

SparkNotes Use and Attitudes Among High School English Language Arts Students: A
Retrospective Exploratory Mixed-Method Study

Amanda Light Dunbar

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By: Amanda Light Dunbar

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Dr. Diane Pesco Examiner

Dr. Hariclia Petrakos Examiner

Dr. Sandra Chang-Kredl Supervisor

Approved by: _____
Dr. Sandra Chang-Kredl, Graduate Program Director

Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science

Date: August 17th, 2021

Abstract

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Amanda Light Dunbar

This mixed-method study explored recollections of SparkNotes use among high school students in terms of the rate of use, the reasons for use, and the characteristics of users. The study also explored feelings and attitudes about SparkNotes use, particularly whether or not it is considered a form of cheating. An electronic survey collected quantitative and qualitative data from 209 anonymous participants with high school graduation dates between 2000 and 2020, most of whom described themselves as good readers who enjoyed reading. Sixty-nine percent reported that they had used SparkNotes for support with English homework, and this proportion did not vary significantly across geographic, vocational, or reading behavior-based cohorts, although there was a slight positive association between SparkNotes use and graduation year. Participants mainly reported using SparkNotes when they needed help understanding a text (68%) or remembering details of what they had read (66%), or when they had not entirely read the text (57%). Forty percent of participants said that using SparkNotes is not cheating, and 38% said it depends. When prompted for elaboration, participants offered qualitative comments suggesting intellectual engagement, plagiarism, and not reading as main factors in determining the legitimacy of a student's SparkNotes use. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of New Literacy Studies. Overall, results of the study indicate that SparkNotes is widely used as both a supplement to and a partial replacement for reading primary texts in high school English class, and that whether or not this is considered cheating depends largely on individual conceptions and values around reading.

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Dedication

To Mr. Moxley (1950-2010), a masterful teacher, in whose class I first used SparkNotes.

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SparkNotes Use and Attitudes Among High School English Language Arts Students: A
Retrospective Exploratory Mixed-Method Study

My research seeks to explore a disconnect between research, curriculum, pedagogy, and popular understandings of how reading happens in high school English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, using SparkNotes online study guides as a focal point. In working with students and teachers, I have observed that many secondary ELA teachers, particularly in Cycle 2 (the final two years of high school in Quebec), spend months of every school year teaching novels from the English literary canon, even though this is not required by Quebec's provincial curriculum—the first site of disconnection. I have also observed that many students do not read these books in their entirety—the second site of disconnection—relying instead on online summaries. The issue of students not actually reading the books they study has been widely explored in popular writing about ELA education, but not in academic research—the third site of disconnection.

SparkNotes is a point of intersection for these disconnects. It is the dominant brand among online study guides: its website attracts half a million visitors each month (SEMrush, 2020), and in a *New York Times* review of “online cheat sheets,” SparkNotes was described as a “generally useful, more nuanced interpretation” than other study guides (Furchgott, 2010). By advertising teaching and learning resources having to do with the literary canon, SparkNotes keeps traditional texts at the forefront of students' and teachers' minds and reinforces the (false) idea that they are a natural part of the ELA curriculum. By making the information contained in canonical texts accessible to students through an alternate route—that is, summaries and study guides—SparkNotes encourages students to use secondary instead of primary texts, and a different set of literacy skills, to complete homework and assignments. And by maintaining a morally ambiguous role somewhere between supportive learning resource and cheating aide,

SparkNotes remains an “unofficial” source of information, which might help explain its absence from formal discourse.

In order to understand SparkNotes’ role in English Language Arts education, I needed to gather formal evidence about whether or not students use the site as much as popular writing and informal polling would suggest, and whether they use it instead of or in addition to reading the assigned texts. I did this through an exploratory study using a survey instrument that I designed based largely on themes found in the body of popular education writing (essays, editorials, etc.) about SparkNotes. This study had two aims:

1. To explore recollections of SparkNotes use among high school students in terms of the rate of use, the reasons for use, and the characteristics of users.
2. To explore feelings and attitudes about SparkNotes use, particularly whether or not it is considered a form of cheating.

To contextualize the project, I first review some of the popular literature about SparkNotes, identifying and describing its main themes. I then construct a theoretical framework based in New Literacy Studies (NLS), a school of thought that helps explain the complexity and nuance of the literacy environment in which contemporary students and teachers find themselves. Next, I analyze the high school ELA sections of the Quebec Education Program, identifying how they connect to NLS and critical theoretical traditions. Finally, I highlight some studies that offer insight into the culture of adolescent literacy and ELA pedagogy from a research perspective.

Popular Impressions of SparkNotes

Teacher and Student Publications

Critiques of SparkNotes are widespread in published writing about high school and

postsecondary English Language Arts education, including student newspapers, teaching journals, and books aimed at professional development. Taken together, these articles and editorials demonstrate three consistent themes. The first theme involves students not reading books—for example, in an editorial in *The English Journal*, a peer-reviewed publication for secondary ELA teachers, one 35-year veteran teacher wrote that “students don’t need to read real books at all anymore [...]. They just need to make sure it seems as if they have” (Dyer, 2007, p. 23). A 40-year veteran teacher and ELA Education professor reported in her book that students turn to study guides “so that they can do anything but actually read the work itself” (Christenbury, 2000, p. 18). Another secondary ELA teacher, again in *The English Journal*, described the use of modern translations of classic works in ELA classes as a “disturbing trend” (p. 14), also noting that many students do not read assigned books (LoMonico, 2012). Another teacher explained that he had stopped assigning at-home reading to prevent “a SparkNotes free-for-all,” adding that his students “won’t read at home when there is another option” (Rademacher, 2017, pp. 101–102). An ELA Education professor reported that almost none of his English-major students, themselves preservice secondary ELA teachers, had read *To Kill a Mockingbird* when they were assigned it as high school students; he further predicted that 20% would avoid reading it again for his class (Broz, 2011).

The second theme involves students using SparkNotes to augment their comprehension of assigned readings, either with or without the support of their teachers. One college teacher reported (somewhat skeptically) that many of her students claimed to have read both SparkNotes and the original works she had assigned (Bach, 2014). But another teacher admitted that he, himself, had used SparkNotes to review a Shakespeare play before seeing a performance, and that it had “deepened and enriched [his] involvement with the play” (Gallagher, 2014). He also

described using SparkNotes with his students to similar effect. In one high school student publication, a teacher expressed support for students using SparkNotes to help recall details from books they had previously read, while a student explained that he relied on SparkNotes to answer questions that would arise as he was reading assigned texts at home (McMahon, 2010). In another piece of student writing, the author surveyed 63 of her peers taking grade-12 Advanced Placement English and found that while 78% used SparkNotes, only 18% entirely replaced their assigned readings with SparkNotes study guides (Levin, 2011).

The third theme is the idea of SparkNotes use as a form of cheating. In a 2016 book about education technology, Fink & Brown described SparkNotes very directly as “primarily a cheating site” (p. 18). A 2013 article in *The New Republic* about cheating at Harvard cited use of SparkNotes as a prime example. The author reported that all the friends and acquaintances she had polled informally admitted to having used SparkNotes in high school (Robb, 2013). An opinion piece written by an undergraduate student and published in a multi-college newspaper in 2018 railed against students who “brag about using a terrible website called SparkNotes to cheat on their homework” (Johnson, 2018, para. 1). One high school ELA teacher, quoted in a student-written editorial, described SparkNotes as “a website meant for cheating that actually serves as a decent study guide” (Dotzenrod, 2012, para. 6)—acknowledging that the two need not be mutually exclusive. A tech writer described SparkNotes as a “win-win deal: You avoid having to actually read a work of literature, while appearing to have done so carefully and intelligently” (O’Leary, 2003, p. 41).

These themes contributed to the development of my research questions and my data collection tool. First, I wanted to find out how many students use SparkNotes. Second, I wanted to know more about the nature of the support students gain from SparkNotes. Third, I wondered

how students conceptualize their use of SparkNotes, either as a legitimate study tool, a cheating aid, or both.

Personal statement

The same themes that appear in education writing on SparkNotes—reading vs. not reading, SparkNotes as support, and SparkNotes as cheating—are also present in my own experiences as a former student of English Literature and an educator in English Language Arts, and the experiences of many of my friends and colleagues. In 2020, as I began this project, I started casually bringing up SparkNotes in conversation. With just a few exceptions, everybody my age or younger who had gone to school in English had heard of the site, and most had used it themselves. My mentions of SparkNotes were often met with faraway expressions and knowing smiles as people recalled the feeling of putting one over on unsuspecting teachers, or of annoyance with peers who had used SparkNotes unabashedly without consequence. Frequent responses included “I haven’t thought about that in years, what a throwback!” or “SparkNotes got me through English class!” I watched people light up over newfound commonalities; almost everyone had an anecdote they were eager to share, including myself.

The first time I remember using SparkNotes was for my Grade 12 Advanced Placement English class in September, 2000. I had read *The Grapes of Wrath* over the summer as instructed but, at age 16, had not connected with the story or particularly enjoyed it. On the first day of class, the teacher gave a quiz on the novel—my opportunity to prove that I had read it from cover to cover. I failed the quiz, which felt unfair given the seemingly endless hours I had spent slogging through hundreds of pages of settings, characters, and experiences I could not relate to. I knew that if asked about the significance of California oranges burning in piles to keep them from poor, hungry Oklahomans, I would have had a lot to say; however, from July to September,

I had forgotten details like the name of the preacher, the slogan on the postcard, and who had started the fight in the work camp. The next time I encountered a class novel I didn't enjoy reading, I abandoned it after a few chapters and read the SparkNotes instead. I aced the quiz and sailed through my essay on *Heart of Darkness*. Through trial and error, I had stumbled on an efficient and effective way to succeed in English class. It turned out to be invaluable preparation for my undergraduate-level literature courses (honors and otherwise), where keeping up with the readings—often a novel a week, per class—was simply impossible.

In 2010, as a preservice English Language Arts teacher, I once again turned to SparkNotes. When planning my lessons, I always read the primary texts multiple times, but I also used SparkNotes to remind myself of details I had forgotten and to make sure I hadn't overlooked any major symbols or themes. I once caught a Grade 8 student plagiarizing from the SparkNotes chapter summaries for *The Outsiders*, indicating that a new generation of students had discovered my go-to resource. In reflecting on these experiences, I notice that, whereas I easily got away with my SparkNotes use, students who were less able to integrate the information into well-written assignments were easy to spot. Fink and Brown (2016) put it bluntly: "SparkNotes can be a very efficient labor-saving device [... but] you've got to be solidly literate to be able to use it... without getting caught" (pp. 18-19). A pragmatist might argue that students with already well-developed literacy skills don't need to practice reading as much as others, so no harm is done by their using SparkNotes; however, there seems an element of basic injustice when stronger students can easily take shortcuts to better grades, while weaker students are likelier to face serious consequences for the same behavior. This phenomenon highlights SparkNotes' contradictory role as both a subverter and supporter of long-established patterns in English Language Arts education.

Theoretical Framework

New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies (NLS) is a school of thought that arose around the turn of the millennium (Alvermann, 2009), at approximately the same time as the SparkNotes website, which dates to 1999 (O’Leary, 2003). NLS views literacy as being embedded in ideology (Alvermann, 2009), interpreting it as a set of social practices that vary depending on context, rather than a collection of isolated skills for processing text (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009). NLS is connected to both Cultural Studies and Curriculum Studies in that it acknowledges the role of literacy education in transmitting and reinforcing cultural values. NLS is also influenced by the field of communications, specifically semiotics (Alvermann, 2009), which has historically grappled with the question of what constitutes a text. SparkNotes, by its existence, also implies this question: do study guides count as texts? NLS is intersectional and interdisciplinary, taking into account lived experience, historical and cultural context, pedagogical practice, and educational systems, among other considerations. Grounding my research in this theory allows me to connect students’ self-reported beliefs and practices around reading and SparkNotes to the cultures in which they function. NLS points to features of the contemporary literacy environment, both in and out of schools, that may help explain SparkNotes’ ubiquity and clarify its role in English Language Arts education.

In New Literacy Studies, literacy is composed of social practices, and the word “practice” is used in two ways. The first is: “observable, collectable and/or documentable specific ethnographic detail of situated literacy events” (Tusting et al., 2000, p. 213, qtd in Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009, p. 6). This refers to the actions people take in relation to a text, either to understand or interpret it, or to interact with it in any other way—for example, performing a

close reading, or creating a character map for a story. The second is: “culturally recognizable patterns of behavior, which can be generalized from the observation of specifics” (Tusting et al., 2000, p. 213, qtd in Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009, p. 6). This refers to the features of the text itself, which is constructed according to social norms, and the “actions” the text takes. For example, genre fiction (e.g., mystery, romance) tends to follow a consistent formula with specific features that situate the reader and guide their interactions with the text. According to these definitions, practices in NLS may refer to both reading/interpreting and writing/creating; they are also not limited to specific contexts (e.g., school), but encompass acts of reading and writing that occur throughout all areas of life. Baynham and Prinsloo (2009) called for new methodologies to study “transcontextual literacy” (p. 18), which they described as challenging the decontextualized, skills-based construction that is widely represented in literacy curricula. This skills-based construction—the focus on identifying and recalling information like characters’ names and relationships, sequences of events, and symbols and themes—appears to be a factor in students’ SparkNotes use. The book *Chasing Literacy*, which I discuss at some length in the following pages, demonstrates what the study of transcontextual literacy can look like, and how it can offer rich data about students’ literacy practices.

Chasing Literacy (Keller, 2013) reports the results of a qualitative study grounded in New Literacy Studies and includes the only direct references to SparkNotes in an academic context that I was able to find, in quotations from participants describing the time-saving strategies they use for English homework. *Chasing Literacy* is a key text for my project because it describes students’ experiences with school and literacy in a way that helps explain how and why they turn to study guides like SparkNotes. Keller conducted the research in 2006 as part of his PhD, following nine Midwestern U.S. students during their last semester of high school, of

whom four continued to participate through their first semester of college. Through interviews and observations, Keller collected a rich body of data about the students' reading and writing practices. Keller intended his book to serve as a resource for other teachers, a guide for understanding the connections between students' struggles with reading and the way communication culture has changed over time. Keller reported three specific instances of students mentioning SparkNotes (pp. 68, 78), all in describing time-saving strategies they used to manage school reading loads.

In discussing the current state of literacy, Keller built on the work of Deborah Brandt and others who have documented and theorized about acceleration in media, technology, and society since the 1990s. He argued that as cultural values around communication have tended towards speed and efficiency, literacy has been drawn in the same direction. Students are called upon to demonstrate multiple literacies in various and frequently-changing contexts—e.g., constantly-evolving social media and messaging platforms, website formatting and design trends, cultural conventions and etiquettes, etc. This accelerating accumulation of literacy skills is at odds with the more traditional requirements of most high school and college-level English classes, which tend to value close reading of long texts requiring sustained, deep attention. Keller called this phenomenon “literacy acceleration”.

Keller's concept of literacy acceleration is based on Brandt's (1995) concept of literacy accumulation. Brandt conducted 65 interviews in 1992 and 1993, through which she attempted to trace the evolution of literacy's cultural significance and connotative meaning in the U.S. from the 1930s to the 1990s. Brandt came to the conclusion that as the meaning of literacy changes over time, the meanings accumulate. This means that children learning to read in the '90s had to learn the skills for interpreting contemporary media in addition to, rather than instead of, the

skills their grandparents would have learned at the same age. Brandt described these older skills as “residual literacies.” Brandt explained that, traditionally, schools were responsible for disseminating literacy insofar as it enabled students to participate in the life of the community by, for example, following along with a religious text during services, or writing a letter. However, she challenged the role of schools in a cultural context where literacies are layered and ubiquitous, where being literate requires active participation over a lifetime to stay up-to-date. A critic might accuse Brandt of reframing the skills of basic literacy (decoding, spelling) as outdated cultural artifacts when they are, in fact, still necessary to learn to read. But her point was that in the field of literacy, it continues to be necessary for children to learn older skills and knowledge in addition to new ones, whereas this is not always the case in other subject areas like math, science, or history. I would add that the continued focus on canonical literature in English Language Arts classes may even reflect an overgeneralization of Brandt’s concept, where teachers assume that students must read the classics to be able to understand contemporary literature.

In *Chasing Literacy*, Keller pointed out that cultural values of speed and efficiency are embedded in contemporary literacy practices (around digital communication, for example), reinforcing the processes of accumulation and acceleration. He argued that as literacies accumulate and accelerate, readers must find new ways to filter content and manage their attention in the face of unprecedentedly high volumes of text. Cultivating attention-management and content-filtering strategies, Keller asserted, is a natural response to this challenging situation—a response that SparkNotes supports with its searchable study guides. One of Keller’s goals in his book was to “complicate the binaries of attention/distraction and hyper/deep attention” (p. 101) based on his observation that, in many cases, what looked like distraction was

actually a controlled dance of selective focusing, designed to achieve multiple objectives with limited time.

Keller found that his participants engaged in multiple styles of reading and writing, and that they made strategic decisions about which ones to use where—for example, they might opt to read SparkNotes summaries rather than primary texts based on how they expected to be assessed. In discussing his observations, Keller cited Katherine Hayles’ theories on reading styles. As part of her work on digital media, Hayles (2012) described three reading styles: close, hyper, and machine (close and hyper reading are very relevant to this discussion; machine reading, less so). Hayles explained that close reading arose in literary studies in reaction to the expansion of “text” to include objects, icons, and processes during the 1970s and ‘80s (a concept that is reflected in the current edition of the Quebec English Language Arts curriculum). Close reading cemented traditional literature’s central position in literary studies and came to dominate both methodology and culture within the discipline. Hayles argued that literary studies relies on close reading to justify its continued existence, and that close reading “constitutes the major part of the cultural capital that literary studies relies on to prove its worth to society” (p. 58). But the information that would traditionally be extracted through close reading (e.g., characterization, rhetorical technique, themes) is the same information that study guides provide. Without literary studies and close reading, ELA becomes something more akin to communications or media studies—equally legitimate branches of literacy, according to New Literacy Studies, but not ones that convey cultural capital in the same way.

Hayles contrasted close reading with hyper reading, which is characterized by strategies like keyword searches, extracting small sections of longer texts, and switching back and forth rapidly between multiple sources of information—characteristics that describe much of digital

reading, including SparkNotes, and are sometimes central to textual analysis in communications and media studies. She explained that hyper reading requires a different style of thinking and attention, supporting Keller's assertion that what appears to be distraction may actually be strategic attention management. Hayles noted that previous studies about reading practices, many of which observed a decline in reading volume and skill in the general population, had failed to differentiate between print and digital reading. By not measuring digital reading volume or skill, Hayles argued, the field of literary studies misses a huge opportunity to understand how digital reading works, the better to help students transfer their potentially well-developed digital reading skills to print.

Although Keller's participating students demonstrated competency in digital reading strategies, they seemed largely unaware of the potential for transferring these competencies to English Language Arts class. In general, they did not view reading as a "complex, layered event" (p. 17); instead, they saw academic reading as a formulaic activity involving extracting key words and information—similar to hyper reading—in order to reformat them into a correct interpretation of the text. Keller shared many anecdotes from his study demonstrating that his participants tended to believe there were right and wrong answers to questions about authors' intentions, as well as hidden meanings in texts, which teachers know and students are meant to figure out. This attitude reflects literary studies' focus on close reading and cultural transmission, and supports the use of SparkNotes as an authoritative information source. Keller compared it to Freire's (1970) banking model of learning, wherein knowledge is "a gift bestowed" to students by their teachers (p. 72). Because students perceived reading as being just one thing—a formalized, school-based activity—they were unable to imagine themselves as active participants with preexisting, transferrable skills that they could apply to constructing meaning from course

texts.

Keller's exploration of students' real-life literacy practices offers a context for understanding why they might choose to read SparkNotes summaries rather than primary texts. In addition to being pressed for time—the most obvious reason to use a shortcut like SparkNotes—contemporary students may have developed literacy skills outside of school that lend themselves better to fast rhetorics (e.g., digital media, short-form text) than slow ones (e.g., traditional print literature) (Keller borrowed these terms from Faigley, 2006). Framed this way, using SparkNotes is an adaptive strategy that allows students to use their existing strengths in one area of literacy to support new learning and improve academic achievement in another. Students are savvy when it comes to assessments; if a teacher's focus seems to be on remembering key plot points or specific details, rather than synthesis or interpretation, SparkNotes provides more ready access to that information than a thick, unsearchable novel. In an environment of literacy acceleration, where the list of skills required to participate is constantly expanding, it seems reasonable that students would look for ways to conserve their limited time and attention.

English Language Arts Curriculum

In Quebec, the provincial curriculum is called the Quebec Education Program, or QEP. At each level (elementary and secondary), the ELA component of the QEP consists of several documents. At the secondary level, these are the *Secondary English Language Arts program*, Cycles 1 and 2 (SELA and SELA2), which provide an overview of the entire program; the *Progression of Learning at the Secondary Level, English Language Arts*, which lists specific skills and deadlines for their acquisition; and the *Framework for the Evaluation of Learning, English Language Arts*, which explains how the competencies outlined in the other two

documents should be weighted in evaluating students' progress.

The QEP's English Language Arts program is highly theoretical at all levels, from the beginning of elementary to the end of high school. For this research, my focus is on secondary ELA teaching; however, it is worth noting that reading mechanics (e.g., alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, etc.) are never mentioned in the QEP, even though it is obviously important for students to learn how to decode in their first years of school. This means that from the beginning, ELA teachers must augment the guidelines with their own knowledge and experience to bring their students to a level of technical reading proficiency where they can access prescribed learning outcomes like reading and responding to children's literature.

The secondary ELA section of the QEP describes itself as "a literacy program that has an important role to play in teaching the humanistic values and beliefs of our culture," describing language as "a medium that makes active participation in democratic life and a pluralistic culture possible" (Québec, 2010b, p. 85). The SELA2 adds that "students learn not only the structures and features (i.e. mode, codes and conventions) of specific genres, but also the inherent social messages and meanings they carry." These statements are just a few of the numerous clues in the QEP that point to a guiding philosophy in line with New Literacy Studies. The QEP lists in its bibliography work by critical pedagogue Paulo Freire and educational philosopher Maxine Greene, both social activists in their times, and much of its description hints at ideas from critical theory, communications, cultural studies, curriculum studies, and critical pedagogy. The QEP also aims "to foster an appreciation [in students] of their rich literary and cultural heritage" (Québec, 2010b, p. 85), but in the context of so much other critical theoretical language, and in the absence of explanation as to what is meant by "literary and cultural heritage", this statement

seems somewhat tacked-on.

The SELA and SELA2 cite Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1974/1998), but the specific phrase they use, "reading the word and the world" (Québec, 2010b, p. 85; Québec, 2010c, p. 1) is the title of another Freire work: *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, coauthored with Donaldo Macedo. The introduction, written by Henry Giroux (1987), begins with a quote from Antonio Gramsci on literacy's role in both reproducing and resisting cultural systems of power. Giroux offered Gramsci's ideas as context for Freire's work, positioning Freire as the sole successor (to date) to Gramsci's form of critical literacy theory. Giroux described how, at the time of his writing, literacy had taken on a cultural and political meaning related to class and privilege. He wrote: "literacy is associated with the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition... a pedagogy of chauvinism dressed up in the lingo of the Great Books" (p. 2). Giroux interpreted Freire's work as a guide for using the tools of literacy to deconstruct the power structures it supports; although the QEP does not go so far as to suggest deconstructing power structures, its focus on critical thinking and insistence that "every text is a deliberate, social construct" (Québec, 2010c, p. 2) could be seen as a nod in that direction.

Reading the word and the world could be interpreted as a metaphor, but in the context of literary and critical theory, it may also be understood literally. The phrase echoes Marshall McLuhan's famous idea that the medium is the message (1967)—for example, the advent of railroads changed human patterns of behavior around trade and travel, although both those things had existed beforehand, and those changes were the railroads' message. The QEP seems to interpret "reading the world" concretely, as it expands the notion of "text" beyond the printed word. The SELA defines a text as: "the product of a process of production and interpretation of

meaning(s) expressed in spoken and/or written and/or media discourse, i.e. a product that serves a social purpose or function,” adding that “the definition of text in this program also allows for nontraditional uses, such as an exchange between a teacher and a student as text, a fictional character as text, a shopping mall as text, etc.” (Québec, 2010b, p. 85). A student or teacher who analyzes a shopping mall as text is following in McLuhan’s footsteps.

At the Cycle 1 level, the QEP ELA program is divided into four broad competencies: “uses language/talk to communicate and to learn”; “represents his/her literacy in different media”; “reads and listens to written, spoken, and media texts”; and “writes a variety of genres for personal and social purposes” (Québec, 2010b). At the Cycle 2 level, there are three competencies, with “represents his/her literacy in different media” having been removed (Québec, 2010c). In both cases, reading is only represented in one section, and is considered to include listening and viewing alongside the traditional idea of interpreting written text. It is clear from this that the QEP does not prioritize practices from traditional literary studies—in fact, just two references to canonical texts occur in the high school ELA curriculum: for learning outcome A.e.3.vii, “Establishes interrelationships between the structure and features of the genre, the context in which the text is produced, and the impact of the text on self as reader” (Québec, 2010a, p. 8), dramatic irony in *Romeo and Juliet* is given as an example; for learning outcome A.e.3.viii, “Compares/contrasts own ideas, values and beliefs with those presented by writer/producer,” (Québec, 2010a, p. 8), the example is given of comparing content from a teen magazine with novels written between 1920 and 1945. The use of texts from the canon is not prohibited nor even discouraged, but it is also not explicitly sanctioned or encouraged.

The overwhelming majority of the ELA QEP is devoted to literacy theory, philosophy, and broadly-applicable learning outcomes such as the ones quoted above, leaving the concrete

details of materials and pedagogical techniques to teachers' discretion. In Quebec, at least, curricular demands cannot explain the continued use of novels from the literary canon in ELA classrooms, but my observation as an ELA practitioner is that these materials are still widely used, often to the exclusion of more contemporary ones. In the next section, I will present a few studies that allude to the motivations and priorities of teachers and researchers when it comes to student learning in ELA, which may help explain the continued use of these classic texts.

English Language Arts Research and Pedagogy

Concrete information about the techniques that ELA teachers use and the teaching materials they choose is not readily available, at least in Quebec. High school teachers are not generally surveyed regarding their day-to-day practices, so little is known about what texts are used in their classrooms beyond anecdotal evidence and personal experience. However, research about reading motivation can provide some relevant context, as much of this research either alludes to or is predicated upon commonly-used pedagogical practices or philosophies that the researchers deem ineffective or in need of improvement.

The broad goal of the research on reading motivation is explicitly stated in Applegate et al. (2014): to produce the “ideal reader... an avid, engaged, and enthusiastic reader, immersed in the joy of learning, with an imagination set free by words” (p. 189). The authors assert that the ideal reader “has the potential to [...] unite teachers, theorists, and researchers alike” as they strive towards “the ultimate goal of virtually all literacy educators” (p. 189). Research on reading motivation largely focuses on encouraging the reading that happens outside of school, in students' leisure time. Less attention is paid to the reading that students (including ideal readers) already do as part of their coursework. Finding out more about that reading—the reading that happens (or does not happen) as part of homework and assignments—was part of the purpose of

this project, and the findings may be used to support and contextualize future research on reading motivation. If students are already reading novels for school but, based on that experience, choose not to read outside of school, this suggests that there may be a problem with either the types of novels that are assigned, or the implicit or explicit curricular goals that guide the way these novels are taught.

The Applegate et al. study revisited a 2004 study by the same team regarding what they called the “Peter Effect”: the idea that ELA teachers cannot convey enthusiasm for reading to their students if they are not, themselves, enthusiastic readers. The 2014 study surveyed 1025 American college students with various majors. Participating students completed an open-ended questionnaire that asked about recent reading experiences both in and out of school, early literacy experiences, and general reading enjoyment. Forty-seven percent of respondents were classified as enthusiastic readers, meaning that they reported a positive attitude towards reading and had engaged in voluntary reading over the previous summer. Among preservice teachers, the number was 51.1%. The authors concluded that intervention is needed to convince and support parents and teachers to actively foster children’s love of reading to prevent another generation of “functionally aliterate” (p. 189) college students who are able to read but choose not to. The implication is that the experiences students usually have in their high school ELA classes do not, for the most part, lead to the avid engagement with reading that researchers would like to see.

Applegate et al. suggested engaging parents in promoting literacy by sharing research studies and tips for “how to make home a place for family reading” (p. 198). This perspective reflects a romantic ideal (Freire & Macedo, 1987) where reading is more of a one-way process than an interaction between reader and text, with the reader experiencing joy and fulfillment while constructing their own meaning, absent any cultural or historical context. In suggesting

that family culture is the variable to address to promote student literacy, Applegate et al (2014) assume equal access to materials, skills, leisure time, and representation in literature, while ignoring issues like parents' long work hours or economic stress that might make the suggestions difficult to implement in many households. The study's premise and its conclusions represent a more traditional, limited view of reading than that espoused by the Quebec Education Plan or the ideas of New Literacy Studies; it is this view that supports and perpetuates the stereotype of the ideal reader, whose motivation to read is entirely intrinsic and unaffected by external factors.

Any suggestion to modify teaching practice, like offering different novel choices in ELA class, is strengthened by acknowledging the potential barriers. In a book chapter written for a lay audience (parents and teachers) encouraging the use of children's and young adult literature in secondary ELA classrooms, L. Christenbury (2000) speculated as to the causes of teachers' continued reliance on traditional materials. She suggested that teachers, parents, and school boards who support the use of canonical texts may do so for any of several reasons. They could be repeating their own experiences as students—after all, people who become ELA teachers are likely to have enjoyed those classes as students. They might be preparing their students for the perceived demands of future study by familiarizing them with the kinds of mainstream cultural artifacts that contribute to general knowledge. The choice of traditional teaching materials could also represent a political stance in favor of traditional values. Christenbury also acknowledged that many teachers do not read widely after university, so might find it difficult to select appropriate non-canon materials—a view that is supported by the research of Applegate et al. (2014).

Christenbury (2000) also offered the obvious (her admission) criticism that teaching from the canon produces an “uncritical rehash of the traditional power culture: white, male, Christian,

Anglophilic” (p. 15), tending to favor American and British novels, plays, and poetry from the 19th and early 20th centuries—a view in line with New Literacy Studies. She pointed out that postsecondary English departments are no longer so focused on the classics as to justify their central position in secondary ELA, suggesting that even if high school English were intended to prepare students for university-level English Literature courses, the readings would need to be more varied to do this effectively. Finally, and most directly relevant to my research, Christenbury wrote that when faced with the English literary canon, many students will turn to study guides to help them “unmask the mysteries” of these texts and “render them comprehensible” (p. 16). She added that when adolescents are offered only complicated books with older adult protagonists, many will find ways to avoid reading them, and this may “turn students away from reading and intellectual engagement altogether” (p. 18).

The studies I have mentioned so far focused specifically on print reading, which Keller, Hayles, and New Literacy Studies might say is too limited a definition of students’ leisure reading behavior. However, a 2012 study on middle school students’ attitudes towards reading found that it was not print vs. digital that made a difference to reading motivation, but leisure vs. academic (McKenna et al.). The researchers surveyed 4,491 middle-school students from across the U.S. and found that the students’ attitudes towards academic reading were the same regardless of whether the reading was done digitally or in print. The authors suggested that even when well-intentioned teachers incorporate digital technologies into ELA teaching, they tend to use them “as a high-tech version of the transmission-oriented pedagogy with which they are comfortable” (p. 299)—which makes sense in the context of Applegate et al. and Christenbury’s assertions that teachers may not be aware of other materials or pedagogical approaches, or confident in their ability to use them. Digitizing materials and techniques without actually

adapting them generally proves ineffective because it targets the wrong variable in trying to bolster student motivation.

Like the other studies described in this section, McKenna et al. (2012) referred to the “cultivation of lifelong readers” as an ultimate goal of their research (p. 300). Like Keller, they suggested that observing students’ reading behavior outside of school could offer valuable insight that would help teachers make their lessons more engaging. McKenna et al. noted that the types of activities referred to in their survey varied widely between the different categories (digital/print, academic/non-academic), in keeping with the broad definition of literacy practices proposed by New Literacy Studies. They pointed out that digital, non-academic reading, the category preferred by the students in their study, was the only category dominated by social interaction; in other words, their results suggested that students prefer to read in conversation than in isolation.

This suggestion connects back to New Literacy Studies and forms a bridge between traditional and new pedagogies via an idea proposed by Jenkins et al. (2009): that literature has always been intertextual, with traditional works borrowing from one another and remixing ideas into new forms. A typical example might be Shakespeare’s incorporation of well-known characters from Greek mythology and English folklore into *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In this sense, Shakespeare’s play enriched and extended an existing body of literature, contributing to an ongoing conversation and unifying his audience in a collective experience based on shared cultural references.

In the new media environment, according to Jenkins et al. (2009), participants work collaboratively to synthesize data into new cultural products that contribute to the media landscape—arguably a contemporary analogue to traditional literary remixing. This is described

as “act[ing] within distributed knowledge systems” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 39), and includes summarizing, paraphrasing, compiling and attributing information—traditional literacy skills applied in a nontraditional manner. If the contemporary literacy environment is viewed as a distributed knowledge system, SparkNotes’ function is to store and disseminate information, removing responsibility for these tasks from individual students. In a distributed knowledge system, it makes less sense for individual students to spend time repeatedly extracting the same details from a classic text, when this information is already readily available in the form they need to complete assignments and achieve the indicators of academic success.

In a sense, traditional ELA teaching ignores contemporary students’ access to distributed knowledge systems. This allows SparkNotes to capitalize on students’ savvy and teachers’ lack of awareness of the media landscape in which their students function. The Quebec Education Program’s hyper-theoretical, competency-based curriculum seems intended to provide teachers the freedom to adapt to changing circumstances; however, given a framework where literacy skills can be applied to almost any object or medium, many English Language Arts teachers seem unable to move beyond books they recognize from the English literary canon. This may be due to lack of interest, lack of knowledge, lack of exposure, or lack of time or resources, but the result seems akin to a phenomenon paraphrased by Broz (2011) as “teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn” (p. 16). More specifically, in this case, teachers’ continued reliance on canonical literature seems to result in teachers pretending to teach reading, and students pretending to read—an assertion that the current research both supports and complicates.

Research Questions

Based on an analysis of recollected high school reading experiences, my project explores the questions:

1. What is the rate of SparkNotes use among high school students for help with English homework, and why do they turn to SparkNotes for support?
2. What feelings and attitudes do students hold about SparkNotes use, and do they consider it a form of cheating?

Methodology

Research Design

This mixed-method exploratory study used a survey, administered through Google Forms, to collect both quantitative and qualitative data about students' and teachers' self-reported reading behavior, attitudes, and use of SparkNotes (see Appendix A for survey text). The survey questions were developed partly in response to the themes identified in the "Popular Impressions of SparkNotes" discussed at the beginning of this thesis: students not reading; SparkNotes as legitimate support; and SparkNotes as cheating. Participants were anonymous by default, although many opted to provide their email addresses for possible follow-up or future research.

The survey used a branching format and included 23 sections comprising 54 questions, which were designed to take about 10 minutes to complete; however, the branching format meant that not all participants encountered all questions. The questions that might be automatically skipped related to demographics (e.g., only participants reporting that English was not their preferred language for reading were asked whether they read more in another language and, if so, what that language was) or role (e.g., English teachers were asked to respond to a set

of questions from their current perspective as teachers, in addition to the standard questions relating to their past experiences as students). All closed-ended questions were mandatory, except for a few, like “which of these have you heard of?”, where “none” was a possible answer; in those cases, a blank response was considered equivalent to “none.” For mandatory questions, careful consideration was given to offering multiple-choice options that would cover every possible response, including “I don’t know,” “it depends,” or “other,” depending on the question. Although almost all the questions were multiple-choice, many opportunities were given for participants to add qualitative commentary to their closed-ended responses. For example, multiple-choice questions with a possible “other” response included a fillable textbox; questions with an “it depends” option prompted participants to elaborate in their own words; and the general question “is there anything you would like to add?” (or a question with similar wording) was asked three times throughout the survey.

Procedure

Participants 18 years and older were recruited using a Snowball technique. A poster advertising the study was shared on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and by email (see Appendix B). This poster included a URL that linked to the survey; thus, the researcher had no direct contact with participants. Text on the poster and in accompanying emails and messages requested that people share the information with their friends, colleagues, and students (in the case of postsecondary instructors). Contacts reported that they had shared the posts in online teachers’ groups, in community groups, with class mailing lists, and with summer camp staff. Volunteers completed the survey online using their own Internet-connected devices. Data were collected over a period of one month in spring, 2021.

Participants’ survey responses were saved automatically to a Google Sheet upon clicking

the “submit” button at the end of the survey. Appendix C provides a sample of this raw data. I copied the contents of the Google Sheet to an Excel workbook, excluding the one participant who responded “I do not consent to participate and/or I am under 18.” I then assigned participant ID numbers. In the Excel sheet, I used formulas to reformat certain responses into a more manageable form—for example, responses to multiple-choice questions with the possibility to select multiple answers appeared in the Google Sheet as a list of comma-separated values within a single cell. In order to be able to analyze these as discrete responses, I separated them into individual columns. I also used formulas to recode closed-ended nominal responses into numerical values. Finally, I exported the reformatted data to SPSS for part of the analysis. Appendix D provides images documenting this process.

Before analyzing the responses to the 10 open-ended survey questions, I copied them into their own Excel workbook with separate sheets for each question. This allowed me to more easily see each set of responses as a whole, without the interference of empty cells or non-responses (some participants seemed not to notice that open-ended responses were optional, so filled the space with “N/A” or similar). This also meant that I could not initially see which members of the target cohort were English teachers, which helped prevent bias in my coding of their responses. I did later separate the teachers’ responses for review as a cohort, but only after they had been included with the general sample. As all qualitative questions were optional, response rates ranged from 5 “other” responses to a question about high school reading behavior, to 121 responses for “If you answered ‘it depends’ for one of the previous questions, please explain a bit about what you mean (what does it depend on?)” following the section on SparkNotes values. Response lengths ranged from a single word to a few paragraphs. I treated the qualitative data for each question separately, first reading through it once to get a feel for the

responses, then using in-vivo coding to highlight specific words and phrases that stood out, then developing a coding scheme to reflect the themes that emerged. This process will be described in detail, question by question, in the results section under “Participants’ Elaborative Comments.”

Researcher Reflexivity

As a researcher working on this study, I have much in common with the majority of participants: I am a skilled, motivated reader who engaged in a variety of reading and reading-avoidant behavior during high school. I have also been an English Language Arts teacher and have worked in other, English-adjacent fields, and my experiences in all of these areas contributed to the development of my research questions and study design. I am an insider in every sense, having come to this research with significant knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon I wished to explore. These close personal and professional connections to the subject matter likely affected what I did and did not notice in analyzing my qualitative data, as well as influencing the direction and focus of my discussion.

My personal position is most similar to the participants who critiqued the framing of SparkNotes as a legitimate support or cheating aid. Part of what brought me to this research was noticing that many people with whom I had a lot in common seemed to have very strong feelings either for or against SparkNotes, whereas I viewed it as more of a neutral tool. The data I collected as part of this study reflects that strength of opinion; in order to represent my participants’ thoughts and feelings as accurately as possible, I based my analyses of the qualitative data on verbatim quotations from them. I also tried to enrich the data by asking quantitative questions with qualitative follow-up throughout my survey, with the two types of information lending each other valuable context. Because the survey was anonymous, I was not able to use member checking to validate my results, but I relied heavily on peer debriefing with

friends, colleagues, and my supervisor, soliciting their opinions about and challenges to the patterns I thought I saw emerging from the data.

Results

Participants

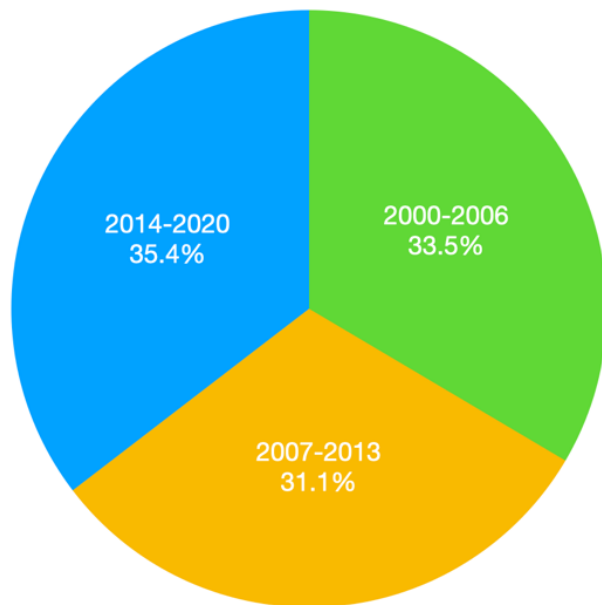
The survey on SparkNotes use and attitudes received a total of 227 responses, 209 of which were included in the quantitative analysis. Three participants were excluded because they reported that their high school English classes had read zero novels per year, on average (i.e. English was taught solely as a foreign language); 15 were excluded because they reported having graduated high school between 1960 and 1999. The SparkNotes website was launched in 1999, meaning that these latter participants would not have had the opportunity to use it when they were students. However, some of their data were analyzed separately for comparison with the main sample. The remaining 209 responses were considered to belong to the “target cohort,” which is described in the following paragraphs.

Graduation Years

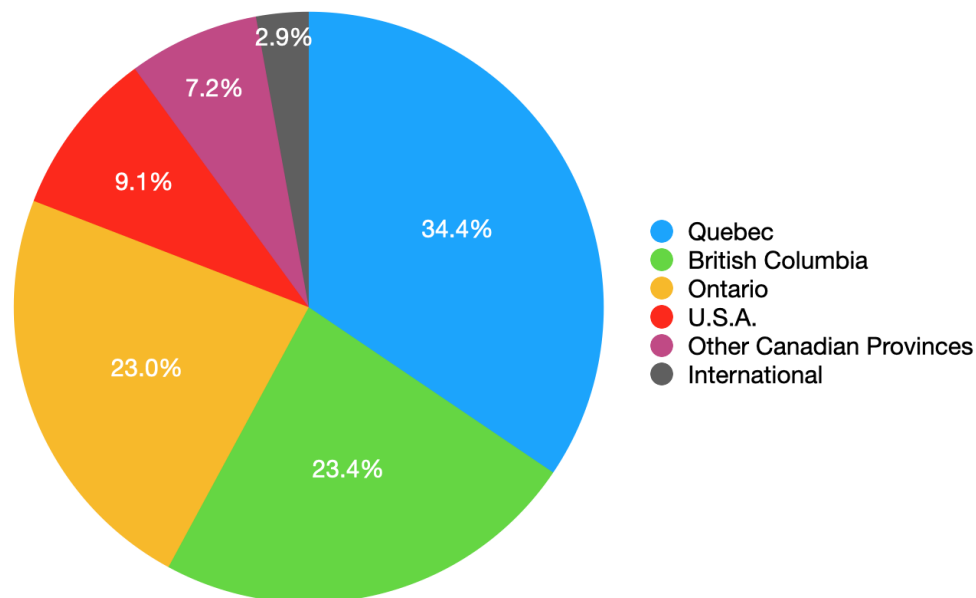
Participants in the target cohort were spread relatively evenly throughout the 21-year span of target graduation dates: 70 (34%) between 2000 and 2006; 65 (31%) between 2007 and 2013; and 74 (35%) between 2014 and 2020 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Participants' Graduation Years (n=209)

***Geography***

The largest geographical cohorts were from Quebec (72; 34%), BC (49; 23%), and Ontario (48; 22%). Of the remaining 41 participants, nearly half were from the U.S. (19; 9% of total), with the remainder representing six other countries and five other Canadian provinces (see Figure 2).

Figure 2*Participants' Locations (n=209)****Language of Instruction***

Most participants (183; 88%) attended English-language high schools, and only two preferred to read in a language other than English.

Vocation

Twenty-one teachers of English Language Arts or Literature completed the survey; of those, 18 had graduation years within the target range (2000-2020) and were included in the main sample for analysis. They were also included in the subgroup of participants (82; 39% of total) who reported having majored in English, Communications, or a related field, or having a career related to one of those fields.

Reading Attitudes and Behavior

When asked whether they liked reading, the majority of respondents (183; 88%) replied either “Mostly yes” or “Yes, definitely”; a similar number (174; 83%) gave one of those answers

when asked if others would describe them as a good reader (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3

Participants' Reading Enjoyment (n=209)

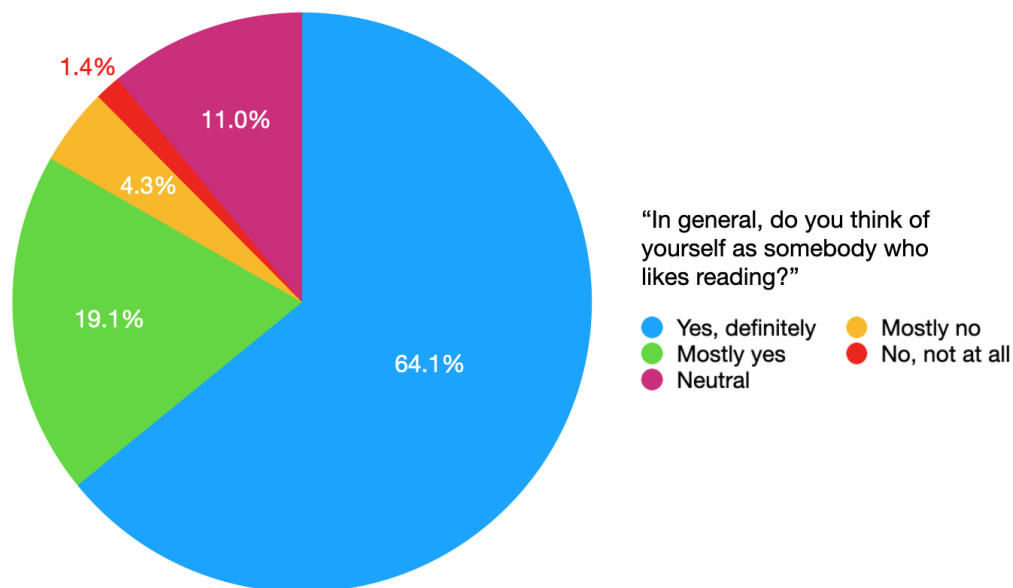
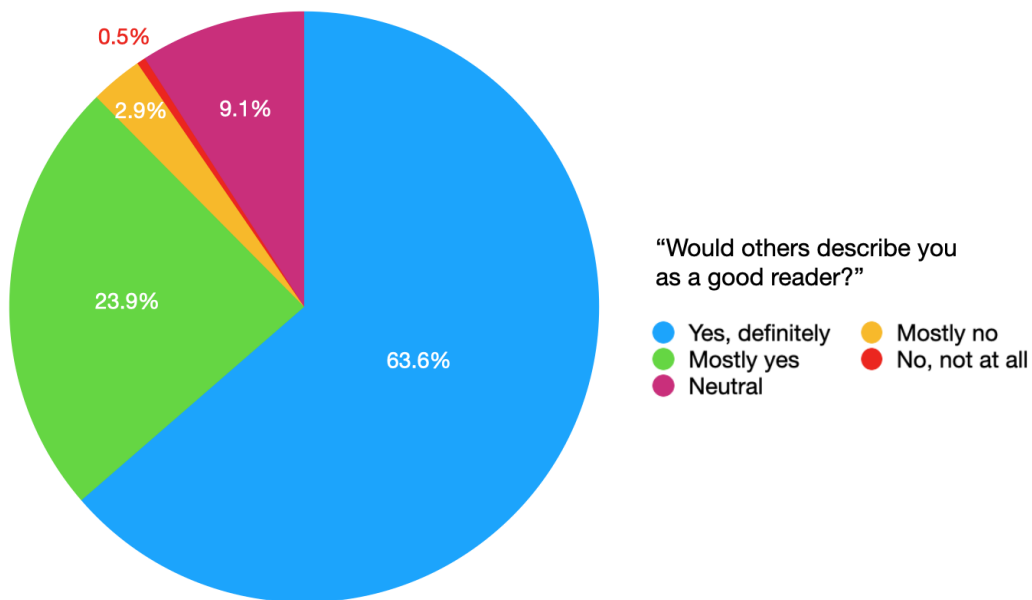


Figure 4

Participants' Reading Ability (self-reported) (n=209)



134 participants (64%) reported that they had read at least one contemporary novel for leisure in the past year, such as *A Game of Thrones* or *The Kite Runner*, and 100 (48%) reported that they had read at least one classic novel for leisure in the same timeframe, such as *Frankenstein* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Nearly two thirds of participants reported having received mostly As in their high school English classes (152; 73%), and only 10 (5%) reported having received mostly Cs or Ds. However, 120 participants (57%) reported that they only “read at least part of every book”; “read some books but not others”; or “didn’t read any” of the books that were assigned in those same classes (see Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5

Participants’ Grades in High School English Class (n=209)

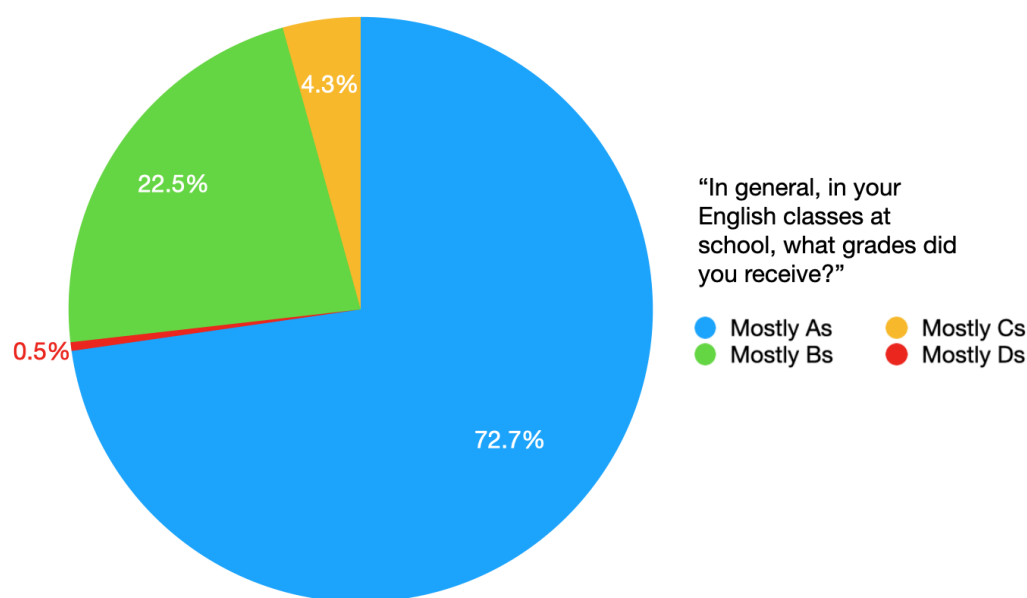
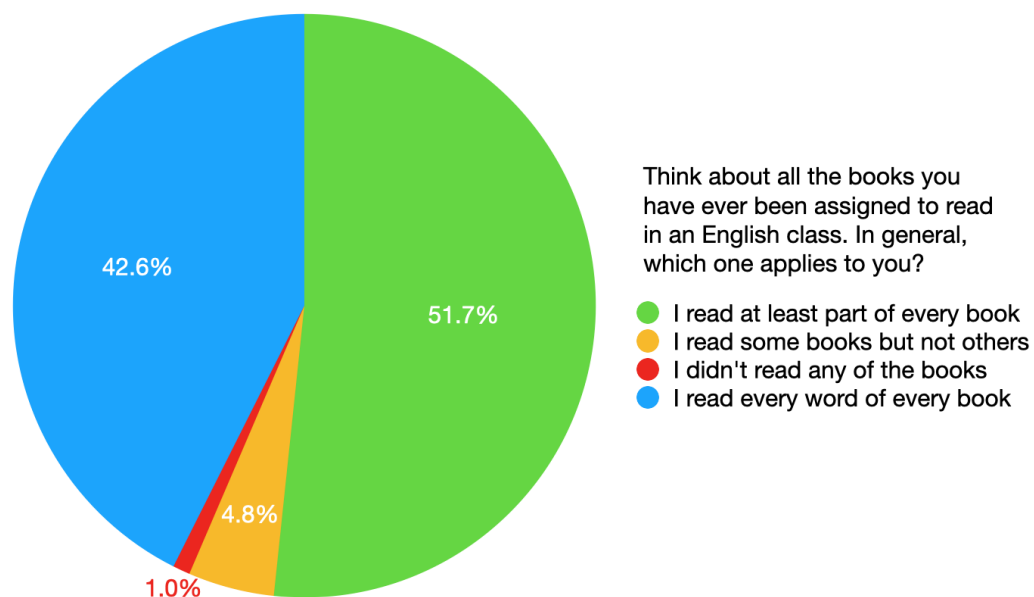


Figure 6

Participants' Reading Behavior in High School English Class (n=209)



Participants Summary

Participants were relatively homogenous in terms of reading enjoyment and ability, high school language of instruction, and grades received in English class. However, there was substantial variation in graduation years, geographical locations, vocations (i.e. English majors/professionals vs. non-English majors/professionals) and compliance with high school reading assignments. Participants were divided into subgroups based on these variables, which were then compared in terms of rates of SparkNotes use.

SparkNotes Use

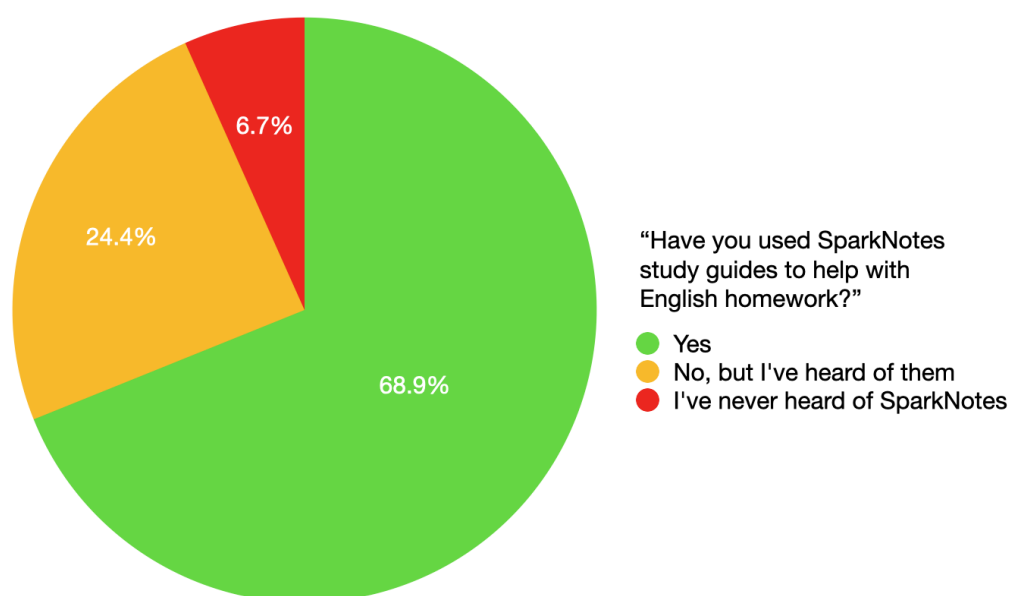
Rates of Use

Of the 209 participants in the target cohort (i.e. those who graduated high school in 2000 or later and who read at least one novel, on average, in each year of high school English class), 144 (69%) reported having used SparkNotes study guides to help with English homework. Only

14 people (6.7%) had not heard of SparkNotes before taking the survey, meaning that 93.3% of participants in the target cohort had heard of the study guide brand (see Figure 7). When asked whether they thought their peers had used SparkNotes in high school, 173 (83%) responded affirmatively, which is in line with the previous finding that most students did use the study guides.

Figure 7

SparkNotes Awareness/Use Overall (n=209)

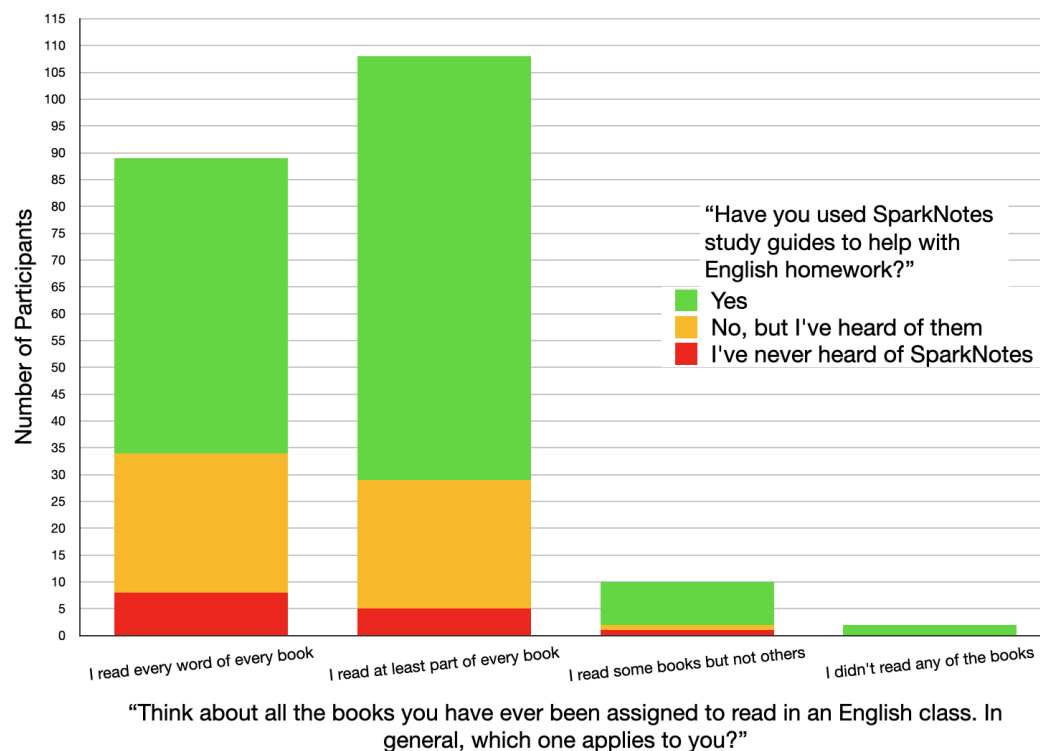


There were no significant differences in the rate of SparkNotes use between subgroups based on vocation (73% of English majors and teachers used SparkNotes vs. 66% of other participants) or geographic location (rates of use ranged from 65% in BC to 74% in the U.S.) Participants were also asked about their academic reading behavior—that is, when they were assigned books to read for high school English class, did they read them? Of the 120 participants who reported not having read every word of every book, 74% used SparkNotes. Of the 89 participants who did read every word of every book, 62% used SparkNotes. This difference is

not statistically significant given the cohort sizes—in other words, there was no correlation between participants’ reading behavior and SparkNotes use (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

SparkNotes Awareness/Use by Reading Behavior



There was a mild statistically significant relationship between graduation year and SparkNotes use, with later graduation years associated with a higher incidence of SparkNotes use. This was evident when participants were divided into graduation-year cohorts (2000-2006, 2007-2013, 2014-2020) based a chi-square test of independence, $\chi^2(2) = 8.838, p = .012$, and also in terms of a year-by-year comparison using a Cochran-Armitage test of trend, $p < .001$ (see Figures 9 and 10). This finding does not necessarily mean that more students use study guides now than in the past. The SparkNotes website first launched in 1999, so its gradual rise in popularity could just as easily be attributed to the increase in home Internet access that would have occurred for high

school students throughout the early 2000s.

Figure 9

SparkNotes Awareness/Use by Graduation Cohort

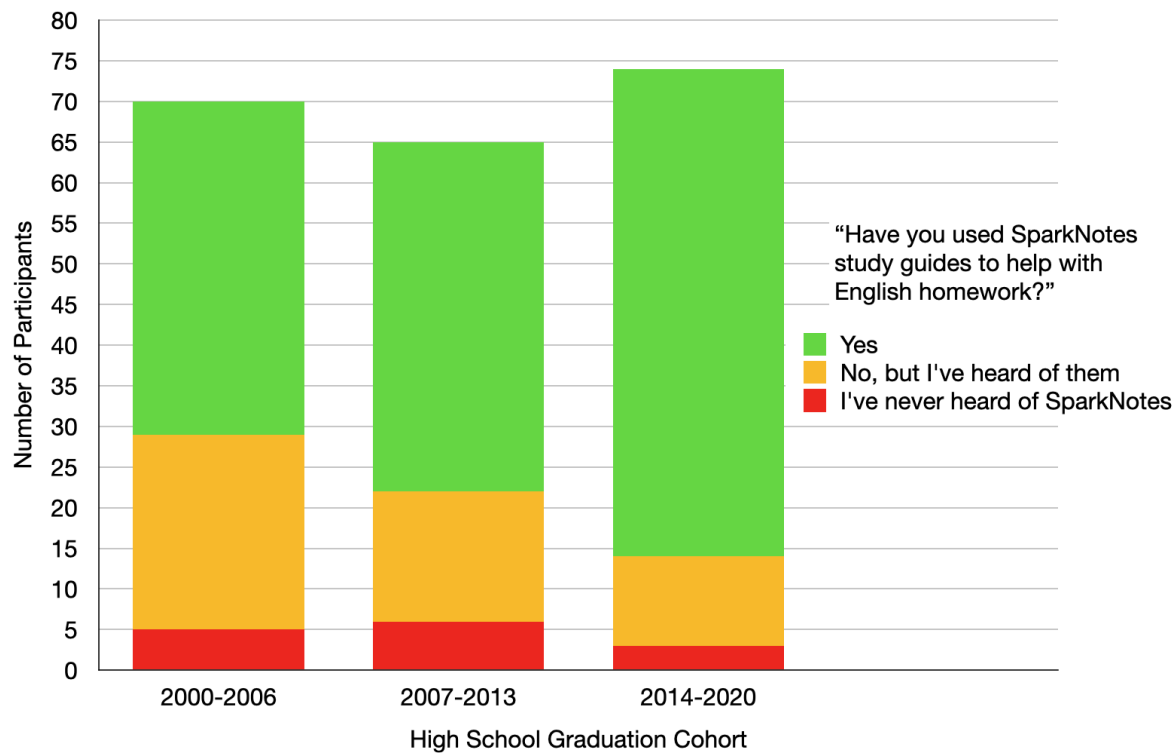
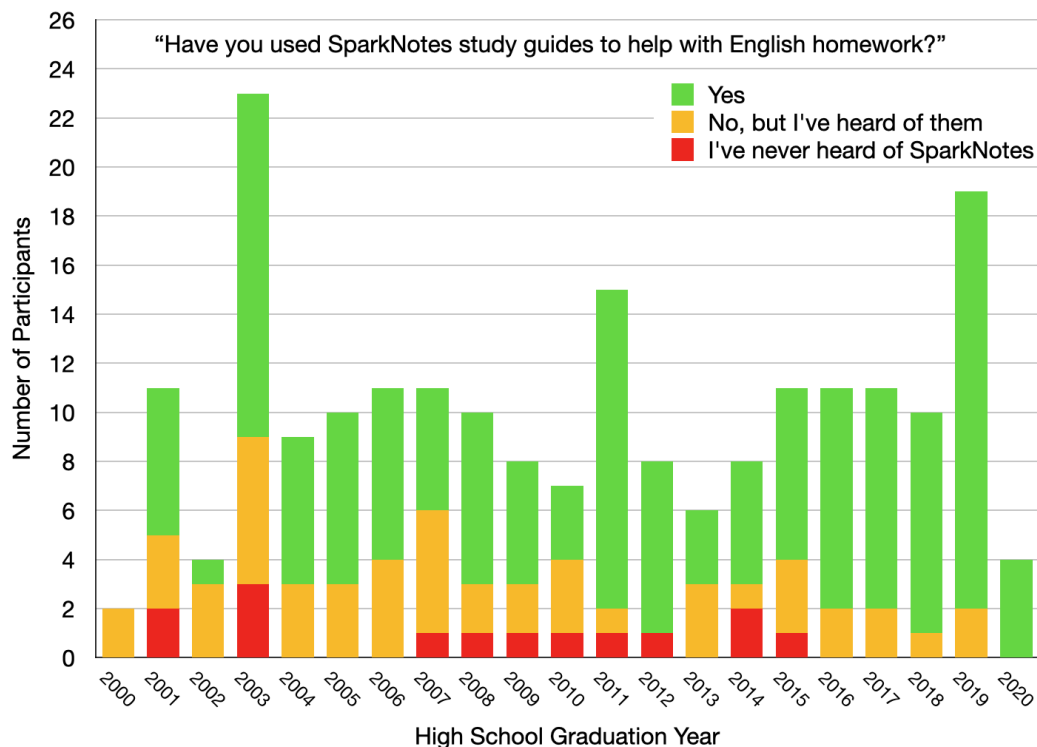


Figure 10*SparkNotes Awareness/Use by Graduation Year****English Teachers***

Twenty-one participants self-identified as Teachers/Instructors of English Language Arts or English Literature; of these, 18 fell into the target cohort. Their responses were strongly representative of the broader cohort in terms of personal SparkNotes use, reading behavior, and opinions about SparkNotes use and cheating. Among the 21 English teachers who completed the survey, 11 (52%) had not mentioned SparkNotes to their students; one had mentioned it in the context of warning not to use it (5%); and nine (43%) had mentioned it in the context of explaining when and how it was okay to use (see Figure 11). However, all participants were asked whether or not their high school English teachers had mentioned SparkNotes, and those responses are inconsistent with teachers' self-reporting. Thirty-five participants (17%) answered

“don’t know”; 72 (34%) answered “no”; and 102 (49%) answered “yes”; of those, 76 (75%) reported their teachers mentioning SparkNotes in a negative way, and 26 (25%) in a positive way (see Figure 12). In this way, students’ memories of their teachers’ attitudes and behavior around SparkNotes do not correspond with teachers’ self-reported behavior. It could be that the given sample of teacher responses does not reflect broader practices, or that attitudes towards SparkNotes have changed over time, or it could be that students’ impression of teachers’ disapproval of SparkNotes comes from somewhere other than direct statements by teachers.

Figure 11

Teachers: “Have you talked about SparkNotes with your students?” (n=21)

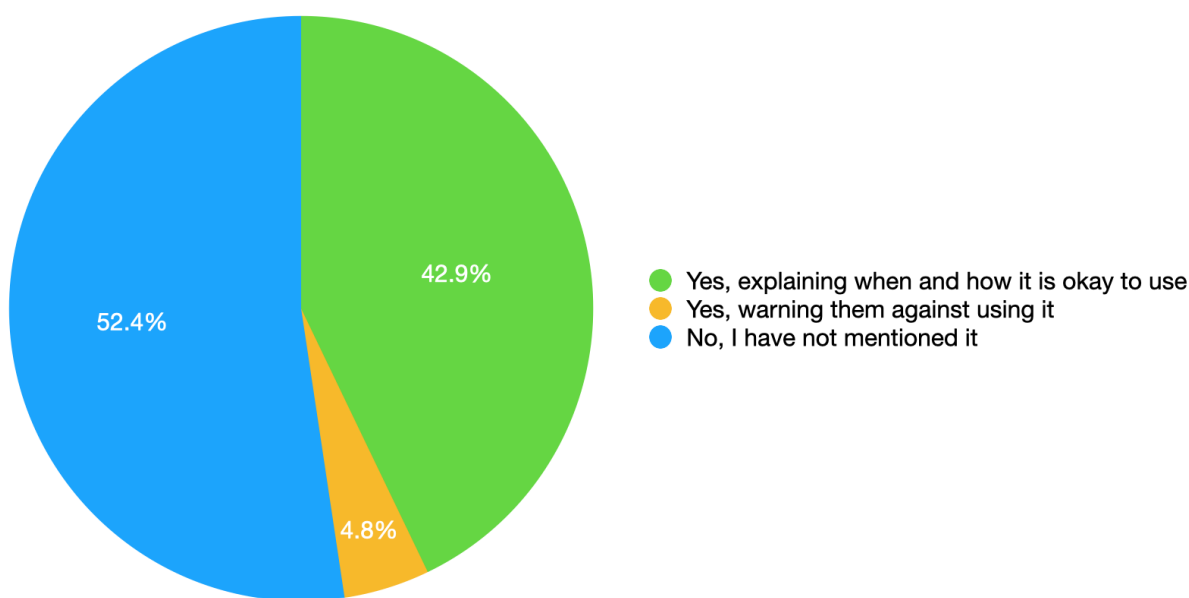
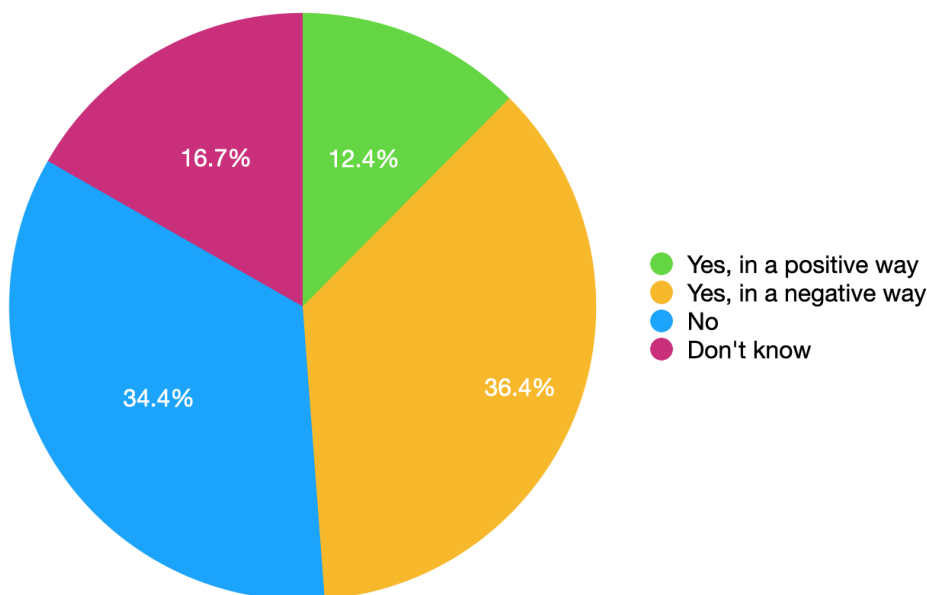


Figure 12

Target Cohort: "Did any of your teachers ever mention SparkNotes in class?" (n=209)



Reading Behavior in the Pre-SparkNotes Era

Among the 15 participants excluded due to graduation years before 2000, nine reported that they had not read every word of every book when they were in high school. Ten reported having used Coles Notes or CliffsNotes (The Canadian and U.S. precursors to SparkNotes, respectively); of those, four said that they had, and six that they had not, read every word of every book. This is similar to the pattern of SparkNotes use among the target cohort. Three also reported that they had used SparkNotes as high school students, even though SparkNotes only appeared in 1999. Of these three, one graduated in 1986, one in 1996, and one in 1999 (the latter reported having used SparkNotes for the first time in Grade 9, which would have been impossible, but it is possible that they used it in their final year of high school.) These people may have misunderstood that the question was asking about SparkNotes use during high school only, or they may have genuinely misremembered their experiences. All three had careers or

university majors relating to English or Communications, so they could have conflated more recent memories of SparkNotes use with their time in high school. Only six out of the 15 respondents with graduation years between 1960 and 1999 reported that they had never heard of SparkNotes, pointing again toward its ubiquity in contemporary literacy culture.

Types of Support

In survey sections 15 and 16, participants were asked “If you did not read every word of every book [that was assigned in your high school English classes], what was the reason?” and “If you answered yes [that you had used SparkNotes study guides to help with English homework], when did you use them?” In both cases, a list of multiple-choice options was given, and participants were invited to select as many as they felt applied to them.

Note: although only 120 participants reported not having read every word of every book, 123 answered the optional follow-up question (why not?). Of the three unanticipated responses (from people who said they *had* read every word of every book) one participant explained that their answer only applied to *The Grapes of Wrath*, which they had “only partially read” (participant 1088), contradicting their previous answer. The other two did not provide any clues in their responses as to why they had opted to answer the follow-up question. Percentages for responses to the question “If you did not read every word of every book, what was the reason?” are thus given out of 123. Of those respondents, 85 (69%) selected “Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested” as a reason for not reading every word; 71 (58%) selected “Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway”; 61 (50%) selected “Not enough time”; and 15 (13%) selected “Book was too difficult.” Two participants did not select any of the offered responses, and of the nine who filled in the “other” textbox, two specified that they did not like “reading on demand” (participant 1141) or “being forced to read” (participant 1018).

When participants were asked in what situations they had used SparkNotes, of the 144 who reported having used it, 98 (68%) selected “When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it”; 95 (66%) selected “When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review”; and 82 (57%) selected “When I had not read the book or chapter” (six did not select any of the offered responses). Five people specified via the “other” field that they had used SparkNotes as an additional perspective, as a pre-reading strategy, or to prepare for a specific assignment. I interpreted these answers as being slightly different than the closest multiple-choice response I had provided, “when I had read the book but needed help to understand it.” The implication in these answers was that the participants understood the text, but were looking for greater depth, nuance, or a specific reading of it. Three people also mentioned using SparkNotes for Shakespeare in particular; in one case the participant mentioned that they thought the teacher had provided SparkNotes study guides (they were not 100% sure about the brand) for a unit on a Shakespearian play (participant 1191). It seems plausible that the teacher could have offered books from the *No Fear Shakespeare* series, which is a subsidiary of the SparkNotes brand.

SparkNotes Values

Section 17 of the survey focused on participants’ opinions about SparkNotes use. For each question, the possible answers were “Yes,” “No,” “Don’t know,” and “It depends.” At the end of the section, participants were prompted to elaborate on their “It depends” responses (i.e. to explain what it depends on). In response to the question, “Do you think that teachers can tell when students use SparkNotes?” 14 people (7%) said “No”; 36 (17%) said Yes”; 40 (19%) said “Don’t know”; and 105 (50%) said “It depends” (11 people did not respond) (see Figure 13). To the question “Do you think that SparkNotes can be useful?” one person said “No”; 17 (8%) said

“It depends”; 25 (12%) said “Don’t know”; and 152 (73%) said “Yes” (14 people did not respond) (see Figure 14). In answer to the question “Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating?” only 11 people (5%) responded “Yes”; 21 (10%) responded “Don’t know”; 80 (38%) responded “It depends”; and 83 (40%) responded “No” (14 people did not respond) (see Figure 15). When prompted for elaboration on their “It depends” responses, 121 people responded with comments.

Figure 13

“Do you think that teachers can tell when students use SparkNotes?” (n=209)

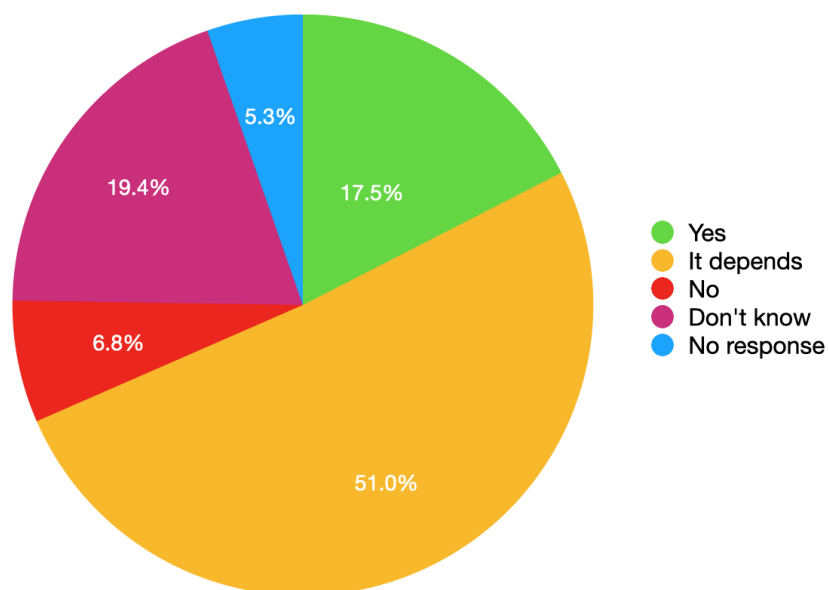
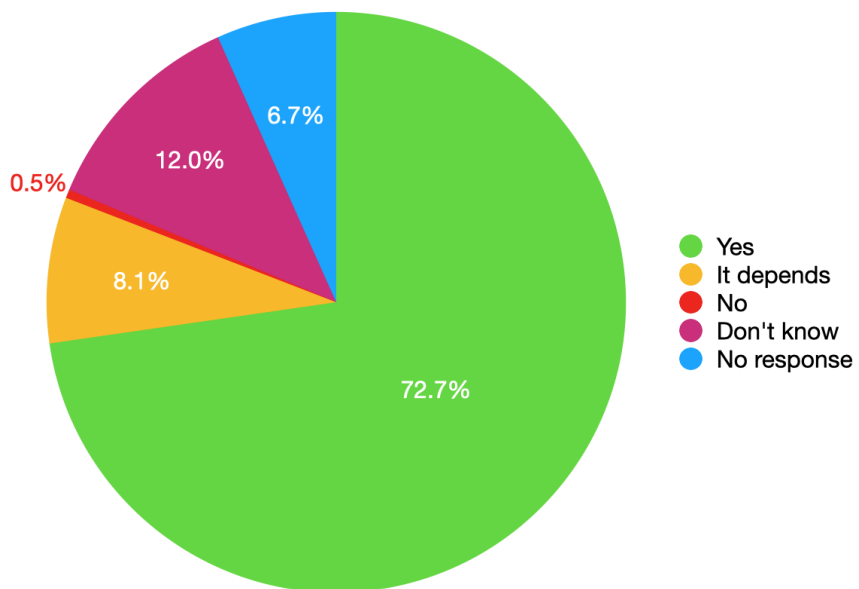
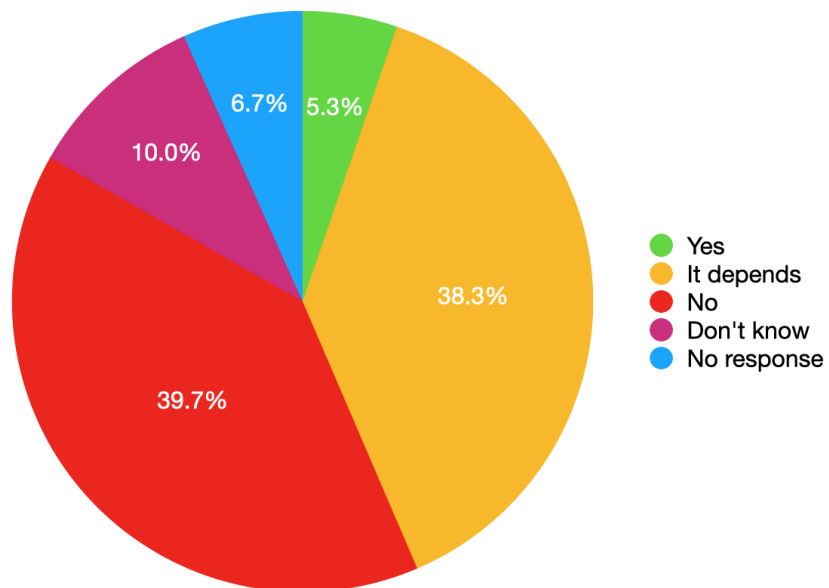


Figure 14

“Do you think SparkNotes can be useful?” (n=209)

**Figure 15**

“Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating?” (n=209)



Participants' Elaborative Comments

Note that all participants' comments are quoted verbatim, including errors, unless otherwise noted.

Reading Behavior: Clarifications

The survey section on reading behavior began with the question, "Think about all the books you have ever been assigned to read in an English class. In general, which one applies to you?" Participants had to choose one of the following answers: "I didn't read any of the books"; "I read some books but not others"; "I read at least part of every book"; "I read every word of every book"; or "Other." If they chose "Other," they were prompted to enter their own response. Five participants chose this option. In each case, the specific answers they gave were technically the same as one of the provided answers (see Figure 16), and were included with those multiple-choice responses in the quantitative analysis, which was intended to reflect technical definitions. However, it is clear that the participants did not feel represented by those answers, or they would have chosen them. Four of the five responses were included with the quantitative category, "I read at least part of every book." But the participants' own answers demonstrated more subtlety in their degree of partial reading: two people offered a detail about only not reading books they didn't like or enjoy (participants 1039, 1048), and two others specified that there had only been one book they had not fully read (participants 1041, 1149). The participants seemed to find it important to clarify that any lapses in assigned reading were exceptional, rather than routine.

Figure 16*Clarifications to Reading Behavior*

| | A | B | C | D |
|---|-----------|---|------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | ID | Think about all the books you have ever been assigned to read in an English class. In general, which one applies to you? | Quantitative Equivalent | |
| 2 | 1039 | I read most books, but skimmed some I didn't like | I read at least part of every book | |
| 3 | 1041 | Every word of every boom except a "A Take Of Two Cities" | I read at least part of every book | |
| 4 | 1048 | All of most, didn't finish ones I didn't enjoy. | I read at least part of every book | |
| 5 | 1149 | I read all books except the second half of one book one year. | I read at least part of every book | |
| 6 | 1204 | Every read in high school (not uni) | I read every word of every book | |
| 7 | | | | |
| 8 | | | | |

The next question in the section on reading behavior asked participants who had not “read every word of every book” to say why. They were invited to choose as many options from the multiple-choice list as they felt applied to them, and/or to write in their own. The options were: “Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested”; “Not enough time”; “Book was too difficult”; “Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway”; and “Other.” Nine participants chose “Other” and filled in their own responses, which are shown highlighted in Figure 17 to distinguish them from the other multiple-choice options. Two participants added concrete clarifying details: one described a specific challenge, and another explained that sometimes the reading assignment *was* an excerpt. Two others mentioned lack of motivation, and two mentioned that they did not like reading “on demand” (participant 1018) or being “forced to read” (participant 1141), which could also be understood as relating to motivation. One said, simply, “SparkNotes” (participant 1078), implying that they had been an opportunistic non-reader, skipping reading because SparkNotes made it possible to do so.

Figure 17*Clarifications to Reasons for Not Reading*

| | A | B | C | D |
|----|------|---|--|---|
| 1 | ID | If you did not read every word of every book, what was the reason? (Choose all that apply) | Quantitative Equivalent | |
| 2 | 1009 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway, Often we were only assigned specific chapters of larger texts. | | |
| 3 | 1018 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, I hated being forced to read something. | | |
| 4 | 1039 | Not enough time, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway, I didn't like or understand the book | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested; Book was too difficult | |
| 5 | 1078 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, Not enough time, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway, Sparknotes | | |
| 6 | 1088 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, This only happened with the grapes of wrath where i only partially read it | | |
| 7 | 1141 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, I do not like reading on demand | | |
| 8 | 1186 | Not enough time, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway, I struggle with "finding meaning" in books / critical analysis... If that was the assignment I'd often lose motivation | | |
| 9 | 1216 | Slow reader | Not enough time | |
| 10 | 1224 | i was a teenager more engaged in the social aspects of being a teen | | |
| 11 | | | | |
| 12 | | | | |

SparkNotes Use: Clarifications and Additional Information

Participants who reported having used SparkNotes for help with high school English class were asked to say when (i.e., in what circumstances) they had used them. As with the previous question on reading behavior, they were invited to choose as many multiple-choice options as they felt applied to them, and/or to write in their own. The provided responses were: “When I had not read the book or chapter”; “When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review”; “When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it”; and “Other.” Eleven participants wrote in their own responses, which are highlighted in Figure 18 to distinguish them from the other multiple-choice options. Four participants gave responses related to verifying or expanding their own understanding: “For additional insight” (participant 1003), “for other perspectives” (participant 1030), “to compliment my understanding” (participant 1104), and “to get new ideas” (participant 1190). These suggest enrichment rather than support,

relating to the theme of engagement, which will be discussed in depth later on. Five participants described concrete tasks for which they would use SparkNotes: three people specifically mentioned reading Shakespeare, and two described using SparkNotes to prepare for tests or exams.

Figure 18

Clarifications to Reasons for SparkNotes Use

| | A | B | C | D |
|----|-----------|--|--|---|
| 1 | ID | If you answered yes, when did you use them? (Choose all that apply) | Quantitative Equivalent | |
| 2 | 1003 | For additional insight | | |
| 3 | 1030 | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it, When I had read the book or chapter, but wanted help or other perspectives on analyzing it | | |
| 4 | 1039 | Always because we would often get quizzed on facts I couldn't remember from just reading the book | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review | |
| 5 | 1041 | When I had not read the book or chapter, When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review, When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it, To help analyse Shakespeare | | |
| 6 | 1075 | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review, i think i sometimes read then before reading the book | | |
| 7 | 1104 | I used spark notes to compliment my understanding of the books | | |
| 8 | 1190 | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it, Studying for tests to help make notes or get new ideas | | |
| 9 | 1191 | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it, I think we were given SparkNotes (BUT I DONT KNOW IF IT WAS ACTUALLY SPARKNOTES OR ANOTHER COMPREHENSION GUIDE, I really can't remember) specifically to help us understand Shakespeare. I don't remember what play or if it helped or again even if it was sparknotes , but my one experience with possible sparknotes was a teacher-led initiative. | | |
| 10 | 1199 | Prepare for exams, essays | | |
| 11 | 1201 | To review because I forgot the details. | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review | |
| 12 | 1219 | Anytime Shakespeare was assigned | | |
| 13 | | | | |
| 14 | | | | |

At the end of the section on SparkNotes use, participants were asked, “Is there anything you want to add?” Forty-three participants responded, although six commented only on the survey itself or addressed their comments to the researcher (such as participant 1088, who wrote “Good luck with your research”). Figure 19 shows a sample of the responses. Seven participants mentioned having used other study guide brands besides SparkNotes, or that other brands had been more popular among their peers (not knowing that the survey would later ask about other brands specifically). Five participants mentioned using SparkNotes for Shakespeare in particular, and four mentioned that SparkNotes hadn’t been widely used when they were in school due to

lack of access to technology or the newness of the website (which supports the idea that SparkNotes may have increased in popularity over time due partly to the increase in home Internet access). Six participants talked about using SparkNotes for help, some even as adults, with things like verifying their understanding of a story or choosing a book to read for fun.

Nine participants made comments that I regarded as having a specific emotional affect, rather than being purely informational; of those, two were negative and seven were positive. The positive comments included exclamations like “SparkNotes are awesome!” (participant 1162), “SparkNotes saved me in every English class I’ve ever taken” (participant 1126), and “SparkNotes helped me succeed” (participant 1139). The comments with a negative affect were: “I was disappointed with the information available” (participant 1122)—which is more a criticism of the SparkNotes website than the concept—and “a tool used when I was being lazy or overwhelmed” (participant 1156)—which I interpreted as an expression of guilt over using SparkNotes, based on the use of the word “lazy.”

Figure 19

Additional Information for SparkNotes Use (Sample)

| | A | B | C | D |
|----|------|---|---|-------------------------------|
| 21 | 1088 | Good luck with your research | | |
| 22 | 1096 | In more recent years, when reading for pleasure, I occasionally consult spark notes for additional context or to get insight into things I may have missed on my own. | "when reading for pleasure, I occasionally consult SparkNotes" | adult use |
| 23 | 1110 | Sometimes you look through SparkNotes even if you've read it just to confirm understanding of themes, etc. | "look through SparkNotes even if you've read it to confirm understanding" | support; authoritative source |
| 24 | 1116 | Today, I am more likely to seek out a Wikipedia summary. | | other brands |
| 25 | 1120 | we were encouraged to use sparknotes for difficult texts (my class struggled a lot with heart of darkness and shakespeare plays) | "encouraged to use SparkNotes"; "struggled with...Shakespeare" | Shakespeare |
| 26 | 1122 | I used it, but I never found it to be very useful at the time. Generally, the summaries were not that detailed. I often looked but was disappointed with the information available. | "not very useful" "disappointed with the information" | negative emotion |
| 27 | 1126 | SparkNotes saved me in every english class I've ever taken, including high school, cegep, and university | "SparkNotes saved me" | positive emotion |
| 28 | 1131 | I said yes in a positive way, but they also discouraged its use as it negates the purpose of reading the chapter. | "negates the purpose of reading" | not reading |
| 29 | 1139 | Sparknotes helped me understand our literature and succeed in my classes | "helped me succeed" | positive emotion |
| 30 | 1150 | In high school, understanding english was harder for francophones so some teachers encouraged the use of SparkNotes, for understanding at least. However, starting CEGEP, using it was prohibited and considered career suicide | "career suicide" | taboo |

Feelings Towards School and SparkNotes

Participants were asked twice more if they had anything to add—once after the section on SparkNotes values, and again at the end of the survey. Although I initially addressed each of these questions separately, after reviewing the in-vivo coding, I decided to use the same axial codes for both sets of responses. For the question after the section about SparkNotes values, there were 14 responses analyzed; for the question at the end of the survey, there were 17. A sample of the responses are shown in Figure 20. Overall, the responses for these two questions mostly fell into one of three categories: positive feelings towards SparkNotes, negative feelings towards SparkNotes, or negative feelings towards school. As with the “Anything to add?” question regarding SparkNotes use, many people included positive comments like “SparkNotes was essential for me” (participant 1039), “SparkNotes is great” (participant 1031) and “I hope SparkNotes lives on” (participant 1083). Other examples of positivity towards SparkNotes included responses like “I found SparkNotes mostly beneficial for understanding big concepts” (participant 1139); “Learning workable shortcuts for the work you have to do is a valuable lesson” (participant 1042); “I know of teachers (including myself) using SparkNotes to help US create lessons” (participant 1074); and “SparkNotes is a good resource in terms of accessibility” (participant 1204). Between the two questions, 12 responses reflected the theme of “positive feelings towards SparkNotes.”

There were four comments each in the “negative feelings towards SparkNotes” and “negative feelings towards school” categories. Two people mentioned that they loved reading but hated critical analysis and/or English class—I considered these as negative attitudes towards school. One person wrote extensively about the need to update the high school English curriculum, adding that “The only time I remember everyone in my class actually reading a book

in high school is when we did the hunger games, because people were actually excited to read it. Other than that, everyone used sparknotes all the time” (participant 1126). Another wrote about the impossibility of keeping up with reading loads in university-level English classes. Of the comments that were negative about SparkNotes, two referred specifically to the website being difficult to navigate; the other two spoke about the limited value of SparkNotes as a way to get good grades, saying that the guides were not detailed enough for some teachers’ reading quizzes, or simply that “SparkNotes won’t get you an A” (participant 1035).

Figure 20

Additional Information for SparkNotes Values and Overall (Sample)

| | A | B | C | D |
|----|------|--|--|-----------------------------|
| 1 | ID | Is there anything you want to add? | In-vivo | Axial |
| 2 | | In depth analysis of literature is not everyone's cup of tea. I LOVE to read, but I hate analysing literature. I tended to be pretty good at writing essays and whatnot in English because I did read and write at a very high level for my age and grade, but I would much rather just consume and enjoy literature. I can't imagine having to slog through an English course AND not being good at reading and writing literature analyses! | "LOVE to read, hate analysing literature"; "much rather just consume and enjoy literature" | Negative towards school |
| 3 | 1007 | You are super duper! | | |
| 4 | 1031 | Sparknotes is great. Especially the No Fear Shakespeare stuff. Having the original text and contemporary text side by side is an incredible way to teach Shakespeare! | "SpakrNotes is great" | Positive towards SparkNotes |
| 5 | 1033 | Good luck with your research :) | | |
| 6 | 1035 | Sparknotes won't get you an A. | "won't get you an A" | Negative towards SparkNotes |
| 7 | 1042 | Learning workable shortcuts for the work you have to do is a valuable lesson :) | "workable shortcuts... valuable lesson" | Positive towards SparkNotes |
| 8 | 1044 | Spark Notes can be used to review the chapters read, but students should not rely on it. Based on past experience, SN contains important information but usually excludes small details. Teachers tend to base questions on the "little" details to evaluate if students have read the assigned chapters. | "students should not rely on SparkNotes"; "usually excludes small details" | Negative towards SparkNotes |
| 9 | 1083 | In general, I do hope Sparknotes lives on. | "I hope SparkNotes lives on" | Positive towards SparkNotes |
| 10 | 1120 | I'm not a teacher sorry | | |
| 11 | 1126 | I find sparknotes especially beneficial when I actually have read the text (besides the times I've used it when I haven't read it). For example, I'm the type of person who likes to plow through a text to get the full scope of it, then go back to analyse. With sparknotes, I can easily orient myself in the novel and find which places stood out to me and why very easily. If I remember that the protagonist had a conversation with her mom that seemed important, I can go on to sparknotes to help guide me to where that conversation occurred, and perhaps get additional insight on something that went over my head the first time around. | "especially beneficial when I have read the text"; "easily orient myself in the novel" | Positive towards SparkNotes |

SparkNotes Values: Defining Cheating vs. Appropriate Use

By far, the open-ended question that elicited the richest and most elaborate qualitative responses followed the section on SparkNotes values: “If you answered ‘it depends’ for one of the previous questions [Do you think teachers can tell when students use SparkNotes? Do you

think SparkNotes can be useful? Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating?] please explain a bit about what you mean (what does it depend on?)” Many participants wrote a few sentences or a paragraph that combined their “it depends” explanations for two or three of the preceding questions; because of this, the data from the “it depends” question were analyzed all together, even though they actually included the responses to three separate questions.

Although my intention had been to read through the 121 responses once without coding, two concepts were repeated so frequently, so early, that I ended up highlighting them even on the first read-through. These were the concepts of: (a) plagiarism from the SparkNotes website, and (b) students not reading assigned texts. Following this initial read-through and preliminary coding, I used in-vivo coding to excerpt representative and/or meaningful words and phrases from each comment, dividing them into categories for the three separate questions (can teachers tell, are they useful, is it cheating) when applicable. Many of the comments included a “versus” component, which makes sense given the nature of the question they were responding to—that is, the concept of “it depends” suggests two contrasting situations leading to two different outcomes. For this reason, I added “vs.” to some of the in-vivo codes, e.g., “instead of doing the work” vs. “help with understanding” (participant 1006).

In the second round of coding, I recorded key words and phrases that captured the in-vivo codes. In the end, I found that participants tended to respond in a similar way to all three questions, so I combined the codes for each set of responses to produce a single list of key words per participant that included all of their comments (see Figure 21 for examples). I then grouped these key words into themes, as shown in Figure 22. Two of the codes, not reading and plagiarism, were so explicitly and frequently represented that I decided not to group them into

other categories, but to leave them as their own themes. In the next paragraphs, I will describe each theme in turn, ending with a section on plagiarism and not reading.

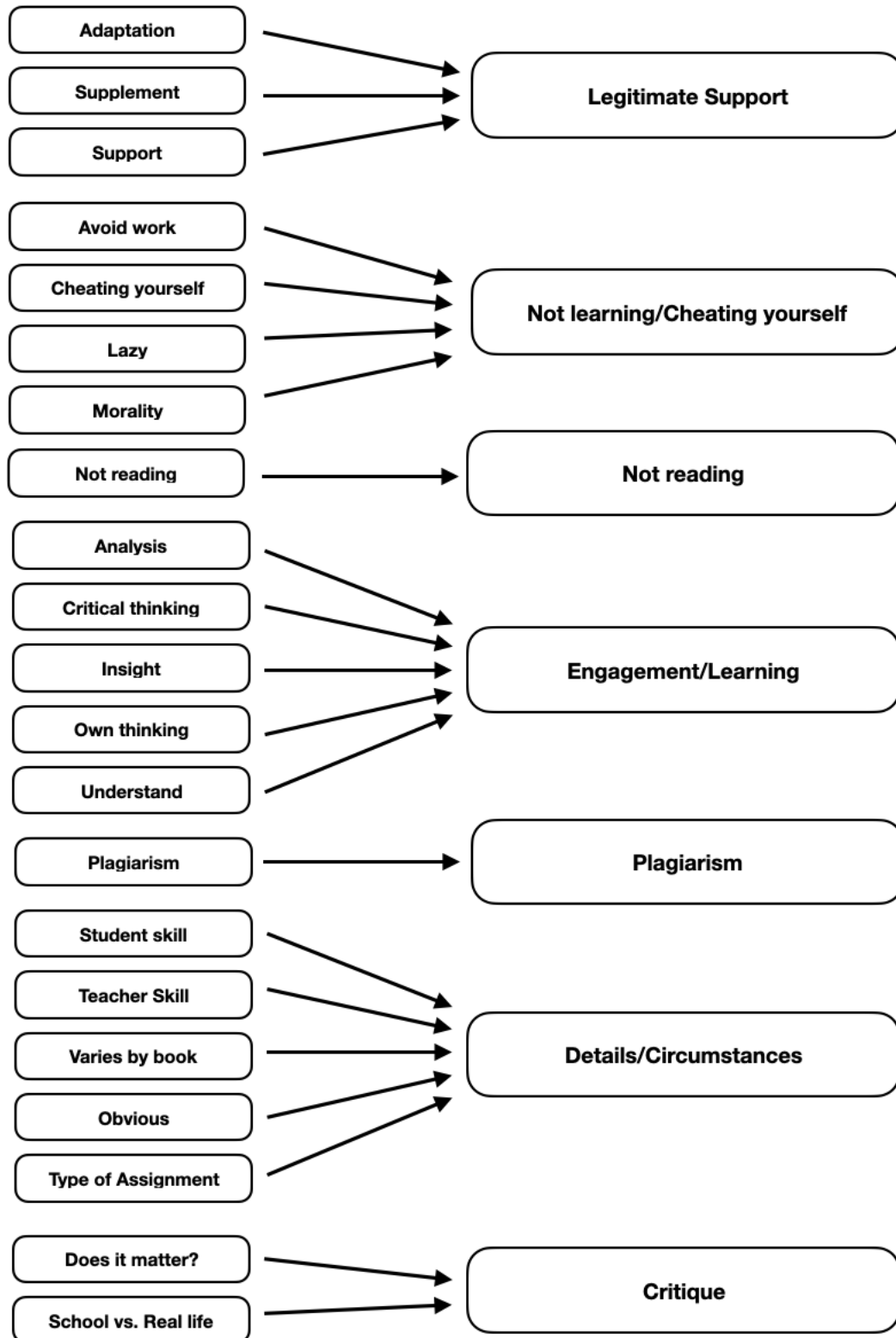
Figure 21

Elaboration on “It depends” Responses (Sample)

| | A | B | E | F | G | H | I |
|---|-----------|--|---|-------------------------|--|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | | | Do you think that SparkNotes can be useful? | | Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating? | | Summary |
| 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2 | ID | If you answered “it depends” for one of the previous questions, please explain a bit about what you mean (what does it depend on?) | In-vivo (versus) | Axial | In-vivo (versus) | Axial | |
| 3 | 1003 | If a student plagiarizes the entirety of their analysis from SparkNotes, then yes, cheating for sure. But if they’re just helping themselves understand the text more fully from a literature analysis lens, I don’t think it’s a bad helper. If they are using it as their only source, or using it instead of doing the work, then it’s less useful than if they are using it for review, or for help with understanding something, etc. If they are using it as a source for exams or essays and it is clearly cut/paste or their only source then it is often very obvious (a student’s tone, writing capability, performance in class usually comes into play here) and that is usually considered cheating. If it’s an assignment to actually not collect summaries summaries or something | *not a bad helper* | | *plagiarizes entirety of analysis...cheating for sure* vs. *helping themselves understand* | plagiarism; understand | plagiarism; understand; |
| 4 | 1006 | I’ve seen some fairly obvious examples of cheating with SparkNotes and similar services, in which case a teacher likely knew they were being used. SparkNotes is another resource. I think it can be used advantageously (e.g., helping students understand sections more fully, especially for students with learning difficulties or ESL students; recalling parts of books; using the synopses to compare to other works, etc.), but it could also be used to skimp on reading the actual book. I think it is cheating if the student is using it to get out of the assignment of reading the assigned book. | *instead of doing the work* vs. *help with understanding* | understand | *clearly cut/paste or their only source...usually considered cheating* | plagiarism | obvious; understand; plagiarism |
| 5 | 1008 | It can be an effective aid or supplement but is not useful as a substitute for reading the material. | | | | | obvious; |
| 6 | 1011 | If the student is using Sparknotes word for word, instead of their own words it students are reading summaries on spark notes rather than reading the book it could be considered cheating. But if they have read the chapter and are using spark notes for a better understanding or review i don’t think that is cheating | *another resource*; *learning difficulties or ESL* vs. *skimp on reading the actual book* | support; adaptation | *get out of the assignment of reading the book* | not reading | support; adaptation; not reading |
| 7 | 1017 | | *aid or supplement* vs. *substitute for reading the material* | not reading; supplement | | | not reading; supplement; |
| 8 | 1019 | | | | *word for word* | plagiarism | plagiarism; |
| 9 | 1022 | | | | *rather than reading the book* vs. *better understanding or review* | not reading; understand | not reading; understand; |

Figure 22

Codes and Themes for SparkNotes Values



Legitimate Support. I counted 36 instances of this concept. Many of the comments in this category acknowledged learning differences among students, such as: “There can be good reasons a student can’t read something” (participant 1042); “It makes literature very accessible” (participant 1078); “It can be useful for people who are struggling” (1090). Others explicitly positioned using SparkNotes as a supplement to assigned reading (the specific word ‘supplement’ was used eight times) in contrast with using it on its own, for example: “SparkNotes can be a useful supplement—with a grain of salt” (participant 1172); “As a supplement to either a very thorough reading, or a rapid skim, they can provide a sort of general audience sentiment regarding the text in question” (participant 1168); “If the student read the text and is using SparkNotes as supplementary material, it’s not cheating” (participant 1120). Overall, comments in this category recognized the value of SparkNotes as a resource, but also seemed to suggest a danger in relying on it too much.

Not Learning/Cheating Yourself. The idea of purposefully avoiding learning, unfairness to other students, or laziness came up 23 times. Some comments described students who use SparkNotes as cheating themselves: “you’re sort of cheating the process a student should have when experiencing a reading” (participant 1042); “if you’re reading SparkNotes INSTEAD of the book, maybe you’re cheating yourself of great literature?” (participant 1191); “If you aren’t touching the actual book and are just using SparkNotes to get through assignments/quizzes then I think this is cheating yourself from actually learning” (participant 1065). Others ascribed a moral failing to students who use SparkNotes in a certain way: “it definitely says a lot about a person if they always forego readings and go to SparkNotes instead” (participant 1065); “depends on what they are asked to contribute and how good the student is at lying” (participant 1142). The idea of motivation—caring about the material, or wanting to learn—also came up several times: “If used

to skip entirely reading a book because they just don't care, not good" (participant 1035); "It depends on whether the student wants to learn anything or is just trying to avoid learning anything" (participant 1075). Some participants also described SparkNotes use by some students as being unfair to others in their class: "sparknotes is cheating when it is used as a substitute for doing the work that others in your class are doing" (participant 1178); "use of SparkNotes by some might be unfair for students who actually read every word of the book" (participant 1125); "It seems like an unfair advantage [over] those who work really hard" (participant 1088).

Engagement/Learning. The words "analysis," "critical thinking," "thinking," "understanding," and "insight" came up 58 times in the comments. Participants seemed to want to clearly distinguish between rote learning (i.e. memorizing facts and details from SparkNotes) and critical engagement, with the latter implied as being more important. There were many similar comments in this category:

- "It depends on if the student can use what they read to formulate their own ideas" (participant 1049)
- "I feel like I should be able to understand it on my own" (participant 1063)
- "It's not going to offer them enough to fully skip out on doing the work of critical thinking" (participant 1039)
- "using it for ideas to then expand on and start thinking about a topic of their own is totally fine" (participant 1089)
- "actually engage with ideas in the book and use critical thinking" (participant 1064)
- "generate a more critical thinking from what they've read" (participant 1082)
- "deepen your understanding of the text you've read and then make your own interpretations of it from there" (participant 1130)
- "genuine engagement with the text" (participant 1181)
- "so long as they are thinking about it themselves as well" (participant 1183)

- “cheating when the student hasn’t read or thought critically about the reading” (participant 1153)

As well, one person suggested that engaging with the SparkNotes study guides themselves, by taking notes or making flashcards, could “aid learning at a deeper level” (participant 1083). This theme of engagement was one of the most prevalent, alongside plagiarism and not reading.

Details/Circumstances. This category encompassed ideas like student skill, teacher skill, and type of assignment as factors in participants’ “it depends” responses. It also included the many comments that described SparkNotes use as “obvious” in certain situations. Many of the comments in this category cited teachers’ skills as the deciding factor in whether or not they would be able to tell if a student used SparkNotes: “Teachers may be able to tell if they are already familiar with the students’ writing” (participant 1068); “Younger teachers may be more likely to notice Sparknotes summaries” (participant 1122); “If you yourself read the spark notes you’d recognize it, otherwise I don’t think you’d be able to tell” (participant 1213); “a teacher can tell it’s not in their own words” (1201). Teacher skill is related to student skill, in that a more capable student may be better at hiding their use of SparkNotes. This was also reflected in the comments: “If the student’s writing style suddenly changes in an essay, it may be a case of plagiarizing SparkNotes” (participant 1116); “how well the student who used sparknotes is able to use their own words in assignments/homework” (participant 1178); “how the student presents in their own words the information” (participant 1224). Some participants also thought that whether or not SparkNotes use counted as cheating was dependent on the type of assignment for which it was used. As one person pointed out, “The purpose of the reading assignment is to read” (participant 1071). But others expressed more nuance in their responses: “Depends in how I worded the questions for reading comprehension” (participant 1082); “Depends on the type of assignment, a quiz: they wouldn’t be able to tell, but they may be able to tell in an essay”

(participant 1123). One person chided teachers who set out to catch students using SparkNotes: “it’s trivial to design assignments to catch out people trying to rely on SparkNotes” (participant 1222).

Critique. Four participants left comments that criticized the whole concept of SparkNotes use as an issue. One person said, “A teacher might be able to tell but maybe that doesn’t matter? I don’t consider it cheating. In my current job, I’m allowed to look up the answers 😊” (participant 1031). Another said, “I think it shouldn’t really matter whether or not we used sparknotes. If I can accurately relay that feminism is a prominent theme in the *Handmaid’s tale* by only using sparknotes, then I think that’s equally as good” (participant 1126). Another pointed out that “Consulting other opinions on literature is not looked down on in other contexts” (participant 1103). These comments point toward an issue at the heart of the debate around SparkNotes use, which is that whether or not it is seen as a problem is highly context-dependent.

Plagiarism and Not Reading. At 39 and 29 direct mentions, respectively, plagiarism and not reading were by far the best represented concepts in the “it depends” commentary. Participants brought up plagiarism with regard to both “can teachers tell?” and “is SparkNotes cheating?”, and it seemed to be a clear indicator for many—that is, plagiarism was the most direct answer to “what does it depend on?” This was expressed in comments such as: “If a student plagiarizes the entirety of their analysis from SparkNotes, then yes, cheating for sure” (participant 1003); “If students plagiarize what they read in Sparknotes when doing an exam than that would be considered cheating” (participant 1062); “Depends in if you are directly plagiarizing” (participant 1186); and “If you’re blatantly plagiarizing from sparknotes then that is obviously cheating” (participant 1130). Plagiarism and engagement/learning were often

presented in opposition to one another in participants' comments, as in "If the student is using Sparknotes word for word, instead of their own words" (participant 1019); "Plagiarizing from SparkNotes, not using your original interpretation but just using what you read on SparkNotes" (participant 1128); and "Lifting text directly from the site and passing it off as one's own is cheating. Lifting an argument or analysis directly from the site and passing it off as one's own is probably cheating, though this feels more arguable" (participant 1030). This last example in particular suggests ambiguity around what constitutes intellectual engagement, which may be a less obvious facet of plagiarism than word-for-word copying.

Participants who commented on not reading seemed to be at least as concerned with dishonesty as with intellectual engagement: "If the student uses resources to pretend to read, I do believe that that is academic dishonesty/cheating" (participant 1071); "If they directly copy from it or use it in place of reading a text, then that would be against the spirit of the assignments" (participant 1100); "I used it so I didn't have to actually read a text and could just copy answers on homework. I definitely used it to cheat. It could be used in an honest way, but honestly I think that is rare" (participant 1066). Some participants also expressed the idea that intention matters in determining whether or not it is acceptable for students to skip part or all of a reading assignment: "I think honesty and integrity is important. If the student has the honest intention of reading the book and is struggling, spark notes wouldn't count as cheating. If the student doesn't care about the book for any myriad of reasons, then using spark notes is going into the realm of cheating" (participant 1160); "If a student doesn't make any attempt whatsoever to read a book and is relying entirely on sparknotes to pass a test, I think its cheating. If a student didn't have time to read an entire book because of the mountains of homework that is given to high school students and used sparknotes to fill in parts they did not have time to read, I think it's not

cheating but a useful shortcut” (participant 1156). According to these commenters, the motivation behind not reading is as relevant as the action itself. For them, the line between cheating and not cheating is positioned according to a moral code that assigns the designation of “cheater” to students whose values or priorities do not match their own understanding of academic integrity.

Overall, the “it depends” responses suggest a model of reading and English class participation with two axes: reading and analysis. Comments that focused on plagiarism were biased toward analysis, expecting students to perform engagement, critical thinking, and understanding beyond whatever support they might glean from SparkNotes. This was exemplified by responses like “When using spark notes to unravel the meaning of the novel for you, either to find a thesis for your essay or otherwise, you are adopting someone else’s interpretation rather than forming your own from the way you experience the text” (participant 1069) or “if the student copies exactly what is mentioned on spark notes then it is considered cheating but if they use it to better understand or catch up on missed work I don’t think it is cheat” (participant 1107). Comments that focused on reading were more forgiving of SparkNotes use for help with understanding or analysis, rather than as a replacement for reading, for example: “if they have read the chapter and are using spark notes for a better understanding or review i don’t think that is cheating” (participant 1022); “I think if the student actually read the assigned reading and wanted to gain additional insight, it wouldn’t really be cheating” (participant 1096).

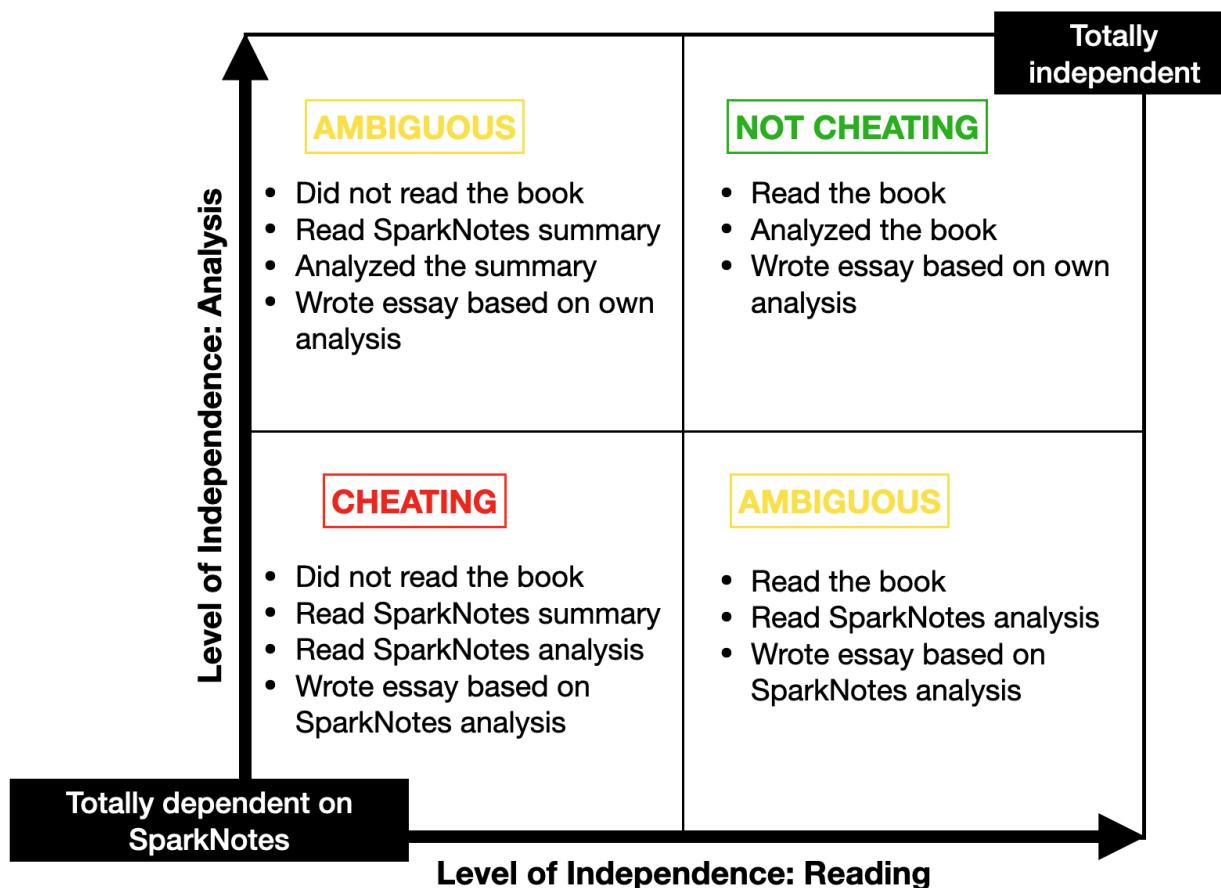
SparkNotes study guides offer both chapter-by-chapter summaries, which could be used in place of reading, and interpretations, including lists of themes, symbols, key facts and quotations, which could be used in place of independent analysis. It is unclear whether

participants who focused on only one of these elements did so because they were not aware of the other, or because they did not find it as important. None of the ELA/Literature teachers mentioned not reading in their responses, though several mentioned plagiarism, which could indicate that some students take reading assignments more literally (i.e. believing that the actual reading is what matters) than teachers intend them.

The contrast between the analysis-focused and reading-focused perspectives on SparkNotes use points toward a lack of consensus and/or understanding among the general public, including students, around the educational purpose of literary study in ELA classrooms. This raises questions like: if a student doesn't read the book at all, relying entirely on SparkNotes summaries for information about the plot and characters, but writes an essay based on their own interpretation of the information, would that be acceptable to somebody who prioritizes independent analysis over reading? Conversely, if a student reads the book cover to cover but does not understand what they've read, so relies on SparkNotes to explain the book's themes, symbols, and literary devices, then writes an essay based on that analysis, would that be considered legitimate support by participants who value reading above all? This reading vs. analysis model is illustrated by Figure 23, which shows how the differences between the two views create zones of ambiguity around when and how SparkNotes use would be considered legitimate by participants who focused their comments on either reading or analysis, but not both.

Figure 23

Is Using SparkNotes a Type of Cheating?



Discussion

This study explored the questions: what is the rate of SparkNotes use among high school students for help with English homework, and why do they turn to SparkNotes for support? and, what feelings and attitudes do students hold about SparkNotes use, and do they consider it a form of cheating? These questions were inspired partly by the body of writing about SparkNotes by English Language Arts teachers and students, from which arose the issues of not reading, SparkNotes as legitimate support, and SparkNotes as cheating aide. The 227 survey responses gathered for the project lend depth and nuance to the discussions around those issues, confirming

some assumptions and challenging others. They also suggest that my own experience of being in high school and discovering the positive effect that SparkNotes could have on my English grades was not an uncommon one.

SparkNotes Use

Of the 209 participants who were included in the main analysis, 83% answered “yes, definitely” or “mostly yes” when asked if they think of themselves as “somebody who likes reading”; 88% answered the same way when asked whether others would describe them as a good reader; and 73% reported that they received mostly As in their high school English classes. But only 43% reported that they had read “every word of every book” that was assigned when they were in high school, with 52% reporting that they had read “at least part of every book.” Sixty-nine percent of participants reported that they had used SparkNotes for support with English homework, and this proportion did not vary significantly across geographic, vocational, or reading behavior-based cohorts. Sixty-eight percent of participants reported that they had used SparkNotes when they had read a text but needed help to understand it, and 66% reported that they had used it when they had read the text but needed a review; 57% also reported having used it when they had not entirely read the text. Overall, these results indicate that SparkNotes is widely used as both a supplement to and a partial replacement for reading primary texts.

SparkNotes Attitudes

When asked, “Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating?” 5% of participants said yes, 12% said they didn’t know, 38% said it depends, and 40% said no. This question was grouped with two others—do you think teachers can tell when students use SparkNotes, and do you think SparkNotes can be useful—and participants were asked to elaborate on their responses if they had selected “it depends” for any of the questions. This

request for elaboration prompted 121 comments that spoke to participants' opinions about reading behavior and SparkNotes use, both their own and in general. The issues of students not reading assigned texts and students plagiarising from SparkNotes were the most frequently-cited responses to the question, "what does it [cheating, usefulness, teachers' ability to detect SparkNotes use] depend on?" These were often referenced in contrast to ideas of understanding, critical thinking, engagement, and insight, as in, "Plagiarizing from SparkNotes, [vs.] not using your original interpretation" (participant 1128). Many participants felt that SparkNotes was an acceptable support if students used it for help with reading, but not analysis; many others felt that the opposite was true. The comments highlighted the ambiguity around what constitutes legitimate use of SparkNotes, what constitutes cheating, and what role the act of reading plays in high school English class.

SparkNotes and New Literacy Studies

Many of the self-described skilled and motivated readers who participated in this study could likely be described as ideal readers — "avid, engaged... enthusiastic," "immersed in the joy of learning," "the ultimate goal of virtually all literacy educators" (Applegate et al., 2014, p. 189). However, according to their survey responses, only about half of them were diligent readers who completed reading homework exactly as assigned. The other half approached their reading homework in a looser way, skipping or skimming some parts of a book according to the constraints of time, attention, and interest. These two reading styles match Hayles' (2012) descriptions of close reading (the default for literary studies) and hyper reading (skimming, skipping). Whereas the latter is fine for leisure reading or even academic reading in some contexts, literary analysis specifically demands close reading to identify themes, symbols, literary devices, and so forth, all of which should be supported by specific examples from the

text, generally in the form of quotations. Close reading has traditionally been the foundational technique of literary studies, which in turn forms the basis for much of the novel study practiced in high school English classes.

This may be why some participants specifically noted that although they like reading, they do not like having to read. This could also be why Keller's (2013) participants thought of academic reading as a formulaic exercise focused on extracting key words and information. Close reading *is* a formulaic activity insofar as it consists of a set of practices that have become standard within the discipline—and SparkNotes study guides are tailored to this formula. In a sense, the dichotomy of close vs. hyper reading parallels academic vs. leisure reading. This difference reinforces the main idea of New Literacy Studies: that literacy is a set of practices that vary depending on context. Ideal readers arrive in English class with their own well-developed literacy skills, the result of extensive, intrinsically-motivated practice; these translate into literacy strategies that allow them to streamline their academic workloads based on the demands of the assignment and the limitations of their own time and interest. Perhaps ideal readers who use SparkNotes do so because they have correctly identified the differences between academic and leisure reading, and learned through experience which strategies and literacy practices are best suited to each.

The idea of strategic literacy is consistent with Keller's (2013) finding that students engage in multiple styles of reading and writing, and that they make strategic decisions about which ones to use based partly on how they expect to be assessed. This was reflected in a direct way in open-ended survey responses that talked about using SparkNotes to study for tests or exams, and by the 57% of the participants who reported not having read every word of every book that was assigned, who gave one of their reasons for doing so as “Did not seem

necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway.” It was also reflected indirectly by survey comments that were critical of school curricula and assignments that make it possible to get good grades without reading the book, like the participant who wrote, “If they have only resorted to spark notes and were able to complete the task, that’s a problem” (participant 1074). This commenter could be suggesting that teachers ought to anticipate students’ access to SparkNotes and design assessments accordingly, or they could be implying that the types of assignments that can be completed using only SparkNotes are a waste of students’ time. Either way, there is an assumption that students will use the resources that are available to them.

Opinions about how students should use these resources tend to be strongly expressed. The phenomenon of not reading was described with similar vehemence by published writers and survey participants alike: students turn to study guides “so that they can do anything but actually read the work itself” (Christenbury, 2000, p. 18); “If they are using it to get out of reading, then yes it is cheating” (participant 1095). The fact that this is seen as such a big problem suggests a moral element to the way people think about reading. This idea is also reflected in the way certain participants felt the need to qualify their responses about reading behavior by specifying that the only books they didn’t finish were ones they didn’t enjoy. It comes up again in the comments where participants discuss intent to read or not read as the deciding factor in whether or not the behavior counts as cheating: “If the student has the honest intention of reading the book and is struggling, spark notes wouldn’t count as cheating” (participant 1056). The ideal reader stereotype includes a sense of virtuousness, which may have something to do with the intrinsic motivation ideal readers embody. This could help explain why survey respondents felt that wanting to read a book, but facing some insurmountable obstacle that forced the use of SparkNotes instead, was not cheating, whereas using SparkNotes as a choice did count as

cheating.

In my literature review, I wrote that the context of New Literacy Studies (NLS) would help me connect students' attitudes and behavior to the cultural systems and structures in which they function. In the end, the contribution of NLS to the interpretation of my findings is in assuming the existence of what I would call a *literacy culture* specific to high school ELA classes. NLS is concerned with the way culture acts on literacy, as exemplified by Brandt's (2005) concept of literacy accumulation and Keller's (2013) concept of literacy acceleration, both of which give names to specific processes of cultural influence. NLS defines literacy as a set of social practices that vary depending on context (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009), so by identifying a set of literacy practices that occur in a particular context, it should be possible to describe the literacy culture for that context.

Based on my findings, I propose that the literacy culture surrounding English Language Arts education—not only within ELA, but among the general public when they think about ELA—ascribes morality to reading motivation and behavior. This creates a parallel framework for measuring achievement and success, unrelated to grades but relevant to how students and the general public think about themselves and their peers as literacy practitioners, like the participant who wrote, “Sparknotes was a tool used when I was being lazy or overwhelmed” (participant 1156). It is this parallel framework, rather than curricular demands or other academic influences, that gives rise to the concept of the ideal reader—a concept with strong moralistic undertones. If cheaters are definitionally immoral, then moral actors cannot, by definition, cheat. Thus, the ideal reader should be incapable of cheating—but my findings suggest that even students who love to read and get good grades in English class are cheaters by many definitions, complicating the ideal.

This tension speaks to the lack of clarity around learning objectives and the purpose of reading, exemplified by the QEP's deprioritization of traditional reading in its ELA curriculum. This is also reflected in the variety of ways study participants described reading, interpretation, and analysis, and the relationships between these three elements of literacy practice. Some found it most important for students to read independently, even if they received support with analysis, like the participant who wrote "if they're just helping themselves understand the text more fully from a literature analysis lens, I don't think it's a bad helper" (participant 1003); others, like the participant who wrote "If someone has trouble reading and uses them to support their learning then it is good" (participant 1189), found it most important for students to perform their own analysis, even if they received support with reading. This lack of consensus could indicate that teachers do not clearly communicate learning objectives to students, or that students' impressions or assumptions about ELA learning objectives are so strongly influenced by the broader literacy culture that they override teachers' instructions and expectations. This broader literacy culture seems to emphasize a more traditional, romantic ideal of reading (as described by Freire and Macedo, 1987) than what teachers or curriculum designers may have in mind.

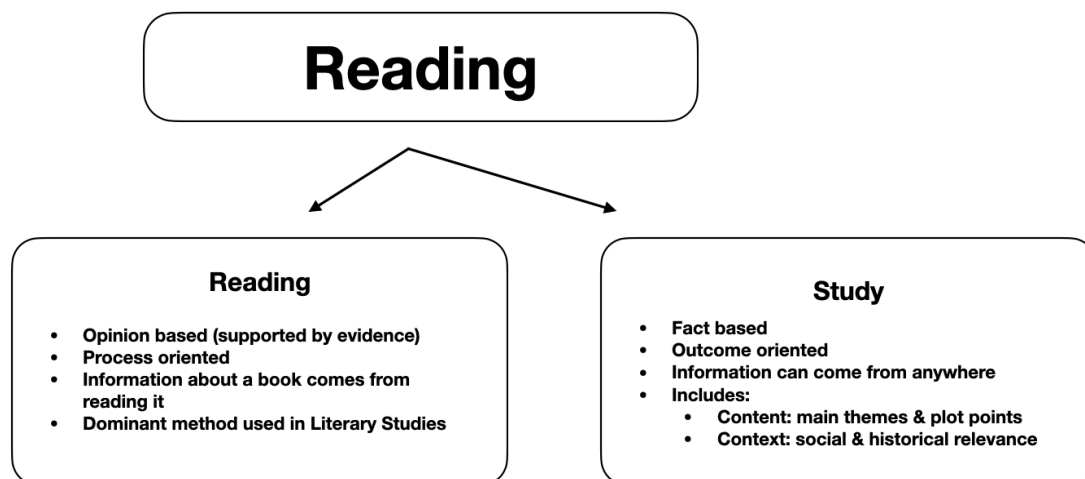
Implications for English Language Arts

In education in general, defining goals and learning objectives is a foundational concept, but the results of this study point to broad areas of confusion regarding the goals of high school English class. If most students skip or skim parts of the books they study at school, what does this say about the purpose of reading, particularly if these students are still able to achieve the stated learning outcomes and earn good grades? This is particularly interesting given that the majority of participants in the present study could be self-characterized as "ideal readers." The contrast between their images of themselves as people who enjoy and are good at reading, and

their behavior when faced with a reading assignment (and in some cases, their explicit statements that they do not like being forced to read), indicates that a separation between concepts of “reading” and “study” could be helpful in talking and thinking about high school English class. Figure 24 gives an example of how these concepts could be defined.

Figure 24

Reading vs. Study



Studying the English literary canon certainly has value. References to books like *1984* and *Lord of the Flies* occur frequently in other contexts, including contemporary literature, news media, and politics. To participate knowledgeably in the cultural conversations that dominate Anglo-centric public discourse, it is helpful to be familiar with these texts, which constitute a form of cultural capital. However, the type of familiarity that is required is more about general knowledge than literary analysis. In the same way that citizens of a country will generally be familiar with some basic details of that country’s history, people educated in English will often know that *1984* is a fictional work of political satire that critiques authoritarianism. But how students arrive at that understanding—either through close reading and analysis of the novel itself, or by studying secondary texts about *1984*, which could include non-print sources—is

arguably less important.

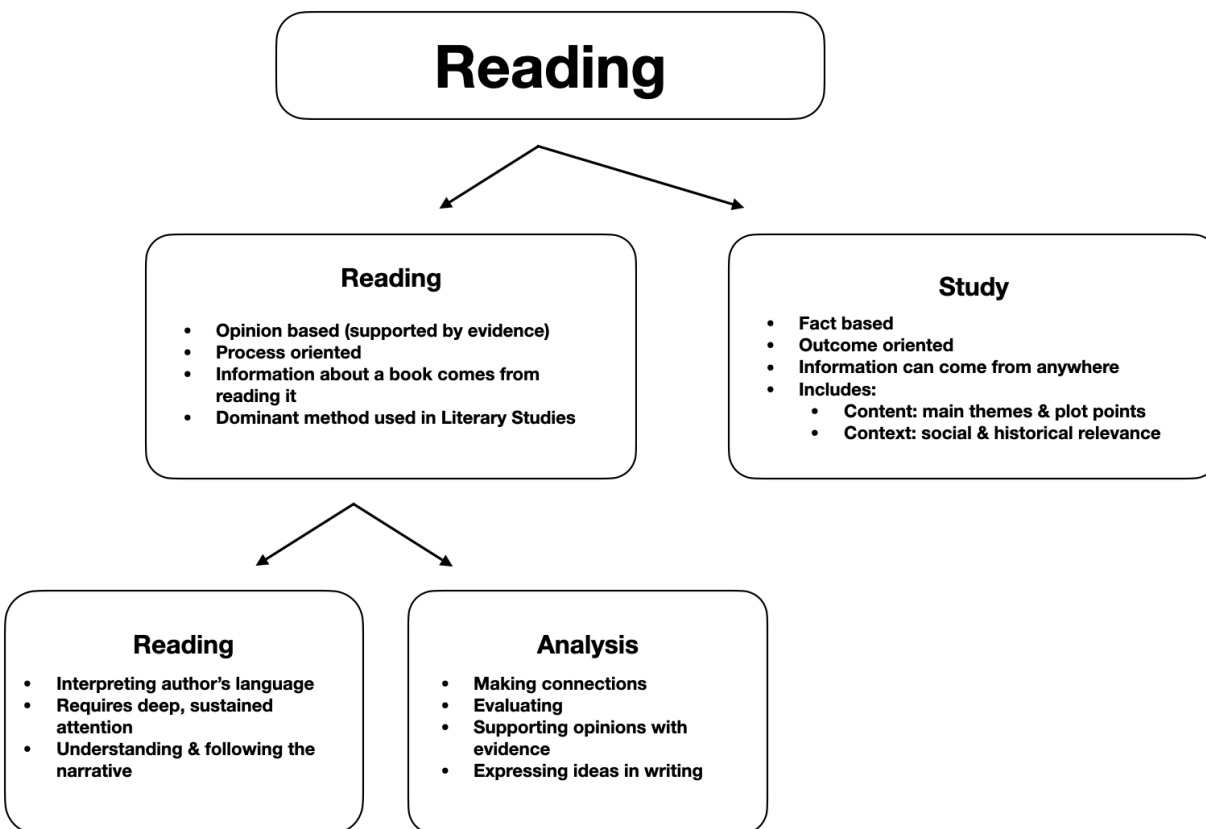
Setting aside books from the canon as objects of study, rather than required reading, would open up space in ELA classes for reading as an act of appreciation, engagement, and analysis. I am by no means the first to suggest this idea; many recommendations exist online and in teaching guides for book pairings, where a contemporary or young adult novel is used as an entry point to teaching about a classic novel with similar themes. But knowing how many students do not actually read assigned novels supports the idea that if reading is the goal in and of itself, a different approach is needed. Such an approach would require clarifying instructions to students: is it important that they read each page closely, perhaps taking notes to help them remember details later on, or is the point to experience the literature organically, building engagement and motivation for further reading? The answers to these questions will vary depending on context, but the important thing is that teachers make their expectations known rather than assuming that “reading” means the same thing to all students.

Thinking about reading and studying as discrete activities can help create space for non-canonical texts in the ELA classroom, which might in turn promote reading motivation and engagement among students. But subdividing reading even further, into comprehension and textual analysis, can help make classrooms more inclusive for all students (see Figure 25). For example, in the case of an English language learner, analytical skills will often transfer from one language to another, but vocabulary generally does not. Separating reading comprehension from textual analysis or other forms of study can allow students with limited vocabulary in English to practice each component of literacy at the appropriate level. SparkNotes or similar guides can be used to scaffold either reading comprehension, or analysis, or both, depending on the needs of the student. Here, again, clarifying the goals of a reading assignment can help students and

teachers alike to consider best practices and potential strategies to achieve those goals.

Figure 25

Reading vs. Analysis



Limitations

The snowball technique used to recruit participants for this study does not guarantee a random sample, and in this case, the self-selected participants were mainly strong students who liked reading and were comfortable sharing their opinions about SparkNotes; thus, the results should not be generalized to other populations. As well, because all data were self-reported, there is a risk of social desirability bias. If such bias played a role, it could mean that students' grades or reading abilities were actually lower than reported, or that their non-reading behaviors or rates of SparkNotes use were higher. Finally, it is worthwhile to note that the digital format of

SparkNotes study guides may have played a role in participants' use and opinions of them, but the current study's questionnaire did not address this potentially confounding factor.

Future Directions

As the participants in this study were a relatively homogenous group, future research could seek to learn more about reading behavior and the use of SparkNotes among other populations—for example, students with lower grades, English language learners, students with less general interest in reading, and so on. Such a project could broaden the current study's quantitative findings, and/or deepen the qualitative findings through interviews, some of which might focus on teachers' perspectives and values regarding ELA learning objectives. Analyzing provincial or regional ELA curricula from places other than Quebec could also provide important context for such findings. The topic of SparkNotes use and reading behavior would also benefit greatly from further research into how digital reading and literacies affect students' choices and strategies when faced with the demands of traditional high school English reading assignments. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore whether students' reading behaviors change when young adult or contemporary literary fiction is assigned rather than works from the canon.

Conclusion

SparkNotes plays a contradictory role in contemporary English Language Arts education. It both critiques and enables the ongoing dominance of the English literary canon in ELA classrooms, while also existing as its own cultural phenomenon, exemplified by the now-common phrase “let me give you the SparkNotes version.” It makes reading seem cool through its popular and highly active social media channels, while also facilitating not reading. Most importantly for educators and education researchers, it represents a possible starting point for larger conversations around curriculum, pedagogy, and ethics. As one participant wrote in their

survey comments, “I think it’s about the intersection of a bunch of stuff: time managements, enrichment, confidence building through confirmation, achievement anxiety...the use of SparkNotes is likely as intersectional as the population that uses it in a 21st Century context” (participant 1157). Broz’s (2011) description of the situation as “teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn” (p. 16) may be hyperbolic, but it points to a real discrepancy between what teachers ask students to do, what students actually do, and how everybody talks about it. Although SparkNotes use has been an open secret for many years, discussed informally by teachers and students alike, it has rarely been addressed in an academic context. This study is an attempt to steer the conversation in a more evidence-based direction to help bring students, teachers, and researchers of literacy together on the same page.

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Appendices

Appendix A: SparkNotes Survey Text

Section 1: Introduction

This anonymous survey takes about 10 minutes. Anyone aged 18 and over can complete it, but it is especially aimed at people who attended high school in the year 2000 or later, plus current students and English Language Arts teachers.

[Full text of Concordia University Information and Consent Form]

Do you consent to participate?

>Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research.→Go to Section 2: Location

>No, I do not consent to participate in this research, and/or I am younger than 18.→Go to Section 23: End of survey

Section 2: Location

Where did you attend high school?

>Canada→Go to Section 3: Location in Canada

>Outside Canada→Go to Section 4: Location Outside Canada

Section 3: Location in Canada

Where was your high school in Canada?

>[Dropdown menu listing all provinces and territories in Canada]→Go to Section 5: Cohort

Section 4: Location Outside Canada

Where was your high school outside Canada?

>[Dropdown menu listing all countries in the world]

Section 5: Cohort

Please type your high school graduation year. If you left high school without graduating, put the year you would have graduated.

>[textbox]

Was English the main language of instruction at your high school?

>Yes

>No

Section 6: Reading in English

For the first two questions, please choose the number that fits you best.

- 1 = Very hard
- 2 = Somewhat hard
- 3 = Neutral (not easy or hard)
- 4 = Somewhat easy
- 5 = Very easy

In general, how easy or hard is it for you to read in English?

>[Likert scale 1-5]

Think about when you first learned to read in English. How easy or hard was it for you?

>[Likert scale 1-5]

Is English your preferred language for reading? (Choose yes if you are equally comfortable in English and another language)

>Yes→Go to Section 8: Reading Level

>No→Go to Section 7: Reading in Other Languages

Section 7: Reading in Other Languages

Do you read more in another language than in English?

>Yes

>No

If you answered yes, what is the language?

>[textbox]

Section 8: Reading Level

For the first two questions, please choose the number that fits you best.

- 1 = No, not at all
- 2 = Mostly no
- 3 = Neutral (halfway between yes and no)
- 4 = Mostly yes
- 5 = Yes, definitely

In general, do you think of yourself as somebody who likes reading?

>[Likert scale 1-5]

Would others describe you as a good reader?

>[Likert scale 1-5]

In general, in your English classes at school, what grades did you receive?

- >Mostly Ds
- >Mostly Cs
- >Mostly Bs
- >Mostly As

Section 9: Leisure Reading

Think about your leisure reading. This could include reading for fun or to learn something new, but not school or work assignments.

For each category, check the box if you read one or more in the past year. Include things you read on an e-reader, on paper, and online.

- >Short Fiction
- >Comic book (including graphic novels)
- >Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page)
- >Memoir or Biography (like *Becoming* or *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*)
- >Contemporary Novel (like *A Game of Thrones* or *The Kite Runner*)
- >Classic Novel (like *Frankenstein* or *Pride and Prejudice*)
- >Young Adult Novel (like *Wonder* or *All the Bright Places*)
- >Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.)

What do you like to read the most?

>[textbox]

What do you like to read the least?

>[textbox]

Section 10: Role

Which best describes your current role:

- >Student→Go to Section 13: Current Students
- >Teacher/Instructor (English Language Arts or English Literature)→Go to Section 11: English Teachers
- >Teacher/Instructor (other subjects)→Go to Section 14: Non-Students
- >None of the above→Go to Section 14: Non-Students

Section 11: English Teachers

Thank you for participating in this survey! First, you will be asked a few questions about your perspective as a teacher. Then, you will be asked to think back on your experiences as a student.

At what level do you teach?

- >High school
- >CEGEP/College
- >Undergraduate
- >Other [textbox]

Have you heard of SparkNotes study guides?

- >Yes
- >No

SparkNotes.com is a collection of study guides for a variety of subjects, particularly English Literature. They also offer teaching guides and lesson plans.

Section 12: Teachers' SparkNotes Use

Have you ever used SparkNotes teacher guides?

- >Yes
- >No

Do you use SparkNotes study guides for any of the following? (Choose all that apply)

- >To review the details of a book you have already read
- >To help choose books to read with your class
- >To plan "SparkNotes-proof" lessons (i.e. to make sure students won't be able to complete assignments using SparkNotes)
- >To guide you when teaching a book for the first time
- >To check students' work for plagiarism or cheating
- >Other [textbox]

Have you talked about SparkNotes with your students?

- >Yes, warning them against using it
- >Yes, explaining when and how it is okay to use
- >No, I have not mentioned it

Is there anything you want to add?

>[textbox]

The next section is designed to find out about your experiences as a student. Please think about that time and try to answer as your high-school self.

(This part is aimed mostly at people who graduated high school in 2000 or later, so some of the questions may not make as much sense if that doesn't apply to you.)

Please put on your "Student Hat" now. Click "next" when you're ready!

→Go to Section 15: High school reading behaviour

Section 13: Current students

Are you majoring or do you plan to major in English Literature, Communications, English Language Arts Education, or a related field?

>Yes

>No

>Don't know

Have you ever taken an English, Communications, or Literature course as an elective?

>Yes

>No

The following sections are designed to find out about your experience as a high school student. Please think about that time and answer to the best of your ability.

→Go to Section 15: High school reading behaviour

Section 14: Non-students

Did you major in English Literature, Communications, English Language Arts Education, or a related field in university, or is your job closely related to one of those fields?

>Yes

>No

Did you ever take an English, Communications, or Literature course as an elective?

>Yes

>No

The following sections are designed to find out about your experience as a high school student. Please think about that time and answer to the best of your ability.

Please put on your "Student Hat" now. Click "next" when you're ready!

Section 15: High school reading behavior

Think about all the high school English classes you have taken. On average, how many books did your class read per year?

>0

>1-3

>4-6

>More than 6

Think about all the books you have ever been assigned to read in an English class. In general, which one applies to you?

- >I didn't read any of the books
- >I read some books but not others
- >I read at least part of every book
- >I read every word of every book
- >Other [textbox]

If you did not read every word of every book, what was the reason? (Choose all that apply)

- >Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested
- >Not enough time
- >Book was too difficult
- >Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway
- >Other [textbox]

Section 16: SparkNotes Use

Have you used SparkNotes study guides to help with English homework?

- >Yes
- >No, but I've heard of them
- >I've never heard of SparkNotes

If you answered yes, when did you use them? (Choose all that apply)

- >When I had not read the book or chapter
- >When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review
- >When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it
- >Other [textbox]

If you answered yes, what grade were you in when you FIRST used SparkNotes?

>[textbox]

Do you think your peers used SparkNotes?

- >Yes
- >No
- >Don't know

Did any of your teachers ever mention SparkNotes in class?

- >Yes, in a positive way
- >Yes, in a negative way
- >No
- >Don't know

Is there anything you want to add?

>[textbox]

Section 17: SparkNotes Values

If you are an English teacher, please remove your "Student Hat" and answer the next questions from a teaching perspective.

Do you think teachers can tell when students use SparkNotes?

- >Yes
- >No
- >It depends
- >Don't know

Do you think that SparkNotes can be useful?

- >Yes
- >No
- >It depends
- >Don't know

Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating?

- >Yes
- >No
- >It depends
- >Don't know

If you answered "it depends" for one of the previous questions, please explain a bit about what you mean (what does it depend on?)

>[textbox]

Is there anything you want to add?

>[textbox]

Section 18: SparkNotes Media

Have you used SparkNotes for anything other than literature study guides (e.g., help with other subjects, read the SparkNotes blog, etc?)

- >Yes
- >No

Do you follow SparkNotes on any social media? (Choose all that apply)

- >Facebook
- >Twitter
- >Instagram
- >TikTok

Section 19: Other Study Guides

Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply)

| | Heard Of | Used |
|---------------------|----------|------|
| CliffsNotes | | |
| Coles Notes | | |
| Shmoop | | |
| LitCharts | | |
| GradeSaver | | |
| CourseHero | | |
| BookRags | | |
| No Fear Shakespeare | | |

Section 20: Additional Information

If you prefer not to answer, you may leave these blank.

What year were you born?

>[textbox]

What is your gender?

>[textbox]

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

>[textbox]

Section 21: Comments

Is there anything you would like to add or explain more about?

>[textbox]

Do you have any feedback about the survey itself?

>[textbox]

Section 22: Consent to future contact

May we contact you in the future to follow up on this survey?

>Yes

>No

If you answered yes, please give your email address:

>[textbox]

Section 23: Thank you! This is the end of the survey. Please click "submit" to save your answers.

If you do not wish to participate, you may close this window without clicking "submit" and your answers will not be recorded.

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Posters

*sparknotes survey – Invitation to Participate!

I'm a Master's student researching how people use SparkNotes to help with high school English class.

I'm especially looking for:

- Anyone who graduated high school after 2000
- English Language Arts and Literature teachers

But all adults are welcome to participate!

Please take this anonymous 10-minute survey!

Go to ReadingSurvey.WixSite.com/Link

Research for a Master's thesis in the Department of Education, Concordia University, Montreal
 Primary investigator: Amanda Light Dunbar
 Contact: amanda.dunbar@mail.concordia.ca



*sparknotes survey – Invitation to Participate!

I'm a Master's student researching how people use SparkNotes to help with high school English class.

I'm especially looking for:


- Anyone who graduated high school after the year 2000
- English Language Arts and Literature teachers

But all adults are welcome to participate!

Please take this anonymous 10-minute survey!

Go to ReadingSurvey.WixSite.com/Link

Research for a Master's thesis in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal
 Primary investigator: Amanda Light Dunbar
 Contact: amanda.dunbar@mail.concordia.ca



Appendix C: Raw Data Sample (10 Participants)

| | A | B | C | D | E |
|----|------------------------------------|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | Section 2: Location | Section 3: Location in Canada | Section 4: Loca |
| 2 | Participant ID | Timestamp | Do you consent to participate? | Where are you located? | Which province are you in? If you a not currently a student or teacher, please respond with the province where you attended high school. |
| 3 | 1099 | 4/18/2021 23:09:05 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |
| 4 | 1100 | 4/19/2021 7:28:13 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Outside Canada | |
| 5 | 1101 | 4/19/2021 10:47:26 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Ontario |
| 6 | 1102 | 4/19/2021 16:51:14 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |
| 7 | 1103 | 4/19/2021 16:52:16 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Ontario |
| 8 | 1104 | 4/19/2021 16:54:58 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |
| 9 | 1105 | 4/19/2021 17:00:16 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |
| 10 | 1106 | 4/19/2021 17:03:52 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |
| 11 | 1107 | 4/19/2021 17:54:41 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |
| 12 | 1108 | 4/19/2021 18:44:57 | Yes, I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in this research. | Canada | Quebec |

| | A | F | G | H | I |
|----|----------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | ion Outside Canada | Section 5: Cohort | | Section 6: Reading in Engl |
| 2 | Participant ID | Which country are you in? If you are not currently a student or teacher, please respond with the country where you attended high school. | Please type your high school graduation year. If you left high school without graduating, put the year you would have graduated. | Was English the main language of instruction at your high school? | In general, how easy or hard is it for you to read in English? |
| 3 | 1099 | | 2010 | Yes | 5 |
| 4 | 1100 | United States of America | 2008 | Yes | 5 |
| 5 | 1101 | | 2004 | Yes | 5 |
| 6 | 1102 | | 2016 | Yes | 5 |
| 7 | 1103 | | 2017 | Yes | 5 |
| 8 | 1104 | | 2015 | Yes | 5 |
| 9 | 1105 | | 2012 | No | 5 |
| 10 | 1106 | | 2016 | Yes | 5 |
| 11 | 1107 | | 2018 | Yes | 5 |
| 12 | 1108 | | 2017 | Yes | 5 |

| | A | J | K | L | M | N |
|----|----------------------------|---|---|---|--|---|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | ish | Section 7: Reading in Other Languages | | Section 8: Reading Level | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Think about when you first learned to read in English. How easy or hard was it for you? | Is English your preferred language for reading? (Choose yes if you are equally comfortable in English and another language) | Do you read more in another language than in English? | If you answered yes, what is the language? | In general, do you think of yourself as somebody who likes reading? |
| 3 | 1099 | | 3 Yes | | | 3 |
| 4 | 1100 | | 5 Yes | | | 5 |
| 5 | 1101 | | 5 Yes | | | 5 |
| 6 | 1102 | | 4 Yes | | | 5 |
| 7 | 1103 | | 4 Yes | | | 5 |
| 8 | 1104 | | 5 Yes | | | 5 |
| 9 | 1105 | | 4 Yes | | | 2 |
| 10 | 1106 | | 5 Yes | | | 3 |
| 11 | 1107 | | 3 Yes | | | 5 |
| 12 | 1108 | | 4 Yes | | | 3 |

| | A | O | P | Q | R | S |
|----|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | | Section 9: Leisure Reading | | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Would others describe you as a good reader? | In general, in your English classes at school, what grades did you receive? | For each category, check the box if you read one or more in the past year. Include things you read on an e-reader, on paper, and online. | What do you like to read the most? | What do you like to read the least? |
| 3 | 1099 | 4 | Mostly As | Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Classic Novel (like <i>Frankenstein</i> or <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>). Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.) | Nonfiction (science, history) | Fantasy novel |
| 4 | 1100 | 5 | Mostly As | Short fiction, Comic book (including graphic novels), Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Memoir or Biography (like <i>Becoming</i> or <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>). Contemporary Novel (like <i>A Game of Thrones</i> or <i>The Kite Runner</i>). Classic Novel (like <i>Frankenstein</i> or <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>). Young Adult Novel (like <i>Wonder</i> or <i>All the Bright Places</i>). Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.) | Historical fiction, based on true stories; Fantasy/sci-fi novels | Dry textbooks |
| 5 | 1101 | 4 | Mostly As | Short fiction, Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Contemporary Novel (like <i>A Game of Thrones</i> or <i>The Kite Runner</i>) | Short stories | Historical |
| 6 | 1102 | 5 | Mostly As | Short fiction, Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Contemporary Novel (like <i>A Game of Thrones</i> or <i>The Kite Runner</i>). Young Adult Novel (like <i>Wonder</i> or <i>All the Bright Places</i>). Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.) | Romance | Sci-fi |
| 7 | 1103 | 5 | Mostly As | Short fiction, Comic book (including graphic novels), Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Memoir or Biography (like <i>Becoming</i> or <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>). Contemporary Novel (like <i>A Game of Thrones</i> or <i>The Kite Runner</i>). Young Adult Novel (like <i>Wonder</i> or <i>All the Bright Places</i>) | High Fantasy | Nonfiction |
| 8 | 1104 | 5 | Mostly As | Short fiction, Comic book (including graphic novels), Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Memoir or Biography (like <i>Becoming</i> or <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>). Classic Novel (like <i>Frankenstein</i> or <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>). Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.) | Mystery/Thriller | N/A |
| 9 | 1105 | 5 | Mostly As | Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.) | Blog posts | Novels |
| 10 | 1106 | 5 | Mostly Bs | Short fiction, Comic book (including graphic novels), Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Memoir or Biography (like <i>Becoming</i> or <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>). Contemporary Novel (like <i>A Game of Thrones</i> or <i>The Kite Runner</i>) | Romantic stories | Horror |
| 11 | 1107 | 3 | Mostly Bs | Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Classic Novel (like <i>Frankenstein</i> or <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>). Young Adult Novel (like <i>Wonder</i> or <i>All the Bright Places</i>) | Fiction | Peer reviewed articles |
| 12 | 1108 | 3 | Mostly Bs | Short fiction, Magazine article or Blog post (longer than 1 page), Young Adult Novel (like <i>Wonder</i> or <i>All the Bright Places</i>). Nonfiction book (including instructional or cook books, self-help, science, history, etc.) | I like to read fiction novels | Non-fiction books |

| | A | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z |
|----|------------------------------------|--|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | Section 10: Role | Section 11: English Teachers | Section 12: Teachers' SparkNotes Use | | | | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Which best describes your current role: | At what level do you teach? | Have you heard of SparkNotes study guides? | Have you ever used SparkNotes teacher guides? | Do you use SparkNotes study guides for any of the following? (Choose all that apply) | Have you talked about SparkNotes with your students? | Is there anything you want to add? |
| 3 | 1099 | None of the above | | | | | | |
| 4 | 1100 | Teacher/Instructor (other subjects) | | | | | | |
| 5 | 1101 | None of the above | | | | | | |
| 6 | 1102 | Student | | | | | | |
| 7 | 1103 | Student | | | | | | |
| 8 | 1104 | Student | | | | | | |
| 9 | 1105 | Student | | | | | | |
| 10 | 1106 | Student | | | | | | |
| 11 | 1107 | Student | | | | | | |
| 12 | 1108 | Student | | | | | | |

| | A | AA | AB | AC |
|----|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | Section 13: Current Students | | Section 14: Non-students |
| 2 | Participant ID | Are you majoring or do you plan to major in English Literature, Communications, English Language Arts Education, or a related field? | Have you ever taken an English, Communications, or Literature course as an elective? | Did you major in English Literature, Communications, English Language Arts Education, or a related field in university, or is your job closely related to one of those fields? |
| 3 | 1099 | | | No |
| 4 | 1100 | | | No |
| 5 | 1101 | | | No |
| 6 | 1102 | No | No | |
| 7 | 1103 | No | No | |
| 8 | 1104 | No | Yes | |
| 9 | 1105 | No | Yes | |
| 10 | 1106 | No | No | |
| 11 | 1107 | No | No | |
| 12 | 1108 | No | No | |

| | A | AD | AE | AF |
|----|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | | Section 15: High school reading behavior |
| 2 | Participant ID | Did you ever take an English, Communications, or Literature course as an elective? | Think about all the high school English classes you have taken. On average, how many books did your class read per year? | Think about all the books you have ever been assigned to read in an English class. In general, which one applies to you? |
| 3 | 1099 | No | 1-3 | I read at least part of every book |
| 4 | 1100 | No | More than 6 | I read every word of every book |
| 5 | 1101 | Yes | More than 6 | I read every word of every book |
| 6 | 1102 | | 1-3 | I read at least part of every book |
| 7 | 1103 | | 4-6 | I read at least part of every book |
| 8 | 1104 | | 4-6 | I read every word of every book |
| 9 | 1105 | | 1-3 | I read at least part of every book |
| 10 | 1106 | | 1-3 | I read at least part of every book |
| 11 | 1107 | | 1-3 | I read at least part of every book |
| 12 | 1108 | | 1-3 | I read at least part of every book |

| | A | AG | AH | AI | AJ |
|----|------------------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | | | Section 16: SparkNotes Use |
| 2 | Participant ID | If you did not read every word of every book, what was the reason? (Choose all that apply) | Have you used SparkNotes study guides to help with English homework? | If you answered yes, when did you use them? (Choose all that apply) | If you answered yes, what grade were you in when you FIRST used SparkNotes? |
| 3 | 1099 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway | I've never heard of SparkNotes | | |
| 4 | 1100 | | Yes | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it | My guess is ninth grade? |
| 5 | 1101 | I read all the words | Yes | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review | Grade 10 |
| 6 | 1102 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested | Yes | When I had not read the book or chapter, When I had read the book or chapter, but needed a review, When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it | Grade 7 |
| 7 | 1103 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, Not enough time | Yes | When I had read the book or chapter, but needed help to understand it | 9 |
| 8 | 1104 | | Yes | I used spark notes to compliment my understanding of the books | 8 |
| 9 | 1105 | Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway | Yes | When I had not read the book or chapter | Grade 7 |
| 10 | 1106 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway | No, but I've heard of them | | |
| 11 | 1107 | Boring/hard to pay attention/not interested, Not enough time | Yes | When I had not read the book or chapter | Grade 10 |
| 12 | 1108 | Not enough time, Did not seem necessary/was able to complete assignments anyway | Yes | When I had not read the book or chapter | Secondary 1 |

| | A | AK | AL | AM | AN | AO | AP |
|----|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|--|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | | | | | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Do you think your peers used SparkNotes? | Did any of your teachers ever mention SparkNotes in class? | Is there anything you want to add? | Do you think teachers can tell when students use SparkNotes? | Do you think that SparkNotes can be useful? | Do you think that using SparkNotes is a type of cheating? |
| 3 | 1099 | Don't know | No | | Don't know | Don't know | Don't know |
| 4 | 1100 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Yes | Yes | It depends |
| 5 | 1101 | Don't know | Yes, in a negative way | No | Don't know | Don't know | No |
| 6 | 1102 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | No | No | Yes | No |
| 7 | 1103 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | No | Yes | It depends |
| 8 | 1104 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes | No |
| 9 | 1105 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes | It depends |
| 10 | 1106 | Yes | Don't know | | Don't know | Yes | No |
| 11 | 1107 | Yes | No | | It depends | Yes | It depends |
| 12 | 1108 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | No | Yes | No |

| | A | AQ | AR | AS |
|----|----------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | Section 17: SparkNotes Values | | Section 18: SparkNotes |
| 2 | Participant ID | If you answered "it depends" for one of the previous questions, please explain a bit about what you mean (what does it depend on?) | Is there anything you want to add? | Have you used SparkNotes for anything other than literature study guides (e.g. help with other subjects, read the SparkNotes blog, etc?) |
| 3 | 1099 | | | No |
| 4 | 1100 | It depends on how students use SparkNotes. If they directly copy from it or use it in place of reading a text, then that would be against the spirit of the assignments. | | No |
| 5 | 1101 | N/A | No | No |
| 6 | 1102 | | | Yes |
| 7 | 1103 | Consulting other opinions on literature is not looked down on in other contexts. If it helps you to form an opinion or justify your own, I see no problem. | | No |
| 8 | 1104 | I think if someone uses sparknotes without actually reading the text the teacher can tell, but if you do the reading and use sparknotes as extra help , then I don't think the teacher can tell because you are using your own ideas and just fact checking with the site. | | No |
| 9 | 1105 | It can provide insight when there is a lack of understanding and review is needed. | | No |
| 10 | 1106 | | | No |
| 11 | 1107 | For cheating it depends because if the student copies exactly what is mentioned on spark notes then it is considered cheating but if they use it to better understand or catch up on missed work I don't think it is cheat. I said it depends as well for if teachers can tell when students us spark note because it depends how the student explains the information they obtained. If they are explaining deep representations that other students wouldn't usually catch then yes but if they explain themselves at their grade level of knowledge then I do think it would be noticeable. | | Yes |
| 12 | 1108 | | | Yes |

| | A | AT | AU | AV | AW |
|----|----------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | Media | | | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Do you follow SparkNotes on any social media? (Choose all that apply) | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [CliffsNotes] | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [Coles Notes] | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [Shmoop] |
| 3 | 1099 | | | | |
| 4 | 1100 | | Used | | |
| 5 | 1101 | | Heard of | Heard of | |
| 6 | 1102 | | Used | Heard of | Heard of |
| 7 | 1103 | | Heard of, Used | | Heard of, Used |
| 8 | 1104 | | Heard of | | Heard of, Used |
| 9 | 1105 | | Heard of | | Heard of |
| 10 | 1106 | | Heard of | | |
| 11 | 1107 | | Heard of | | |
| 12 | 1108 | | Used | | Used |

| | A | AX | AY | AZ | BA |
|----|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | | | |
| | Section 19: Other Study Guides | | | | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [LitCharts] | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [GradeSaver] | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [CourseHero] | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [BookRags] |
| 3 | 1099 | | | | |
| 4 | 1100 | | | | |
| 5 | 1101 | | | | |
| 6 | 1102 | Heard of | Heard of, Used | Used | Heard of |
| 7 | 1103 | | | | |
| 8 | 1104 | Heard of | Heard of | Heard of | |
| 9 | 1105 | Heard of | Heard of | Heard of | |
| 10 | 1106 | | | Used | |
| 11 | 1107 | | Heard of | Used | |
| 12 | 1108 | | Used | Used | |

| | A | BB | BC | BD | BE | BF | BG |
|----|----------------------------|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|--|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | Section 20: Additional Information | | | Section 21: Comments | |
| 2 | Participant ID | Which of these other study guides have you heard of? Which have you used? (Choose all that apply) [No Fear Shakespeare] | What year were you born? | What is your gender? | What is the highest level of education you have completed? | Is there anything you would like to add or explain more about? | Do you have any feedback about the survey itself? |
| 3 | 1099 | | 1993 | Male | University graduate | | |
| 4 | 1100 | | 1990 | Female | MS Bioengineering & M.Ed. Secondary Science Education | | |
| 5 | 1101 | | 1986 | Female | B. Sc. | No | No |
| 6 | 1102 | Used | 1999 | Female | Cegep | | |
| 7 | 1103 | Heard of | 1999 | female | High School | | |
| 8 | 1104 | | 1998 | female | 3rd year University | | |
| 9 | 1105 | Heard of | 1997 | Female | DEC | | |
| 10 | 1106 | | 1999 | Female | Cégep DÉC, one year left in university !! | | |
| 11 | 1107 | | 2001 | Female | Cegep | | Great survey! Was quick and easy to fill out! |
| 12 | 1108 | | 2000 | Female | College | | |

| | A | BH | BI |
|----|----------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | Section 22: Consent to future contact | |
| 2 | Participant ID | May we contact you in the future to follow up on this survey? | If you answered yes, please give your email address: |
| 3 | 1099 | No | |
| 4 | 1100 | No | |
| 5 | 1101 | No | |
| 6 | 1102 | No | |
| 7 | 1103 | Yes | |
| 8 | 1104 | No | |
| 9 | 1105 | No | |
| 10 | 1106 | No | |
| 11 | 1107 | No | |
| 12 | 1108 | No | |

Appendix D: Quantitative Data Handling Examples

Participant View—screenshots from Google Forms:

SparkNotes Survey
* Required

Location

Where did you attend high school? *

Canada

Outside Canada

[Back](#) [Next](#)

Location in Canada

Where was your high school in Canada? *

Choose ▾

[Back](#) [Next](#)

Cohort

Please type your high school graduation year. If you left high school without graduating, put the year you would have graduated. *

Your answer _____

Was English the main language of instruction at your high school? *

Yes

No

[Back](#) [Next](#)

Original Data View—screenshots from Google Sheets:

| | A | B | C | D | E | F |
|-----|--------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Timestamp | Do you consent to parti | Where did you attend h | Where was your high s | Where was your high s | Please type your high s |
| 101 | 4/18/2021 23:09:05 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2010 |
| 102 | 4/19/2021 7:28:13 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Outside Canada | | United States of America | 2008 |
| 103 | 4/19/2021 10:47:26 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Ontario | | 2004 |
| 104 | 4/19/2021 16:51:14 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2016 |
| 105 | 4/19/2021 16:52:16 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Ontario | | 2017 |
| 106 | 4/19/2021 16:54:58 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2015 |
| 107 | 4/19/2021 17:00:16 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2012 |
| 108 | 4/19/2021 17:03:52 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2016 |
| 109 | 4/19/2021 17:54:41 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2018 |
| 110 | 4/19/2021 18:44:57 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2017 |
| 111 | 4/19/2021 19:43:53 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2016 |
| 112 | 4/19/2021 19:48:57 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2015 |
| 113 | 4/19/2021 21:16:19 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Outside Canada | | Guatemala | 2020 |
| 114 | 4/19/2021 21:30:09 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | British Columbia | | 2009 |
| 115 | 4/19/2021 23:05:32 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | British Columbia | | 2003 |
| 116 | 4/19/2021 23:30:36 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2013 |
| 117 | 4/20/2021 1:01:00 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | British Columbia | | 2001 |
| 118 | 4/20/2021 12:48:42 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Prince Edward Island | | 2005 |
| 119 | 4/20/2021 12:59:27 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2018 |
| 120 | 4/20/2021 13:25:11 | Yes, I am at least 18 year | Canada | Quebec | | 2018 |

| | AI | AJ | AK | AL | AM | AN |
|-----|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | If you answered yes, w | Do you think your peer | Did any of your teacher | Is there anything you w | Do you think teachers c | Do you think that Spark |
| 101 | | Don't know | No | | Don't know | Don't know |
| 102 | My guess is ninth grade? | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Yes | Yes |
| 103 | Grade 10 | Don't know | Yes, in a negative way | No | Don't know | Don't know |
| 104 | Grade 7 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | No | No | Yes |
| 105 | 9 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | No | Yes |
| 106 | 8 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |
| 107 | Grade 7 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |
| 108 | | Yes | Don't know | | Don't know | Yes |
| 109 | Grade 10 | Yes | No | | It depends | Yes |
| 110 | Secondary 1 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | No | Yes |
| 111 | 8 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |
| 112 | | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | Sometimes you look thro | Yes | Yes |
| 113 | Sadly, I don't remember | Yes | No | | It depends | It depends |
| 114 | 9 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Don't know | Don't know |
| 115 | Grade 10 or 11 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Don't know | Don't know |
| 116 | | Yes | Don't know | | It depends | Yes |
| 117 | 12 | Yes | No | | Don't know | Yes |
| 118 | Grade 9 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | Today, I am more likely to | It depends | Yes |
| 119 | Grade 8 | Yes | Yes, in a positive way | | It depends | Yes |
| 120 | Secondary 3 or 4 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |

Excel view—data organized into sections, participant IDs assigned:

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
|-----|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Section 1: Introduction | | Section 2: Location | Section 3: Location in Canada | Section 4: Location Outside Canada | | Section 5: Cohort |
| 2 | Participant | Timestamp | Do you consent to | Where are you located? | Which province are you in? If you | Which country | Please type your high |
| 101 | 1099 | 4/18/2021 23:09:05 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2010 |
| 102 | 1100 | 4/19/2021 7:28:13 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Outside Canada | | United States of Ar | 2008 |
| 103 | 1101 | 4/19/2021 10:47:26 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Ontario | | 2004 |
| 104 | 1102 | 4/19/2021 16:51:14 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2016 |
| 105 | 1103 | 4/19/2021 16:52:16 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Ontario | | 2017 |
| 106 | 1104 | 4/19/2021 16:54:58 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2015 |
| 107 | 1105 | 4/19/2021 17:00:16 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2012 |
| 108 | 1106 | 4/19/2021 17:03:52 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2016 |
| 109 | 1107 | 4/19/2021 17:54:41 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2018 |
| 110 | 1108 | 4/19/2021 18:44:57 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2017 |
| 111 | 1109 | 4/19/2021 19:43:53 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2016 |
| 112 | 1110 | 4/19/2021 19:48:57 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2015 |
| 113 | 1111 | 4/19/2021 21:16:19 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Outside Canada | | Guatemala | 2020 |
| 114 | 1112 | 4/19/2021 21:30:09 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | British Columbia | | 2009 |
| 115 | 1113 | 4/19/2021 23:05:32 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | British Columbia | | 2003 |
| 116 | 1114 | 4/19/2021 23:30:36 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2013 |
| 117 | 1115 | 4/20/2021 1:01:00 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | British Columbia | | 2001 |
| 118 | 1116 | 4/20/2021 12:48:42 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Prince Edward Island | | 2005 |
| 119 | 1117 | 4/20/2021 12:59:27 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2018 |
| 120 | 1118 | 4/20/2021 13:25:11 | Yes, I am at least 18 | Canada | Quebec | | 2018 |

| | A | AJ | AK | AL | AM | AN | AO |
|-----|-------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Sec | Section 16: SparkNotes Use | | | | | Se |
| 2 | Participant | If you answered yes, w | Do you think your peer | Did any of your teacher | Is there anything you w | Do you think teachers | Do you think that Spark |
| 101 | 1099 | | Don't know | No | | Don't know | Don't know |
| 102 | 1100 | My guess is ninth grade? | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Yes | Yes |
| 103 | 1101 | Grade 10 | Don't know | Yes, in a negative way | No | Don't know | Don't know |
| 104 | 1102 | Grade 7 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | No | No | Yes |
| 105 | 1103 | | 9 Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | No | Yes |
| 106 | 1104 | | 8 Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |
| 107 | 1105 | Grade 7 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |
| 108 | 1106 | | Yes | Don't know | | Don't know | Yes |
| 109 | 1107 | Grade 10 | Yes | No | | It depends | Yes |
| 110 | 1108 | Secondary 1 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | No | Yes |
| 111 | 1109 | | 8 Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |
| 112 | 1110 | | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | Sometimes you look through | Yes | Yes |
| 113 | 1111 | Sadly, I don't remember | Yes | No | | It depends | It depends |
| 114 | 1112 | | 9 Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Don't know | Don't know |
| 115 | 1113 | Grade 10 or 11 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | Don't know | Don't know |
| 116 | 1114 | | Yes | Don't know | | It depends | Yes |
| 117 | 1115 | | 12 Yes | No | | Don't know | Yes |
| 118 | 1116 | Grade 9 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | Today, I am more likely to s | It depends | Yes |
| 119 | 1117 | Grade 8 | Yes | Yes, in a positive way | | It depends | Yes |
| 120 | 1118 | Secondary 3 or 4 | Yes | Yes, in a negative way | | It depends | Yes |

Excerpts from key used to recode nominal responses into numerical values:

| Section 15: High school reading behavior | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Think about all the high school books you read last year. Think about all the books you did not read every year. | | Have you used SparkNotes? If you answered yes, how often? | | |
| 2=1-3 | 2=I read some books but not all | 1=Used for this reason | 2=No, but I've heard of them | 1=Used this way |
| 3=4-6 | 3=I read at least part of every book | | 3=I've never heard of SparkNotes | |
| 4=More than 6 | 4=I read every word of every book | | | |
| | 5=Other | | | |

| SparkNotes Use | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|--------------|--|
| Do you think your peers use SparkNotes? | | Did any of your teachers ever mention SparkNotes? | | Is there anything you learned from SparkNotes? |
| 1=Yes | 1=Yes, in a positive way | 1=Yes | 1=Yes | |
| 2=No | 2=Yes, in a negative way | 2=No | 2=No | |
| 3=Don't know | 3=No | 3=It depends | 3=It depends | |
| | 4=Don't know | 4=Don't know | 4=Don't know | |

Recorded data viewed in Excel:

| | A | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | |
|-----|------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | | Section 2: Location | | Section 3: Country | | Section 4: Grad Year | | Section 6: Reading in English | | | Section 7: Reading in Other Languages | | Section 8: Reading Level | |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | ID | Location | Province in (Country) | Outs | Grad Year | Was English | Easy/Hard to | Learning to F | Prefer English | Read More in | Enjoy Reading | Good Reader | Grades | |
| 102 | 1099 | 1 | 11 | | 2010 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 | | 3 | 4 | 4 | |
| 103 | 1100 | 2 | | 187 | 2008 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 104 | 1101 | 1 | 9 | | 2004 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 4 | 4 | |
| 105 | 1102 | 1 | 11 | | 2016 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 106 | 1103 | 1 | 9 | | 2017 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 107 | 1104 | 1 | 11 | | 2015 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 108 | 1105 | 1 | 11 | | 2012 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 1 | | 2 | 5 | 4 | |
| 109 | 1106 | 1 | 11 | | 2016 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 3 | 5 | 3 | |
| 110 | 1107 | 1 | 11 | | 2018 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 | | 5 | 3 | 3 | |
| 111 | 1108 | 1 | 11 | | 2017 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 1 | | 3 | 3 | 3 | |
| 112 | 1109 | 1 | 11 | | 2016 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 | | 2 | 4 | 3 | |
| 113 | 1110 | 1 | 11 | | 2015 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 114 | 1111 | 2 | | 69 | 2020 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 1 | | 5 | 3 | 3 | |
| 115 | 1112 | 1 | 2 | | 2009 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 116 | 1113 | 1 | 2 | | 2003 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 4 | 4 | 4 | |
| 117 | 1114 | 1 | 11 | | 2013 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 118 | 1115 | 1 | 2 | | 2001 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 119 | 1116 | 1 | 10 | | 2005 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 120 | 1117 | 1 | 11 | | 2018 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |
| 121 | 1118 | 1 | 11 | | 2018 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | 4 | |

| | A | AS | AT | AU | AV | AW | AX | AY | AZ | BA | BB | |
|-----|------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------------|--------------|---------|-----------|--------------|--|
| 1 | | Section 16: SparkNotes Use | | | | | Section 17: SparkNotes Values | | | | | |
| 2 | | When did you use them? | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | ID | Used SparkNotes | When I had n | When I had n | When I had n | Peers use S | Teachers me | Can teachers | Useful? | Cheating? | SparkNotes i | |
| 102 | 1099 | 3 | | | | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | |
| 103 | 1100 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| 104 | 1101 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 2 | |
| 105 | 1102 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | |
| 106 | 1103 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| 107 | 1104 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | |
| 108 | 1105 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| 109 | 1106 | 2 | | | | 1 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 | |
| 110 | 1107 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | |
| 111 | 1108 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | |
| 112 | 1109 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | |
| 113 | 1110 | 2 | | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | |
| 114 | 1111 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | |
| 115 | 1112 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | |
| 116 | 1113 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | |
| 117 | 1114 | 2 | | | | 1 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| 118 | 1115 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| 119 | 1116 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | |
| 120 | 1117 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | |
| 121 | 1118 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | |

Recoded data viewed in SPSS:

| | ID | Email | Location | ProvinceinCanada | CountryOutsideCanada | GradYear | WasEnglishtheMainLanguageatyourhigh. | EasyHardtoRead | LearningtoRead |
|-----|------|-------|----------|------------------|----------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| 99 | 1099 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2010 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| 100 | 1100 | | 2 | . | 187 | 2008 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 101 | 1101 | | 1 | 9 | . | 2004 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 102 | 1102 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2016 | 1 | 5 | 4 |
| 103 | 1103 | m... | 1 | 9 | . | 2017 | 1 | 5 | 4 |
| 104 | 1104 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2015 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 105 | 1105 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2012 | 2 | 5 | 4 |
| 106 | 1106 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2016 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 107 | 1107 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2018 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| 108 | 1108 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2017 | 1 | 5 | 4 |
| 109 | 1109 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2016 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| 110 | 1110 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2015 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 111 | 1111 | | 2 | . | 69 | 2020 | 2 | 5 | 4 |
| 112 | 1112 | | 1 | 2 | . | 2009 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 113 | 1113 | | 1 | 2 | . | 2003 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 114 | 1114 | | 1 | 11 | . | 2013 | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| 115 | 1115 | a... | 1 | 2 | . | 2001 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| 116 | 1116 | | 1 | 10 | . | 2005 | 1 | 4 | 4 |

| | UsedSparkNotes | WhenIhadnotreadthebookorchapter | WhenIhadreadthebookorchapterbutnee. | WhenIhadreadthebookorchapterbutnee. | PeersuseSparkNotes | TeachersmentionSparkNotes | Canteacherstell | Useful |
|-----|----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------|
| 99 | 3 | . | . | . | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| 100 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 101 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| 102 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| 103 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| 104 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| 105 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| 106 | 2 | . | . | . | 1 | 4 | 4 | 1 |
| 107 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 |
| 108 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| 109 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| 110 | 2 | . | . | . | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 111 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 112 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| 113 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| 114 | 2 | . | . | . | 1 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| 115 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| 116 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 |