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**As Far As Your Brain Is Concerned, Audiobooks Are Not ‘Cheating’**

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Photo: Martin Dimitrov

As is required of all women in their 30s, I am in a book club. At the first meeting of this group, one poor unsuspecting woman mentioned that she had listened to that month’s selection instead of reading it. *That*, the rest of the group decided together, is definitely cheating. Never mind that no one could exactly articulate how or why it was cheating; it just *felt* like it was, and others [would agree](https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/330xdw/does_listening_to_audio_books_feel_like_cheating/). She never substituted the audiobook for the print version again (or, if she did, she never again admitted it).

This question — whether or not listening to an audiobook is “cheating” — is one University of Virginia psychologist Daniel Willingham gets fairly often, especially ever since he published a book, in 2015, on the [science of reading](https://www.amazon.com/Raising-Kids-Who-Read-Teachers/dp/1118769724/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1470835285&sr=8-2&keywords=daniel+willingham). (That one was about teaching children to read; he’s got another book out next spring about adults and reading.) He is very tired of this question, and so, recently, he wrote [a blog post](http://www.danielwillingham.com/daniel-willingham-science-and-education-blog/is-listening-to-an-audio-book-cheating) addressing it. (His opening line: “I’ve been asked this question a lot and I hate it.”) If, he argues, you take the question from the perspective of cognitive psychology — that is, the mental processes involved — there is no real difference between listening to a book and reading it. So, according to that understanding of the question: No, audiobooks are not cheating.

His reasoning reveals some fascinating insights about the way the brain makes sense of language, whether written or spoken. But first, consider what that assertion — that listening is cheating — is saying: It suggests that the listener got some reward without putting in the work. Because that does seem to be the typical argument, Willingham said. “It’s not that you’re missing out on something, or it’s not that this experience could be better for you,” he told Science of Us. “It’s that you’re cheating. And so they think you’re getting the rewarding part of it … and it’s the difficult part that you’ve somehow gotten out of.” So that implies, Willingham argues, that to your brain, listening is less “work” than reading. And that is true, sort of — but it stops being true somewhere around the fifth grade.

There are two basic processes happening when you’re reading: There is decoding, or translating the strings of letters into words that mean something. And then there is language processing, or comprehension — that is, figuring out the syntax, the story, et cetera. (It’s obviously much more complicated than that; this is what’s known as the [“simple view”](http://rse.sagepub.com/content/7/1/6.short?rss=1&ssource=mfc) of reading, but it’s sufficient for thinking about the question at hand.) Researchers have studied the question of comprehension for decades, and “what you find is very high correlations of reading comprehension and listening comprehension,” Willingham said. As science writer Olga Khazan noted in 2011, a “[1985 study found listening comprehension](http://psych.wisc.edu/lang/pdf/Gernsbacher_GeneralCompSkill_JEPLMC_1990.pdf) correlated strongly with reading comprehension — suggesting that those who read books well would listen to them well. In a [1977 study,](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/edu/69/5/491/) college students who listened to a short story were able to summarize it with equal accuracy as those who read it.” Listeners and readers retain about equal understanding of the passages they’ve consumed, in other words.

Decoding, by contrast, is specific to reading, Willingham said; this is indeed one more step your mind has to take when reading a print book as compared to listening to the audiobook version. But by about late elementary school, decoding becomes so second-nature that it isn’t any additional “work” for your brain. It happens automatically.

According to the simple model of reading, then, you really can’t consider listening to a book to be easier than reading it. But there are other differences here, of course, one being that it’s really easy for your mind to begin to wander when you’re listening to an audiobook. But is that more or less likely to happen as skimming the less interesting parts when you’re reading? There’s not exactly an easy way to test that question empirically, but there are some comparable things about the way people circle back to catch the stuff they missed, whether they’re reading or listening. “About 10 to 20 percent of the eye movements you make are actually regressions, where your eyes are moving backwards,” Willingham explained. Many of those regressions happen when you thought you had the word, but — whoops, no, you didn’t quite get it; others happen when you might be trying to work out syntax.

And something similar happens with the brain’s auditory system, specifically a phenomenon called echoic memory. “I’m sure you’ve had the experience where someone says something, and you’re not really listening, and then you can tell from their intonation that they’ve stopped talking and that they’ve asked you a question,” Willingham said. “And you’re like, ‘Oh, shit, I totally was not listening to this person.’ And then you say, ‘I’m sorry, what?’ And then in that moment where you say, ‘I’m sorry, what?’ — you’re able to recover what it was they asked you.” You did not listen. And yet you still *heard*, and there is a wisp of a memory of that, which is still banging around inside your mind. “And you are, in the time it takes you to say, ‘I’m sorry, what?’ — you are consulting that little memory store, and you get the last second or two of what they said,” he continued. So that, he argues, is comparable to the visual system’s eye regressions: In both mental processes, your mind ticks back to what it just consumed, in order to double check the meaning.

The TL;DR version of all of this is that as far as the mental processes are concerned, there really isn’t much difference between reading and listening to a book. One is not more work than the other. And yet there is, maybe, something to the way your elementary-school teacher might’ve phrased the question — you’re only cheating yourself. Returning for a moment to the simple model of reading: The decoding process does become automatic once you’ve passed a certain level of reading proficiency, but you can become even better at this well into adulthood — and the only way to get better is by reading. The improvements are small (“infinitesimal,” as Willingham put it) but they are there, and up for the grabs for a reader. Comprehension, too, is something that improves the more you read. And there are also, of course, times when you need to remind yourself of something farther back in the text, something that is no longer held in that one- to two-second echoic memory. (WhichGreyjoy is Victarion, again?) You could pause the audiobook and hit that 15-second rewind button until you find it. But you probably won’t.

There’s also this question to contend with: Are you consuming the text the way the author intended it? (And how much does that matter?) The reader of Willingham’s own audiobook did a wonderful job, for example, but there were jokes stepped on, punch lines that didn’t quite land the way Willingham exactly intended. (This, incidentally, is why listening to one of those recent books in the funny female memoir [genre](http://nhpr.org/post/best-selling-trend-funny-female-memoir) — like Amy Poehler’s *Yes Please* — is often a much better experience than reading them.) “The idea that you are experiencing the novel in a way the author did not intend, that you’re missing out in some way — I’m much more open to that than ‘You listened to it, you big cheater,’” Willingham said.

The literary value of audiobooks versus print books — that’s up for wider interpretation. But there’s another way to consider the question of cheating, one that, incidentally, annoys Willingham the most. On my commute this week, for example, I began listening to *H Is for Hawk*, and so some might argue that, once I’m done, I can’t claim to have really “read” it. “There are people who think of reading as a sort of achievement, a mark of honor that you’ve done something worthy of respect,” Willingham said. “There’s this sense that when you have read a book, you’ve done something that is worthy of pride, and it is worthy of other people patting you on the back.”

This, to his mind, is nonsense, a holdover from elementary-school days. “You know, there are classrooms that are set up with that very much in mind,” he said. “There’s a reader wall and you get a star next to your name every time you finish a book, and the number of books is counted. And I think some of that feeling in adults may be … a hangover from prior school experiences.” It’s a rather sad way to view reading as an adult, he contends, and he has a point. After all, grown-ups can’t exchange a list of books they’ve read for a free [personal pan pizza](http://www.bookitprogram.com/).

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