to read the book traditionally or listen to the audiobook while scanning the lines of the book simultaneously. To Mattio, listening to audiobooks is permissible with the added requirement of reading along with the text and annotating (and thus giving all attention to the novel).

Another benefit of audiobooks is that, because they are read by a voice, they can add to the experience of consuming the story because of tone, theatricality and accent. According to the president of the Audio Publishers Association, Sean McManus, "audiobooks create a human connection, something that [his company] find[s] more people seeking every day." With this, McManus argues that listening to a human narrator retell a story in an audiobook creates a humanity that many increasingly crave. Dalton English teacher Dr. Appel-Lastarria adds to this sentiment, remarking that "sometimes, there can be benefits to listening to assigned material alongside reading it to make the tone behind the language more salient. I'm particularly

thinking of cases like texts with older English or where there's specific dialects, as it can help bring them to life." Mattio agrees, remarking that "the dialect in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which, on the page, might seem strange and indecipherable, becomes so much more alive (and familiar) when you actually *hear* it being spoken aloud." Similarly, the experience of hearing a book like *The Bee Sting* is much "richer" when listened to in an Irish brogue.

Listening to audiobooks may also offer a particularly positive benefit to those with learning disabilities. University of Virginia psychologist Daniel Willingham, writing in the *New York Times*, explains that "audiobooks are a good workaround for people with dyslexia: They allow listeners to get the meaning while skirting the work of decoding, that is, the translation of print on the page to words in the mind." Brian Bannon, the chief librarian of the New York Public Library, who is himself dyslexic, recounts in the *New York Times* how he used to look down on those who listened to audiobooks (bringing up his friend's argument that listening to an audiobook is like seeing a musical in New Jersey instead of on Broadway), but has since changed his mind. "It was a revelation," he remembers, speaking about the day that he threw away his previous opinions and listened to his first audiobook. "For the first time, I could keep up." Bannon argues that, as long as those who listen to audiobooks do so in a way that is focused (as opposed to "casual or distracted"), audiobooks can help people, especially those with reading disabilities, stay with the story. He mentions that since discovering audiobooks, he's personally begun to read more than ever before. "By eye, by ear, or both, it all counts," he concludes.

Jackson Meadowcroft '29 agrees with Bannon's point. As someone who struggles to complete his readings on a regular basis, listening to audiobooks helps him understand the material without having to sit and read for long periods of time. To him, if he sees "'8 page history reading' then that's daunting, but if [he's] just listening to something for 30 minutes, that feels really doable." Meadowcroft mentions that he feels more comfortable and confident speaking in class when he has listened to the reading instead of reading it. He says that this is because after listening to a reading, he feels like he understood the text better. Molly McCoy '26 agrees with Meadowcroft's point, remarking that "I lose a lot of detail when I'm reading without an audiobook because I'm usually bored and speed-reading without the audiobook keeps me focused."

Max Foa '27 makes the related point that his use of audiobooks allows for dense readings to be easier to understand because audiobooks set a pace for him, forcing him not to dawdle on certain passages. He listens to audiobooks of his readings on 1.5 speed, and claims that this tactic "both helps me to understand the first time and forces me to keep moving . . . I have to be concentrating the first time because the audiobook just keeps moving." To Foa, the pacing of the audiobook forces him to keep himself accountable for focusing entirely while doing readings for class.

Dalton students believe classroom discussions are affected when most of the students in a class have listened to a book instead of reading it, but disagree about how. Foa believes that in his classes, where most students say they listen to readings instead of reading them, the class dynamic is more lively and a higher percentage of students participate: "In freshman year, I remember being one of the only students to participate, partially because many students had not fully completed or understood the reading...This year, my class has been full of energy and participation, due to many different factors. However, I think that using audiobooks for faster reading and easier comprehension has helped everyone get their readings done, which in turn has contributed in a small way to the engaged atmosphere of the class."

By contrast, McCoy believes that audiobook usage can be detrimental in a classroom setting: "The narrator's decisions about characters could sway the listeners, so I think an entire classroom full of just audiobook listeners isn't the best." With this, McCoy claims that listening to an audiobook alongside her classmates can eliminate unique opinions and create one mindset, creating a less engaging classroom discussion.

Despite all of these benefits, a recent NPR-Ipsos poll found that 41 percent of adults don't believe audiobooks qualify as reading. What is *their* argument? In a letter to the New York Times responding to Bannon's article, author Allen Hershkowitz remarks that listening to audiobooks takes away the joys of traditional reading beyond simple comprehension. Hershkowitz argues that while listening might accomplish the most basic objectives of reading—understanding the argument or the story—you cannot annotate an audiobook or reread sentences. In essence, "Listening doesn't provide the experiential space" for him to do the things he loves the most while reading. Appel-Lastarria poses a potential answer to the problem Hershkowitz articulated with audiobooks when describing the parameters she sets up

for her students who choose to listen to the novels she assigns: "I do think it is acceptable for students to listen to assigned reading with *assisted* audiobook listening, but key to that is also having the book open and looking along. That way, students can keep annotating in their books."

This major shift in the way people consume stories has a significant effect on people other than the consumers of the stories. In some cases, authors have given up having their novels printed at all, and instead turned to audiobooks as their primary mode of storytelling. Peter Bradshaw, an author who has previously published three print novels, just completed his most recent work which was never printed traditionally; instead, it was published directly to Audible.

Whether you are for listening to audiobooks, against it, or in favor with certain parameters, it's undeniable that audiobooks have already become an increasingly significant presence in our world.

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