

Is hurry killing reading comprehension?

In his Sunday *Washington Post* article “What writing 30,000 posts taught this financial planner,” Barry Ritholtz, author of the On Investing column, says that not only are many readers choosing to believe what they want to believe, but that their reading comprehension is abysmal. He writes:

Reading comprehension is terrible. I am astonished how many people lack the basic reading comprehension skills to understand a 500-word essay. I give every piece a second edit to figure out how lazy and biased readers are going misinterpret, misunderstand and just plain old miss the point of the post.

(Note: This is part of the last paragraph of his article that appeared in the printed edition of the *Washington Post*, but which is mysteriously missing from the online version of the article.)

This is sad and disturbing. Those of us who make our living from writing, depend on readers to understand what we say. If readers can't understand our ideas, then how are we going to make sure to get our point across? What is the point of writing? It doesn't matter how talented we are, if the readers don't get it, then it is not worth anything.

What is behind this lack of reading comprehension? Is it that people are not being taught how to read well in school? Is it that people are stupid? Is it that writing has to be “dumbed down”? There's probably some element of all of these, but one bigger problem is that people are in a hurry. They are not taking the time to read closely.

We hear over and over how people are so busy. People are

multi-tasking. People are frazzled. One consequence of this continual rush is that people are not paying attention to what they are reading.

How many times have you posted something or written an email including details about an upcoming event and the recipient will ask you for the exact information you have already provided. It happens to me all the time.

Case in point: I wrote a short email to a friend telling her that I had missed seeing her at our book group and that I really didn't like the book. She wrote back telling me that she has had some family issues and hadn't finished reading the book, and she also wanted to know what I thought of the book. Now, my email was five sentences long. One of those sentences was about my opinion the book. She clearly did not absorb what I wrote. Either she was preoccupied or in a hurry or both.

It seems people are no longer able to read closely. They skim through the information. In fact, when I teach my blogging workshop, I tell my participants that content should be scannable, since this is what people do when they read on the web.

This loss of reading comprehension concerns me. It makes me wonder how anybody is going to learn anything new, let alone anything complex. If we are promoting new products or ideas, this is going to be a huge obstacle to overcome.

What do you think? Have you noticed that you have to oversimplify ideas? Have you noticed that people just don't seem to pay attention?