

To what extent do you agree that students learn better through digital devices than traditional textbooks?

Source: Yishun Town 2025 Sec 4 Prelim

Question type: **Discursive**

Tips: Be careful not to conflate “ability to make lessons **engaging**” with “**accessibility** of learning resources”, for the positive aspects of digital devices. These are separate aspects.

Draw up a quick table to organise your thoughts, as always.

Learning becomes better through digital devices	Learning worsens through digital devices
Accessibility of lesson materials and info • Able to Google search for information • Lessons easily downloaded through SLS/Google Classroom etc • Can ask ChatGPT/Claude etc, which speeds up efficiency	Distractions • Students may go on entertainment apps (YT/Tiktok etc) instead of focusing on the lesson • School’s attempts to ban distractions may ironically disrupt lessons e.g. by blocking a legitimate Youtube video for class discussions
Engagement in classroom • More interactive visuals • Gamified tools such as Kahoot can add excitement to otherwise boring/mundane content.	Limited efficacy or even unwanted consequences • Some countries are reversing digital device usage in classrooms due to concerns about excessive screen time and even mental health concerns • Parents, educators, and even students have supported these, citing improved engagement and improved mental health for going back to traditional textbooks

Model Essay

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore made the decision to equip every secondary school student with “personal learning devices”, known as PLDs. The PLDs killed two birds with one stone. If there were any disruptions to the regular school day, students could continue at home. Teachers could also utilise more interactive, engaging ways of conducting lessons. Yet, educators, parents, and even students themselves in some cases have raised concerns about the distractions posed by devices. Perhaps even more **baffling** – some schools, especially overseas, have walked back on these devices. Are the positive effects of digital devices for learning **overblown**?

Notes:

Your introduction here sets out in summary the points you intend to raise in your essay – greater accessibility, more interactive classes with tech, but also the risk of distraction and that some schools are going back to pen and paper.

Word/Phrase	Meaning
Baffling	Causing confusion
Overblown	Something made to look better/bigger than it actually is

The positive effects of digital devices in the classroom are clear. Digital devices allow for greater interactivity and efficiency in the lesson flow, translating to more engaging lessons. Usually-**mundane** information can be presenting in dynamic ways that grab a student’s attention – highly vital in a time of greatly **eroded** attention spans. Tech platforms allow for efficiency as well. Teachers can type such ideas down instead of having to pick and choose what to keep, while a student who is short on time to take down notes can simply snap a photo (or screengrab) of a discussion board for future reference. Platforms like Kahoot introduce a **gamified** aspect to lessons that excite students, deepening their engagement.

Notes:

This paragraph sets out that digital devices can open up added avenues for making lessons more engaging compared to pen and paper (traditional textbooks)

Word/Phrase	Meaning
Mundane	Something seen as boring
Eroded	Worn away; reduced in size
Gamified	“made like a game”; featuring elements of fun

With technology also comes a wealth of resources available for students to learn, both from the school as well as **diverse** online sources. Students can easily retrieve relevant notes from their schools through Google Classroom. Meanwhile, online sources or even chatbots can **supplement** learning, providing additional resources that enhance a student’s breadth and depth of learning. Search engines and even **large language models (LLMs)** like

ChatGPT and Claude offer students rapid access to information, reducing the time students spend just on finding what they need and allowing them to focus on what truly matters – learning.

Notes: This paragraph focuses on the availability and convenience of getting information with technology and digital devices.	
Word/Phrase	Meaning
Diverse	A wide variety/range
Supplement	To add on to
Large language models	The broad category that artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot fall under. Commonly shortened to LLM(s), but you should spell this out at least once before doing so.

In some cases, however, traditional textbooks pull ahead. Distraction from devices is quite possibly the **proverbial elephant in the room**; it is a **herculean** effort for one individual teacher to **police** what students are doing on their own devices. A news article on the usage of PLDs reported how one student had spent more than three hours on entertainment apps during school hours (and just 18 seconds on Google Classroom). He is just one of many such students, with teachers in that same article reporting catching students distracted by devices in the classroom. While schools do have management systems to reduce this phenomenon, they are not foolproof. Nothing can truly stop the creativity of a disengaged student in class.

Notes: We are now moving to the disadvantages/drawbacks of digital devices in the classroom. Note that this is a discursive essay – you are not trying to convince (or discourage) the adoption of digital devices. Instead, your aim is to highlight why digital devices or traditional textbooks may be better in individual situations. Note the use of the brackets for “(and just 18 seconds on Google Classroom)”. You can use brackets to add in additional info for a certain point, often for emphasis. However this only works effectively if you use it sparingly, such as once a paragraph at max. Overuse can make the passage extremely difficult to read. There is also the use of sarcasm / ironic language here: <i>Nothing can truly stop the creativity of a disengaged student in class</i> . This implies that a disengaged student in class is likely to find ways around management systems like Mobile Guardian (or whatever is installed on your PLDs today)	
Word/Phrase	Meaning
proverbial	In reference to a proverb or saying
Elephant in the room	A very significant point/opinion that has yet to be addressed

Herculean	Requiring extreme strength. <i>Comes from the ancient Roman hero Hercules, characterised for his great strength.</i>
-----------	--

A few countries which previously **pioneered** devices for classroom learning have also walked back on their earlier plans in favour of traditional textbooks and **methodologies**. Research into how the brain processes information through typing versus writing has found that those who utilised writing displayed better information retention. Writing is after all, a more **cognitively** demanding task that requires the brain to “translate” information into precise writing movements. This level of mental engagement was not present in the typing group. Furthermore, an interview with students and teachers alike reported positive outcomes from going back to traditional teaching methodologies, such as improved teacher-student relations.

Notes:

Countries like Denmark have rolled back digital learning after pioneering it as early as 2011. You can watch this video here for more information: <https://youtu.be/aKoCZKtpS3Q>

Australia is also adopting a similar approach, with the state government rolling out a pilot programme for lesser screens in classrooms for younger students.

Word/Phrase	Meaning
Pioneered	Doing (something), before anyone else does; spearheaded
Methodologies	Ways of doing an activity
Cognitively	Related to the mind and its activity

Learning with digital devices, compared to the traditional textbook, offers increased classroom engagement as well as greater availability of resources. However, students at their age lack the maturity for self-regulation. If even adults can be found distracted in meetings, what more can we expect from students? We also need to consider whether we are not unintentionally short-changing our own learning through convenience and shutting out the “social” element of learning. Only then can digital devices for learning truly shine as a feasible long-term methodology.

(616 words)