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ARTICLE

The Teenage Time Machine

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Abstract

Adults tell teenagers to think about the future, delay gratification, and make better choices, as if waiting were purely a private matter of willpower. The research suggests something more complicated. Children and adults alike wait longer when the people promising a reward have proven reliable, and less when those people have not. This essay, written directly for teenage readers, examines what schools teach about time through deadlines, grades, portals, notifications, feedback, and the small promises adults make and either keep or break. Rereading Orwell's *Animal Farm*, it argues that the humanities matter not because they teach students to wait or obey, but because they teach students to judge what deserves their patience, effort, and trust.

Keywords: delay of gratification; education; humanities; schools; time preference; trust

If you suspect the adults around you have a credibility problem when they talk about the future, you are not being cynical. You are being observant. What adults dismiss as teenage impatience may be a reasonable response to promises they have not kept—and there is research that explains why.

By day, I teach nine- to twelve-year-olds at a Montessori school; by night, I teach college students, and I see the same pattern unfold on both sides of adolescence. There is the nine-year-old who quietly stops trusting the classroom cleanup checklist after a teacher forgets to update it for the third week in a row, and the college student who has learned not to read the syllabus too closely because deadlines rarely mean what they claim to mean. Between these two sits you, the teenager.

1. The marshmallow you already know

Ever heard of the marshmallow test? Beginning in the late 1960s, Austrian-American psychologist Walter Mischel and his colleagues conducted a series of studies in which preschoolers could accept a smaller or less-preferred treat immediately or wait for a larger or preferred reward. In some versions, the choice was popularly remembered as one marshmallow now or two later. Some children waited for the larger reward. Some did

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not.[1] Popular retellings turned the experiment into a parable about willpower: wait, and you possess some essential trait; eat the marshmallow, and you lack it. Teachers and parents loved this story precisely because it was so tidy: character explained everything. But that was not the end of the story.

Decades later, cognitive scientist Celeste Kidd and her colleagues adapted the experiment with a twist worth noticing. Before any marshmallow appeared, a researcher made the children two small promises: better art supplies, then better stickers. Half the children watched both promises come true. Half watched both promises fail. Only then did the marshmallow appear, with a simplified choice: one marshmallow now or two later. The children whose promises had been kept waited an average of 12 minutes for the second marshmallow. The children whose promises had been broken waited about three minutes.[2]

This experiment does not show that self-control is a myth. It suggests that waiting is also an act of judgment. To wait is to bet that the person or system promising the later reward will deliver it. When recent evidence says otherwise, choosing the smaller, certain reward can be sensible. Research with adults found a similar pattern. Across two online experiments involving fictional characters and hypothetical monetary choices, participants chose delayed rewards less often when the person promising them was portrayed as untrustworthy.[3]

Economists have two terms for this calculation, and they do not mean quite the same thing. *Time discounting* is the broad umbrella term: it includes any reason you might care less about a future outcome. *Time preference* is the narrower part—your preference for sooner rather than later. You do not need the vocabulary to feel the logic: a future reward shrinks the farther away it sits, and it has to compete with whatever is already in front of you.[4]

2. How school teaches you about time

These studies suggest a useful way to think about trust in school. Schools teach history and algebra, but they also teach students whether the future can be trusted. A test, science lab, rehearsal, practice, or group project asks students to invest effort now for a result they cannot yet see. When teachers keep their deadlines, provide materials and assistance, and respond meaningfully to the work, students learn that such investments can be worthwhile.

Suppose a teacher strictly enforces an essay deadline. Late work loses points, and extensions are rare. You learn to take the schedule seriously. But then the teacher promises to return the essays on Friday, and three weeks pass without comments, grades, or an explanation. Your deadline was firm, but hers was not. The message goes beyond punctuality: you are expected to make sacrifices now, even when the response to your work can be delayed indefinitely.

You may also have heard that screens are harming your attention span and training you to chase whatever feels immediate. Yet school itself reaches you through parent portals, online gradebooks, missing-assignment alerts, and AI detectors. A text from a friend may be called a distraction, while a grade notification on the same phone is treated as urgent. The implicit

[1] Mischel and Ebbesen 1970, 329–37; Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss 1972, 204–18.
[2] Kidd, Palmeri, and Aslin 2013, 111–12.
[3] Michaelson et al. 2013.
[4] Frederick, Loewenstein, and O'Donoghue 2002, 352.

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lesson may not be to resist immediacy, but to be ready to pay attention when someone in authority demands it.

At first, deadlines and phone notifications seem to teach different lessons. But both reveal the same imbalance. You are expected to plan your time, respond quickly, and accept the consequences when you fall behind. Meanwhile, the school can change its schedule without facing the same consequences. What looks like a simple lesson in discipline can become a lesson about power: who gets to decide what matters now and what can wait. You can sense this imbalance and may disengage when you are held responsible for managing your education while given little say over the demands placed on your time.

3. The schedule is the argument

Trust is not purely a matter of character. It also depends on the systems in which teachers, administrators, and students must operate. Even a teacher who intends to keep every promise must work within a schedule, a grading system, and a stack of platforms. A teacher may want to return every essay within a week yet be unable to do so while teaching 150 students across five periods. Likewise, a teacher or administrator may struggle to enforce a rule consistently while being pulled in six directions.

If you look closely, you see that the schedule does more than organize time. It distributes power by determining whose deadlines are fixed and whose can move, whose attention may be interrupted, and who gets to do the interrupting. The reasons behind the teacher–student power imbalance may be understandable, but the imbalance still teaches you something. Students often experience it as evidence about which commitments matter and which do not.

Feedback makes this especially visible. When a teacher returns an essay while the assignment is still fresh, marks unclear passages, asks specific questions, and gives the student a chance to revise, the deadline becomes part of an exchange. The student submitted the work on time, and the teacher responded with serious attention. When the essay returns weeks later with only a number at the top, there is little left for the student to do, much less learn.

4. Why the humanities matter

If schools want students to sustain their effort, they should make that effort worthwhile. One way is to protect students' time rather than merely control it. Examples include a long project carried through meaningful stages, a science experiment tracked across several days or even weeks, or a discussion that returns to the same problem from different angles. Each creates a learning environment in which attention is not merely summoned, measured, and redirected. Students can remain with something long enough for their understanding to change over time.

This is where history, literature, and philosophy shine. Take George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a political fable in which farm animals overthrow their human owner, only to find themselves under the increasingly oppressive rule of the pigs. The horse Boxer, the farm's strongest worker, answers each crisis with the motto, "I will work harder." On a first reading, his constant work for the farm may look heroic. Return to the novel after collecting a few broken promises of your own, however, and Boxer reads differently. His trust is being harvested.

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The pigs claim his labor and loyalty, but when he can no longer work, they sell him to the knacker, a horse slaughterer.[5]

Boxer's mistake is not just that he trusts the future under the pigs. He also lets them define what his time and effort are for. Every crisis on the farm becomes another excuse for the pigs to demand more effort from him. Throughout the story, Boxer gives the farm everything; in return, its leaders give him promises they can revise whenever it suits them. Discipline without reciprocity becomes a tool of exploitation.

Animal Farm has not changed between readings, but you have. That is part of what the humanities can do: given time to reflect on ideas, those ideas can change how you understand the world and, in the process, change you. A poem can mean something different on Friday than it did on Monday. A history unit can begin with certainty and end with the recognition that the past was more complicated than any single interpretation admitted. Work in the humanities asks you to return, notice patterns, revise first impressions, and leave hard questions open long enough to matter. In exchange, each return strengthens your ability to judge what you are being told. The humanities do not train you to wait or obey. They teach you to decide what deserves patience, effort, and trust.

5. Better questions than "think about the future"

Not every promised future deserves trust. Some promises are vague, unfair, or dishonest. As Boxer's story makes clear, "work hard, and it will all work out" is not a serious account of the world. Effort is not always rewarded, and patience is not always a virtue. Sometimes a demand for patience means that someone else wants the benefits of your compliance without accepting an obligation in return.

But that does not mean only the present matters. A life organized entirely around immediate rewards shrinks rather quickly. Consider things that take time to build: a friendship that has lasted since childhood, a skill you improved through practice, or the hard-won trust that lets someone give you an honest, critical opinion that you will take seriously. None of these can be rushed; their value comes from the time and repeated effort required to build them.

When an adult tells you to think about the future, ask: Whose future? Whose timetable? Who benefits from my patience? What reason do I have to believe that my effort will be acknowledged rather than ignored? These questions are not excuses for apathy. They are demands for reciprocity and exactly the kind of questions the humanities teach us to ask.

Adam Wade Darlage holds a Ph.D. in the History of Christianity from the University of Chicago Divinity School and Full Elementary Certification (ages 6–12) from the Center for Guided Montessori Studies, a MACTE-accredited program. Since 2009, he has taught world religions and world mythologies as a part-time lecturer at Oakton College and upper elementary students at DuPage Montessori School in Naperville, Illinois. In 2025, he began teaching in the doctoral program at Sarasota University, an online Montessori university. His current work applies research on time preference and delay discounting from economics and behavioral psychology to the field of education.

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[5] Orwell 1945, chaps. 3, 9.

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