The Internet: Friend or Foe of Reading?

Books are not Nadia's thing. Her mother, hoping to entice her, brings them home from the library, but Nadia rarely shows interest. Instead, like so many other teenagers, Nadia, 15, is addicted to the Internet. She regularly spends at least six hours a day in front of the computer.
She checks her e-mail and peruses myyearbook.com, a social networking site, reading messages or posting updates on her mood. She searches for music videos on YouTube and logs onto Gaia Online, a role-playing site where members fashion alternate identities as cutesy cartoon characters. But she spends most of her time on quizilla.com or fanfiction.net, reading and commenting on books, television shows or movies.

Children like Nadia lie at the heart of a passionate debate about just what it means to read in the digital age. As teenagers' scores on standardized reading tests have declined or stagnated, some education experts argue that the hours spent prowling the Internet are the enemy of reading-diminishing literacy, wrecking attention spans and destroying a precious common culture that exists only through the reading of books.

But others say the internet has created a new kind of reading that schools and society should not discount. At least since the invention of reading, critics have warned that electronic media would destroy reading. What is different now, some literacy experts say, is that spending time on the Web, whether it is looking up something on Google or even Britney-spears.org, entails some engagement with text.

Few who believe in the potential of the web deny the value of books. But they argue that it is unrealistic to expect all children to read "To Kill a Mockingbird" or "Pride and Prejudice" for fun. And those who prefer staring at a television or pushing buttons on a game console, they say, can still benefit from reading on the Internet. In fact, online reading skills may help children fare better when they begin looking for digital-age jobs.

Web proponents believe that strong readers on the Web will eventually surpass those who rely on books. Reading five Web sites, an op-ed article and a blog post or two, can be more enriching, in their eyes, than reading one book.

For the traditionalists, however, digital reading is the intellectual equivalent of empty calories. Often, they argue, writers on the Internet employ a cryptic argot that vexes teachers and parents and seems hardly conducive to improving reading skills generally. Zigzagging through a profusion of words, pictures, video and sounds, they say, distracts more than strengthens readers. And many youths spend most of their time on the Internet playing games or sending messages, activities that involve minimal reading at best.

While the discussion is still playing out among education policymakers and reading experts around the world, a number of countries have decided to participate in new international assessments of digital literacy. Next year, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which administers reading, math and science tests to a sample of 15-year-old students in more than 50 countries, will add an electronic reading component.

Glossary: op-ed article   article expressing an opinion about an issue; commentary
(op-ed= **op**posite the **ed**itorial page)

I. Comprehension (30 marks)

Answer the following questions in your own words as far as possible.

1) Discuss how Nadia spends most of her free time. Is her use of the Internet typical for modern teenagers, in your opinion? (8 marks)

2) Why is the Internet regarded as the enemy of reading, by some people? (6 marks)

3) Why, according to a number of experts, should digital reading be regarded as positive ? (8 marks)

4) What is the traditionalists' view of digital reading? (8 marks)

II. Development Essay (30 marks)

Write an essay of 250-350 words on the following topic. Indicate the number of words you have used.

Are books outdated?