

Literacy & Comprehension

for struggling readers

9 - 28 - 08

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Reading Strategies That Get Results 2
- Debunking the Myths of Literacy 2
- "But I'm Not a Reader...." 3
- Students Speak Out 3
- Reading Assessment 4

The Fight for Literacy

It's the age-old question discussed and debated educators all over the country — How do we engage our students in literacy?

Undeniably, the fight for literacy is greater than ever before. A study in 1999 found that only 3 percent of 8th graders could read at an advanced level* while a 2003 study showed that only 6 percent of high school seniors in America could read at an advanced level.**

Clearly, as parents and teachers, we must work together to inspire student inquiry into all areas of literacy, a task that moves beyond simply improving test score or statistics. Instead, this requires a movement beyond "yes or no" questions in which students are expected to simply regurgitate information provided by the teacher. This type of

pedagogical approach does not inspire student motivation nor does it encourage true learning.

Rather, the classroom should be a safe haven of student-student and teacher-student



interaction where students use various problem-solving tools to construct understandings of the processes and dialogues they are engaged in. If this method is employed, then the classroom naturally becomes suited to nurture critical thinking and analysis. Here, the teacher models or scaffolds ways of thinking and

inquiry, providing a foundation for students to build on. In such an environment, student engagement in literacy is illustrated through goal setting, self-motivation, the establishment of personal connections to text, and the ability to revise, evaluate, and critique text or analysis.

With these goals in mind, the fight for literacy is no longer a collection of distressing or even meaningless statistics, but instead, it suddenly becomes a clear and attainable goal for teachers, parents, and students alike.

*Alverman D.E. "Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents" 2001.

**Wilhem, Jeffrey D. *Engaging Readers & Writers with Inquiry*. 2007. pg. 17

Unlocking Doors: The Power of Literacy

Any discussion of literacy must first begin with an understanding of its forms. It would be a grave error to confine the term to an academic or "textbook" setting, considering that visual, computer, and graphic literacies all have their place in means of communication and understanding.

In this light, literacy takes on

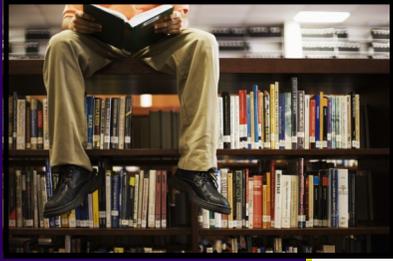
a larger focus, as it's not simply the way to "make the grade." Yes, we all want students to be successful in their schooling careers, but we need to also emphasize how effective literacy allows for students to function successfully in society.

Here, literacy provides students the ability to "rise up" and communicate their thoughts and

ideas, effecting change and (hopefully) bettering aspects of society. At once, then, literacy becomes a tool for students to achieve their wildest dreams, unlocking doors one by one.



Reading Strategies That Get Results



“Literacy is and must be an on-going process in which a particular skill set is continually refined.”



Often, struggling readers become discouraged, finding no light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. When reading comprehension becomes difficult, students have the tendency to simply give up. Fortunately, there are some tried-and-true methods that have been proven to increase student comprehension. These methods focus on the following aspects of reading:

- Pre-reading
- During Reading
- Post-reading

Let’s now look at some of these strategies a little closer.

Pre-reading:

The first step of any pre-reading strategy is setting a purpose. Then once a purpose has been established, students should next connect to prior knowledge. To start, they can ask themselves the following questions — What do I already know about this topic?

What would I like to know? How can I improve my understanding of this subject? Can I predict what may happen next?

By answering these kinds of questions, students have begun engaging in literacy without even turning a page.

During Reading:

In order to understand and retain collections of information, students need to be engaged with text. When they can, students should be marking their text as much as possible, noting what they relate to, what interests them, what confuses them, and so on. Here, identifying difficult vocabulary is crucial. When reading a more difficult piece of literature, for examples, students can highlight everything they understand in one color and highlight everything not understood in another color. More often than not, students find that they actually understand much more than

they initially realized.

Post-reading:

When the reading of a particular text has been completed, always remember that the job is not quite done! During post-reading, students need to reflect on what they have read. This involves summarizing the content, whether that involves a historical event, a scientific process, or the plot of a novel. Then, students need to synthesize information — draw conclusions and connect over themes and ideas. Finally, students should always work to extend their knowledge, evaluating any questions still remaining and analyzing how their knowledge has grown over time.

Although this is just a start, the reading strategies offered here provide a helpful start to anyone struggling with reading comprehension.

Debunking the Myths of Literacy

Main points drawn from the National Council of English Teachers (NCTE) Policy Research Brief 2007

Many are under the impression that students should have learned to read by the time they finish elementary school. While basic decoding skills are formed in the early learning years, we cannot forget that processes of reading and writing are just beginning.

Consequently, it’s important to remember that literacy is and must be an on-going process in which a particular skill set is continually practice and refined.

This, of course, means that literacy cannot be confined solely to the English classroom, for as a 2007 NCTE research pointed out, “each academic content area poses its own literacy challenges in terms of vocabulary, concepts, and topics.” It then becomes the responsibility of the teacher to prepare students to engage with each specific texts.

In addition, readers who struggle in one particular area are often quite fluent in other

areas of literacy. Consider a student who comprehends scientific concepts well in one text but has more trouble comprehending historical data in another text. Do we affix a label of illiteracy on this student? Of course not.

It’s important that both teachers and parents recognize these myths in order to better create classrooms and homes that facilitate effective learning in literacy and comprehension.

“But I’m Not a Reader...”



Most often, students who struggle with literacy comprehension do not consider themselves to be readers. However, this is usually far from the case.

In many ways, students today are just exploring different avenues of literacy, like advertisements and magazines. The internet in particular provides numerous opportunities for engaging students in literacy. From message boards to forums,

blogs to emails, social networking sites to video games, students are practicing reading and writing without even realizing it. In fact, these digital literacies are allowing students to “connect, read, write, think, create, film, record, and represent themselves through a variety of media formerly unthinkable.”*

Through constant practice with these media outlets, students are, in fact, quickly learning to decode and construct meaning from certain types of text.

For example, certain video games require higher levels of thinking and engage critical thought

processes. Online forums for user-generated fan fiction for works like *Harry Potter* or the popular magna comic *Naruto* help unlock students’ creativity in writing. And these are just two have the many examples.

As a result, parents and teachers must recognize and the direct impact that new literacies are having on our students and respond in meaningful ways in the classroom setting, taking advantage of the opportunities they provide.

*Hinchman, Kathleen. *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy*. 2008. pg. 57

Students Speak Out

A recent interview with two NCA 8th grade reading students resulted in some interesting findings. Like most of 8th graders, Whitley* and Raeshaun* enjoy hanging out with their friends, relaxing on the weekends, and spending time on the phone or their computer.

When asked about reading for pleasure, though, both students admitted that while they like to read, they wouldn’t consider themselves “readers” and aren’t necessarily proactive in seeking about enjoyable books.

Although Whitley and Raeshaun have different interests, they did agree on one thing — both like books about everyday life and the situations that regular teens go through. With respect to these types of books, Whitley noted that “they make you feel like you’re not the only one that goes through the things you do.” Books mentioned that met this criteria include the

Bluford series, *Warriors*, by Erin Hunter, and Sharon G. Flake’s *The Skin I’m In*, one of the required novels for this year’s 8th grade reading class.

While discussing different types of books, both Whitley and Raeshaun emphasized the **reader’s choice**, noting how important it is to like what they read, whether it may be a novel or a textbook. Otherwise, reading becomes a real struggle, no matter how easy the text itself may be.

Whitley and Raeshaun also spoke about ways they struggle with reading. Sometimes it’s difficult for Whitley to identify the main idea of a paragraph, especially when reading from a textbook. This, then complicates the note-taking process because identifying which points are important is problematic. Raeshaun admits that while he tries hard, it just doesn’t seem to work. For all of his effort, he has trouble retaining the infor-

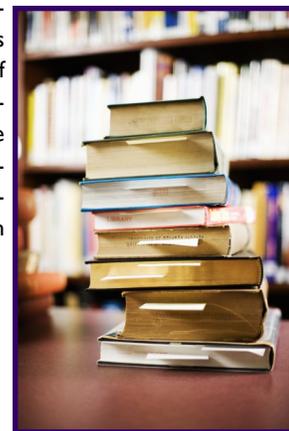
mation, even if he does comprehend the material.

Fortunately, our students have begun using certain reading strategies that they say have improved their comprehension, with their favorite reading strategies involving underlining or highlighting in texts, rereading, and enhancing vocabulary skills.

Letting students speak on matters of literacy becomes extremely important as educators shape literacy practices. It also helps arm the arsenal of parents and teachers alike who are looking create opportunities for students to engage in literacy.

* Names changed

“They make you feel like you’re not the only one that goes through the things you do.”





Northwest Christian Academy

E-mail: tfox@nwbm.org



Helpful Tips for Textbook Comprehension!

QAR CHART: Question-Answer Relationships*

This chart helps students in understanding textbook concepts by breaking found down the different levels of questions and where these answers can be

*Hinchman, Kathleen. *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy*. 2008. pg. 174

In the book		In my head	
Right there	The answer to the question is explicitly stated in the book. Question words and the answer are found in the same sentence or adjacent sentences. Often, the reader can point to the answer.	Author & you	The answer is <i>not</i> found in the text. Information from the text must be combined with the reader's prior knowledge or information from another text to form an answer.
Think & search	The answer is found in the text but not stated explicitly. Information from more than one sentence or text section must be put together to form the answer. Text structure patters (e.g. comparison-contrast, cause-effect) can help readers find the required pieces of information.	On my own	The answer is <i>not</i> found in the text. The answer is based entirely on the reader's prior knowledge, without reference to the text. Teachers often use "on-my-own-questions" to cue students to call up relevant prior knowledge before reading a text.



A Final Note: Reading Assessment

When determining assessment for any discipline, educators must be firm in establishing fair principles of assessment. This means, first and foremost, that assessment strategies should be also explicitly stated, much like the way comprehension strategies should be explicitly taught.

Mark W. Conley, Ph.D, notes the following three guidelines that mark "fair" assessments: clear targets or goals, an ability to provide feedback, and communicating information about performance and growth.* These targets and goals, of course, should not be bound by state standards.

In addition, educators should not only assess a student's accumulating knowledge and abilities, but they should also asses just how much a student cares about what he or she is

doing in the classroom. In essence, this type of philosophy becomes cyclic. The more students care about what they are doing, the more they will want to learn.

Good assessments can take place in a variety of ways. First and foremost, educators should provide outlets for all students to succeed. This includes not only textual assessments (i.e. tests), but also provisions for kinesthetic (hands-on) and auditory (i.e. presentations) assessments.

Rubrics are also a helpful way



of assessing student progress. They allow for and objective and constructive analysis of a student's learning. Showing rubrics to students before a project or essay is due also means that there are no surprises when it comes time for grading. When students know exactly what to expect and have in front of them the standards expected, they become more accountable and in some cases, are more likely to rise above these expectations.

The reading process is no doubt one of development and consequently, assessment should always communicate performance and growth.

*Hinchman, Kathleen. *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy*. 2008. pg. 298