A Reading Guide for
The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains by Nicholas Carr
(W. W. Norton, 2011)

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General questions
As part of an educational community, we should ask ourselves, how does the Internet enhance and distract from learning? How do we find balance? What do we take away from Carr’s book in the context of education?
What do we make of Carr’s epigraph?
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain...
— John Keats, “Ode to Psyche”
Find the full poem at The Poetry Foundation:
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44480

Prologue
Carr evokes the media theories of Marshall McLuhan to start his book, emphasizing looking beyond the content of a medium (like the Internet) and instead looking at its effects.
How is this a useful starting place?

1) Hal & Me
Carr starts his first chapter by talking about Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film 2001: A Space Odyssey, using the death of the supercomputer HAL 9000 as an analogy to talk about brains and computers.
How else does the film intersect with Carr’s subject?
“2001: A Space Odyssey Official Re-Release Trailer”:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHjlqQBspJk
The title sequence of the film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-QFj59PON4
The scene that directly follows the title sequence, “2001: A Space Odyssey - The Dawn of Man”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypEkGq66Jk
The (in)famous scene where the computer HAL rebels against Dave, with the chilling words “I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARJ8cAGm6JE
The impetus for Carr writing his book was in questions he had about his attention span. As he states early on, he believes that his and others’ attention spans have decreased, and he attributes this to Internet usage.
What do you think of Carr’s theory?
How does this compare to your own experience?
What are the implications?
This chapter, like many of the others, is full of pop culture references: Kubrick’s film, *War and Peace*, *Star Wars*, Apple’s Mac, etc.—some more veiled allusions, others extended references.

What is the effect of all of these references?
Besides *2001: A Space Odyssey*, what other films and pop culture intersections connect with the subjects and themes of Carr’s book?

2) The Vital Paths
Here Carr introduces the seemingly at-odds views of empiricism and rationalism as a way to introduce psychology and neurology into his narrative: the science of our brains. Carr writes, “Evolution has given us a brain that can literally change its mind—over and over again” (41).
How does this the brain’s neuroplasticity impact our experiences, or our perceptions of experiences, in relation to learning?

3 & 4) Tools of the Mind & The Deepening Page
Carr evokes the term “intellectual technologies” by anthropologist Jack Goody and sociologist Daniel Bell, defining them as follows:
all the tools we use to extend or support our mental powers—to find and classify information, to formulate and articulate ideas, to share know-how and knowledge, to take measurements and perform calculations, to expand the capacity of our memory. (44)
How and why is this a useful idea to think with?

In his discussion of the inventions of what he sees as the most life-changing tools—the map, the clock, and Gutenberg’s printing press—Carr illustrates not only the effects of these intellectual technologies on our individual brains, but also on society as a whole. Historically, what are some of the social effects of these technologies? What similar effects can we see in the impact of the Internet on individuals and society?

Carr says intellectual technologies “are our most intimate tools, the ones we use for . . . cultivating relations with others” (45). How has human-animal interrelationship changed with the expansion of the Internet?

Carr also claims “that the tools we use to write, read, and otherwise manipulate information work on our minds even as our minds work with them” (45).
In what ways do we see this in relation to the Internet? What about other tools?
In these chapters, we read about the history of reading, writing, and text technologies leading up to our present.
How does this story help to contextualize Carr’s claims?

What else might we say about the long history of media technologies that informs Carr’s book?
For some of his research, Carr relies on the work of Maryanne Wolf, who has studied the history of reading. You can hear more from Wolf and others on the subject of “deep reading” in an episode of the podcast Note to Self, titled “The ‘Bi-literate’ Brain: The Key to Reading in a Sea of Screens” (originally aired September 17, 2014): http://www.wnyc.org/story/reading-screens-messing-your-brain-so-train-it-be-bi-literate/.

5) A Medium of the Most General Nature
This chapter rests on the rise of computers in relation to previous media and the changes brought about along the way.
How do computers relate to other media?
How do we integrate varied media into our own lives?
Carr claims, “Everywhere you look, you see signs of the Net’s growing hegemony over the packaging and flow of information” (93).
What examples come to mind?
While Carr is not totally neutral, he does not fully embrace the Internet as a “good” or “bad” tool. How might we consider his nuanced approach to think about the “growing hegemony” of this new medium? How and why do we balance an approach to the Internet between negative and positive appraisals?
How do commenters (including trolls) affect our opinion of content, and how do they cause an urge toward rebut or stay on the page?
How has information become commercialized? Over time, does meaningful information become packaged as a commodity, where content is only a medium through which goods are sold to individuals?

6) The Very Image of a Book
Carr writes, “The high-tech features of devices like the Kindle and Apple’s new iPad may make it more likely that we’ll read e-books, but the way we read them will be very different from the way we read printed editions” (104).
What are our own experiences with reading in the digital age?
What do we imagine to be the future of the book?
How do we need to face changes to the role of the book in society from the standpoint of education?
Readers interested in the narrative developed in this chapter might also be interested in the book The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control by Ted Striphas (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), and his blog at http://www.thelateageofprint.org/.

7) The Juggler’s Brain
“With the exception of alphabets and number systems,” Carr claims, “the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use. At the very least, it’s the most powerful that has come along since the book” (116).
Do you agree? Why or why not?
Again, like elsewhere, Carr attempts a balanced view of the Internet and its effects on our brains. For example, he writes, “The good news here is that Web surfing, because it
engages so many brain functions, may help keep older people's minds sharp” (122). As in chapter 5, this causes us to consider positive and negative effects.
What positive effects might we celebrate?
What negative effects might we lament?
How do we balance our views of these?
How do we practically deal with both the positive and negative if using the Internet is inevitable?
More generally, how well does Carr balance his perspective, or how might we critique his polemical thrust? (Here we might recall his comment about “the Net’s growing hegemony” from chapter 5.)

8) The Church of Google
Since this chapter is largely about Google, it’s time to talk more specifically.
What are our personal experiences with the company’s search engine?
What are our personal views about Google generally, and about Google Books?
How does Google affect education?
Google’s formal corporate motto is “Don't be evil,” although Carr does not discuss this (and this point logically connects with the next set of questions below).
What do we think of the motto? How does Google decide what is good or evil? Is there a third option?
One of Carr’s major claims is that the Internet, for many, is largely synonymous with Google—which has become the face of the Web in some ways. He is mostly interested in the search engine, but Google might be even more ubiquitous since Carr wrote his book, considering that they have continued to expand their role in various areas (email, maps, cloud services, office document software, the Chrome browser, YouTube, now self-driving cars). He claims that “no matter how long the company is able to maintain its dominance over the flow of digital information, its intellectual ethic will remain the general ethic of the Internet as a medium” (157).
What are the implications, and what do we do about them?

Apple has prided itself on being the most user-friendly and efficient software. How has this changed the way we use the Internet? Why do people love Apple?

9) Search, Memory
“The Web,” writes Carr, “is a technology of forgetfulness” (193).
Based on the rest of the book so far, how should we interpret this?
Do you agree or disagree? What is your personal experience?
What anecdotes inform your thoughts about this?
How do you multitask?
Is Carr too critical of the Internet, or is there another way to understand his argument?

10) A Thing Like Me
So what do we take away from it all?

11) Epilogue
Allusion to Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.”