

fter an evening of homework, senior Henry Yu has a choice: He can either spend an hour reading the assigned 50 pages for his English class, or he can spend five minutes and find a one page summary of the same 50 pages on Spark Notes.

Yu shuts the book and goes online.

"I use SparkNotes for every book [assigned in English class, but I don't use it

for every chapter I get — only when there's a test or quiz or I don't really get what the chapter is saying, and I just read Spark Notes for reinforcement," Yu said. "Or the book's really long; I don't want to read that. I'll use Sparknotes."

Once the introductory short stories or poetry unit is over, literature classes like American Literature Honors and World Literature start their novels, and

students like Yu use Spark Notes — a website that compiles novels, plays and nonfiction into short summaries and corresponding analysis of each chapter — for these assigned readings.

Sophomore Shreya Adloori read the Spark Notes summaries and analysis for "Of Mice and Men" in her freshman year because she didn't have time to read the book.

"I didn't get the specific parts, like details, but I got the overall idea of the chapters," Adloori said. "With books like 'Of Mice and Men' and Shakespeare, the language isn't very easy to understand, so I didn't really get anything while reading the book — but when I read the summaries, I could understand a lot more."

IT'S ONLY EFFECTIVE WHEN YOU READ THE **BOOK FIRST AND THEN USE SPARKNOTES TO** UNDERSTAND IT A BIT MORE ... NOT IF YOU **JUST READ THE ANALYSIS.**

A former student of English teacher Vennessa Nava, Adloori said her performance on Nava's quizzes was poorer when she only used SparkNotes, than on previous assessments where she read the text.

"[SparkNotes] is only effective when you read the book first and then use it to understand it a little bit more, but it's not if you

English teacher Stasophomore Shreya Adloori cey Cler has a different perspective that comes from teaching ELD

just read the analysis by it self," Adloori said.

SparkNotes offer only basic summaries and

analyses. Summaries leave out important

details, and the analyses only offer one per-

spective on the text. Nava uses these limita-

tions when giving assessments, basing them

on details not found on SparkNotes to test if

"I've moved to doing

quote or passage response

quizzes [where] I provide

a passage, and students

need to interpret it," Nava

said. "Sometimes I see

evidence and actual lan-

guage from SparkNotes

in those responses, and

they are typically not the

better responses."

her students are truly reading the novel.

According to teachers, services such as

students . She believes that Spark Notes summaries can be valuable supplements to aid understanding of the text. For example, she directs students who are having trouble with Shakespearean language to No Fear Shakespeare, which provides a line by line translation into modern English.

"Sparknotes [offers] me, as a teacher, a way to offer these kids the ability to understand Shakespeare for free that I can't offer them in the classroom," Cler said. "My goal is to help someone figure out how best to read. My goal is to motivate someone into reading. My goal isn't to scare the hell out of somebody for not reading."

Cler acknowledges that in every class

there will be students who don't read the material, and then do not do well on assessments. She finds ways to help students with problems the that drive them to Spark Notes, often utilizing SparkNotes itself.

"Some of the reasons that vou're having a problem reading is that you don't get bigger concepts," Cler said. "If you read something that tells you what to look for, you're going to pick up on the bigger concepts, and reading is going to be more of a successful experience for you."

One of the solutions Cler suggests is that struggling students read the chapter summary on Sparknotes, then read the chapter itself, going back to the summary again to verify that the student understands what oc-

curred. She has also suggested using audio books, reading the modern translation for older texts and talking about reading strategies to keep up with and gain a better understanding of the reading material.

However, both Cler and Nava agree that directly taking analysis from SparkNotes is not beneficial to students and takes

away from learning and critical thinking. Nava even considers taking analysis from Spark Notes without proper citation as cheating, and students who are found to be using Spark Notes in their assignments are noted in their records as having been academically dishonest. Last year, Nava estimates that she cited 15 students for academic dishonesty in relation to Spark Notes and similar services.

In contrast, 29 percent of students surveyed suggests that students use the analysis portion of SparkNotes and other similar services as jumping points to form their own theories and ideas about the text. Yu said that he has been successful with taking ideas from Spark Notes and expanding on them afterward.

"If I got the deeper meaning myself

without Sparknotes, like I got what the author was trying to say, then I would branch off my opinions [about the text]," Yu said. "Reading Sparknotes will help get your train of thought going."

Despite the potential drawbacks, including academic dishonesty and lower grades, students continue to use SparkNotes and similar summarizing websites.

Yu said he continues to use SparkNotes without reading the actual text, though he was doing worse in his literature class because of it.

"Sometimes I [don't] have time to read anything other than Spark Notes, and I feel like I did pretty bad on the quizzes," Yu said. "I think it's better to get some understanding than none, though."

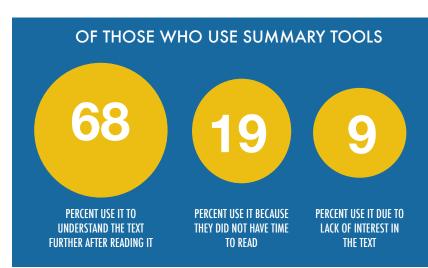
In an informal poll, a majority of teachers said that while they would prefer students to read the assigned pages, given a choice between use SparkNotes or not reading at all, they would have students use SparkNotes in preparation for certain assignments such as class analysis.

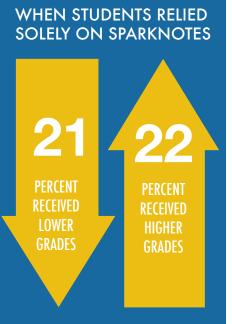
Using SparkNotes, students can gain at least a basic understanding of the context of the text, and can still be engaged in class discussions to learn more deeply about the meaning of the text. Having not read anything, a student would be completely cut off from the conversation, having no incoming idea about any kinds of ideas

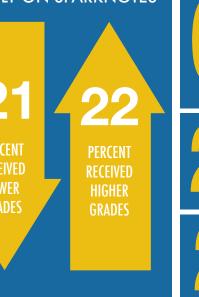
or themes in the text.

When Yu closes SparkNotes he knows that he has finished his reading homework. Whether he has gained everything the book had to offer might be a different story.

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STUDENTS SAY THAT THEY USE **SPARKNOTES** OR SIMILAR WEBSITES PERCENT OF STUDENTS USE SUMMARY

PERCENT OF

PERCENT OF STUDENTS USE ANALYSIS

"I understand that with the advent of the Internet, it's like an inescapable method of intellectual dishonesty," Nava said. "It provides an interpretation of the text, and there are many more interpretations in the text possible and so much more depth and critical thinking that can be brought to any interpretations of the text."

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