A perfect example of how the number of distractions impedes the amount of reading can be found in *The Read-Aloud Handbook* where I describe the decline in reading among citizens in the country that has long led the world in per-capita readership of books, magazines, and newspapers — **Japan**. Because it is a commuting nation in which citizens spend hours each day on mass transit, they had large amounts of time in which to read. But after four decades of rising readership, suddenly readership dropped. Why? The arrival of technological distractions: video games, cell phones, laptops, Blackberries, etc. As distractions rose, readership dropped—in spite of high literacy rates.

That should be a red flag for wealthy families who are bent on saddling an easily-distracted child with every new tech-gadget.

When education and government officials look at declining scores and general readership in the U.S., they point to children of ages past and ask why today's students don't read like "we" did in the past. Few pay attention to how relatively few distractions "we" had in our homes or classrooms. With cell phones attached to their hips, 50 to 100 instant messages a day from friends, a DVD-

TV in their bedrooms with 150 cable channels (right beside their laptop), we are raising the

most distracted generation in world history.

The home is not the only distracting place. Think how much more material must be "covered" today in school, how many more tests must be prepped for and taken — leaving little time for "rewarding" reading, especially for the student who goes home to a world of distractions. Any wonder why reading proficiency levels are not reached and lifetime readers are not created?

Schramm's **Fraction of Selection** shows what needs to be done if we're going to raise readers. If we maintain (in the home and in the classroom) strong **Reward** factors and lower the **Effort** factors, reading **Frequency** will be high. The higher that frequency number is for students, the higher will be their chances of success in school and life. And it certainly won't hurt the nation's collective IQ.

For more on Wilbur Schramm, see:
http://histsoc.stanford.edu/pdfmem/SchrammW.pdf

For more details on these subjects, see Jim Trelease's Web site www.trelease-on-reading.com.

A math formula to explain:

WHY SOME READ A LOT AND SOME READ VERY LITTLE

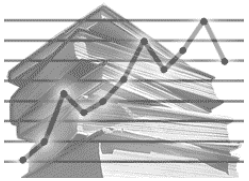
BY JIM TRELEASE

Author of The New York Times Bestseller
The Read-Aloud Handbook

IT'S A FACT: some people—including highly educated ones—read very little, and some — including those with or without higher education — read a great deal. Why?

Since we know that those who read the most, read the best, if we could find the answer to that question we might find clues to solving some serious student reading woes.

What is it that prevents some students from reading very much outside school? Is it the same thing that prevents some adults from reading in their free time?



Much of the answer lies in the work of a man named Wilbur Schramm (1907-1987), the founder of mass communication as a science. I admit to discovering Schramm's work only in 2007 and am chagrined that it is not included in any edition of my *Read-Aloud Handbook* (Penguin, 2006).

Schramm's research included why some people read certain items in a newspaper or magazine and not other items. Exploring why we read what we read, he developed a formula called the **Fraction of Selection**. As I read it, it was as though I'd had a sudden epiphany: Here was a simple explanation of human reading behavior largely unknown and unexplored by educators, to say nothing of Secretaries of Education.

First, a quick math review for those who have spent a little too much time reading and not enough time doing math. In the equation here, the Quotient is arrived at by dividing the Dividend by the Divisor. Increase the Dividend and you increase the Quotient. Conversely, increase the size of the Divisor and you lower the Quotient.

$$\frac{\text{dividend}}{\text{divisor}} = \text{quotient}$$

$$\frac{80}{20} = 4$$

In Schramm's **Fraction of Selection**, the Dividend consists of all the **Rewards** we expect to receive from something we do. The Divisor is whatever **Effort or Difficulty** we might have to endure to get the Reward. And the Quotient is the **Frequency** — that is, how often we end up doing this action. Thus, if there's a restaurant where you'll get a great meal but it's a 200-mile drive and the price is high, chances are that you don't eat there frequently. The "effort" factors are too high. On the other hand, if it's not too far away and not too expensive, you'll taste their great food a lot more often. That's how the fraction of selection works.

$$\frac{\text{Expectation of reward}}{\text{Effort required}} = \text{Frequency of Activity}$$

Now let's apply all of this to reading. Start with the Dividend—the **Rewards** that some people might expect from reading: Pleasure is right at the top but that includes various subcategories of pleasure. For example, some people enjoy reading anything they can escape into, others find satisfaction in gathering information; the prestige they'll have with peers in class or book club members they meet with or a boss or teacher they want to impress; and for some it's the pleasure from the grades or higher pay scales associated with those diplomas they earned with the reading. Different people expect different rewards —or no rewards — from reading. But anyone who does read expects to get *something* out of it.

REWARDS
- Pleasure
- Escape
- Information
- Prestige
- Grades or Salary

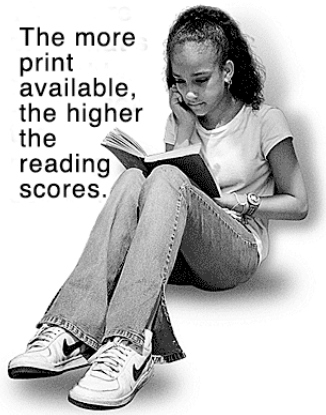
Now to the Divisor —the **Difficulties or Effort Required** for reading:

DIFFICULTIES
- Distractions
- Lack of print
- Lack of time
- Disabilities
- Negative peers
- Noise level

Distractions are a major problem for some—too many TV's, DVD's, phones, video games; or just the general state of chaos in the home or school.

For others there's a lack of print—no newspapers, magazines, or books to read. This is most true in poverty situations. Homes and schools with low literacy scores also have the least amount of print available for reading.

For some folks it's a lack of time—working too many hours, raising too many kids, rushing to too many games or malls, or too much homework.



For some people it's a case of not being able to read easily; they're plagued by learning disabilities or decoding woes.

Others are surrounded by family or peers who have negative attitudes toward school and reading. "Hey! Nicky —get your head out of the book and get in here and watch TV with us! Who you tryin' to impress with the readin'?"

And finally there can be a lack of quiet space; they're surrounded by too much noise at home or too many tests and demands in the classroom.