

# Reading to Youth



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## Tips, Tricks, and Tactics for Engaging Youth in Literature

### 1.1 Why Read to Youth?

Literature for children is vital to the way a child is raised. Even reading to infants has been shown to have beneficial effects. The Volunteer Manual cites that, "Recent brain research clearly shows that what a child experiences in the first few years of life largely determines how his brain will develop and how he will interact with the world throughout his life." Children who have been read to show more development in social and scholastic areas, as well as a reduced likelihood of drug experimentation and teen pregnancy. Reading for children is important. For information on this, please consult the San Jose Public Library Reading to Children Volunteer Manual.

Reading as a life habit has obvious scholastic benefits, but many people are unaware of the social benefits. With so many benefits, the question is no longer if youth should be read to, but rather how to get them excited and interacting with literature.

### 1.2

#### **A Reading to Children Volunteer**

I volunteer once a week at Martin Luther King Jr. Library with the Reading to Children program. I liked the idea of

combining my love of literature and my love of kids through this program. I also needed community service hours for my pageant title as a reigning



National All-American Miss City Queen. It was for these reasons that I found myself in the Reading to Children Training at King Library, where I learned about the above mentioned benefits that reading to children brings.

My biggest challenge in this volunteer work has been framing story time so that it remains engaging and interactive for each member of the group. This is especially difficult if there is a large age difference between the kids. Combining what I learned in training with my own field experience, I've developed several strategies for keeping kids of all ages engaged and excited about literature.

*“It is essential that you go back to a time when you were most vulnerable as a teenager and find that emotional core and write. What were your emotional secrets between ages twelve and sixteen. . . what did you smell, taste, touch, see, and hear in the memory? Go down to the hidden places in your heart and write with honesty and vulnerability.”*

*- Kerry Madden (Author of the Maggie Valley Trilogy)*



## 2.1 Reading to Different Age Groups

While every child is going to have different book preferences, there are general developmental stages that children go through that predispose them towards liking certain books at that given age.

Starting with infants through pre-schoolers, this age range shares several characteristics. Because these children have not fully developed their speech and vision, books with colorful illustrations/pictures, rhymes, and songs appeal to them. They also respond well to simple books illustrating concepts such as shapes or the alphabet, and everyday objects like vegetables.

For the kindergarten to third grade range, books that reflect their ability to speak in sentences, develop friendships, and illustrate sharing are important. Fairy Tales and large-print stories are great for this audience. Author of the children's book Delicious: The Life and Art of Wayne Thiebaud, Susan Goldman

Rubin says that, "Art expresses the inexpressible. Children respond to art." (Charlotte S. Huck Children's Festival 2009) Picture books are great for this age range, as well as joke books.

For the fourth to sixth grade age range, these children have new problem solving skills, are establishing identity, are more prone to hero worship, and are more influenced by their peers, subjects that continue to be important to them through their teen years. Kerry Madden, author of the Maggie Valley Trilogy, says it's important to think like a kid to write for the teen and pre-teen audience. "It is essential that you go back to a time when you were most vulnerable as a teenager and find that emotional core and write. What were your emotional secrets between ages twelve and sixteen. . . what did you smell, taste, touch, see, and hear in the memory? Go down to the hidden places in your heart and write with honesty and vulnerability." (Charlotte S. Huck Festival 2009) Craft and hobby books are more applicable to this age range, as are longer chapter books, fantasy, biographies, science fiction, and historical fiction.



### 3.1

#### TYPES OF INTERACTION

There are four main categories of interaction to draw from that encourage children to read and respond to literature:

- (1) **Asking Questions**
- (2) **Physical Movement**
- (3) **Speech Contributions**
- (4) **Silent Response**

Each category creates a different venue for youth to respond to literature. These venues create activities for different types of learners and age groups to have a personal connection with literature, making a diverse selection of activities for educators, parents, librarians, and storytellers to draw from.

Interaction can be a powerful tool to keep youth absorbed in a work. The *right* interaction can be instrumental in helping youth foster and develop a connection to literature on their own. This connection should be the ultimate goal of reading to youth -- a connection which prompts youth to pick up and enjoy reading of their own volition. It's at this crucial juncture where lifetime readers are built.

#### Types of Interaction

### 3.2 Asking Questions

Asking questions is one tactic for keeping youth involved in a text. Perhaps, the most commonly used, this tactic can range from verbal questions to worksheets. It's not just how the question is asked, however, it's the purpose behind the question. There are three main purposes, or goals, that a question can be trying to accomplish: (Goals can overlap.)

- (1) **Personal Connection**
- (2) **Learn Something New**
- (3) **Reinforce Something Already Learned**

#### (1) *Personal Connection*

In the first category of questions, the purpose of youth creating a personal connection to literature is to foster their own self discovery through reading. With this in mind, the category of personal connection

can be broken down further into two subcategories:

- (1) **Reflecting**
- (2) **Relating**

A question that asks a reader to reflect asks the reader to place themselves within the context of the story. For example, asking the reader to predict what will happen next requires the reader to draw more heavily upon what has happened within the story rather than on their own personal experiences. In these questions, the youth is being asked to create a personal connection with literature by placing themselves within the confines of the characters and plot presented to them. This can be a useful tactic to help the reader become invested in a character by creating anticipation to find out what happens next. This in turn encourages the youth to continue reading.

A question that asks a reader to relate asks the reader to bring aspects of the story out of the work and apply them to the reader's personal life. An example of this type of question might include asking the reader what they would do in the same situation. This type of question builds a personal connection between reader and literature by having the reader use literature to discover something about themselves. In this case, it means the reader will be forced to contemplate his/her own reactions or tendencies in a situation they have never been faced with. This self discovery also encourages youth to continue reading because the story is now about them. As they continue to read, the youth are transplanting aspects of the novel that are meaningful to them into their own lives and self discovery.

## Asking Questions Continued. . .

(2) *Learn Something New*

A question that asks a young person to learn something new



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#### 4.1 EFFECTIVELY FRAMING QUESTIONS

Maximize the use of asking questions

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A question that asks a young person to learn something new usually involves predicting. Because the reader will not have a frame of reference for information they have never encountered, these type of questions may be hard for them to formulate an answer to. Nevertheless, it is still useful to ask the question. Forcing the child or young adult to think consider something they've never encountered builds anticipation for the information they are about to receive. For example, asking a reader to guess about a reference to a famous historical figure they aren't familiar with many times does not help the reader adequately understand the reference. However, the act of speculating about the reference highlights the absence that the missing information is having on the reader's experience of the work. This in turn creates a need for the youth to fill in the missing information. Highlighting this absence fosters a desire to not only fill in the information so that the current work being read is better understood, but also promotes the reader to pick up other resources in order to fully enjoy the first. Therefore, a question like this can promote a desire to discover new information, even if the question is open-ended or rhetorical.

(3) *Reinforce Something Already Learned*

A question that seeks to reinforce something the young reader has already learned forces the reader to revisit their past reading experiences. Not only can this type of question reinforce information in the young person's mind, but it

promotes them to re-experience the act of discovering. This can have two effects: (1) the reader will be encouraged to revisit that text to solidify the information they are being questioned on, or (2) the reader will be encouraged to create the initial experience again with new texts. This type of question can also be helpful because it grounds the reader in an experience that is familiar before or during the act of introducing something new. Creating a parallel between something familiar and something new can make the new reading experience less scary.

#### 4.2 Effectively Framing Questions

Now that the types of questions have been introduced, there are certain steps following a question that make asking it the most effective for creating helping the youth create that connection that will make youth lifetime readers. Altogether these create a sequence that prompts the reader to make connections on their own. In this way, the educator, parent, librarian, or storyteller is only a facilitator in creating that connection. The sequence goes as follows:

- (1) Ask the Question
- (2) Expect an Answer
- (3) Acknowledge Any Answer Given
- (4) Link Interaction Back to the Story

## Effectively Framing Questions Continued. . .

### Question Sequence

- (1) **Ask the Question**
- (2) **Expect an Answer**
- (3) **Acknowledge Any Answer Given**
- (4) **Link Interaction Back to the Story**

The first step has already been discussed at length. Choose the type of question to ask based on the ultimate goal for the reading experience. Depending on the group size, questions can require verbal or non-verbal responses. The type of response is usually dictated by the size of the group the supervisor (educator, parent, librarian, or storyteller) is dealing with. If reading to a group of twenty six-year-olds, non-verbal responses will help keep order. (For example, when reading a story about a lost dog, having all the students who own a pet dog raise their hands will be less chaotic than asking them all what their dogs' names are.)

The second step is vital to insure that the student makes the connection for themselves. Supervisors can skip this step by answering the question themselves, or by otherwise communicating that an answer is not expected or required. This can include anything from not pausing long enough for the student to give an answer, to shutting the student down with body language such as not making eye contact. Whatever, the reason, it's important to look for these tendencies and weed them out. For a question to take full effect, the reader needs to

actively be thinking about the question, and should be given time to prepare a response even if they won't be sharing their responses. If the student is not answering the question for themselves, the connection will be lost.

The third step is important so that the youth receives confirmation that coming up with an answer is important. This is the supervisor's opportunity to provide positive feedback to a student for sharing an opinion, for working with the student to correct an incorrect answer, or even acknowledging a lack of an answer. This last one is important to remember because the very act of the reader searching for an answer will be beneficial to the student, and should be acknowledged accordingly.

The fourth step will keep the reader grounded in the experience of reading. Ultimately, the goal of creating a connection between youth and literature will be lost if a question put to a reader never brings the reader back to literature. Think of it as sewing two pieces of material together, where one piece of material is the young reader, one is literature, and the thread is the connection that is being built. The thread must make trips going both to and from the two pieces of material to adequately join them. Likewise, the connection between a reader and literature must go both directions. A question will help the reader make a connection from the literature to him/herself; linking the reader's

answer back to the work will make the connection in reverse from the reader to literature. Making the connection back to literature will help refocus the young reader on the task of reading at hand. This constant feed from literature to reader, reader to literature, will ensure that each question is maximizing its contribution to building the connection.

## 5.1 Questions For All Ages

While the question sequence mentioned before is a basic frame work for building maximum connection between reader and literature, the way each step of the sequence is handled can vary greatly depending on the age of the reader.

For example, the first step, asking the question, sometimes requires a follow-up question to narrow the focus if the first is too broad. This is most common with young audiences. For example, asking a child what an illustration is depicting might need to be narrowed to asking a yes or no question that is easier to manage. In practice, it might sound like this, "Johnny, what's this a picture of? Is it a picture of a cow?" If the reader is unsure of what the question is looking for, narrowing the focus gives the youth the chance to provide an answer. If a question is too far out of reach, the child may not answer at all, and the question will not have engaged the child to the question's maximum potential.

The second step should hold

## Questions For All Ages Continued. . .

true for all age groups. The difference between age groups might be the mean of communicating an answer. Meaning that a toddler audience might be expected to give a verbal answer, while a teen audience is expected to turn in a written response. Still, the expectation for an answer should not change.

### Question Sequence

- (1) **Ask the Question**
- (2) **Expect an Answer**
- (3) **Acknowledge Any Answer Given**
- (4) **Link Interaction Back to the Story**

Similarly, the act of acknowledging an answer shouldn't disappear, but the means of communicating that acknowledgment can vary according to the age of the youth. For younger audiences in a story time, that recognition might mean a phrase like, "Good job," or "Thank you for sharing that," or "I can tell you were listening." For a teen, recognition might be in the form of comments on a paper, or formally making sure a student is heard out in front of the class. Again, the act of acknowledging an answer should not change.

The fourth step is where the age of the reader makes the biggest difference. As the youth gets older, he/she should be providing the link back to the story themselves. The more a reader can do this on their own (instead of having it done for

them by a supervisor), the more proactive the youth is being towards creating that connection with literature for themselves. This is a marker of a maturing reader. With younger audiences (up to second grade), this will need to be done for them. With readers up to middle school age, this should be encouraged, and the child should be given every opportunity to start providing that link themselves, however, regrounding the question back in the story should be available to the child if they cannot yet provide it themselves. Middle school aged children should be expected to provide a link to the story, and the supervisor's job should be to hone and guide that link. Teenagers should be able to provide the link on their own. This progression is flexible depending on the reading maturity of the student at hand. Being able to link his/her personal discovery back to the literature is the mark of a mature reader.

### Types of Interaction

#### 6.1 Physical Movement

This type of interaction is great for younger readers who have shorter attention spans, or for students who learn best by doing. Physical movement can provide interaction with a text that creates muscle memory, a connection that is unattainable through the other types of interaction. There are three main ways to incorporate physical movement into a story time.

The first is by reading a book that is based on movement, such as a book about the Hokey Pokey. Also, books about karate,

stretching, or exercising allows the perfect opportunity for readers to get up and perform what the book is depicting. The second way to incorporate physical movement is to the students mimic actions that a character is performing in the text. Meaning, if the character blows a kiss to his/her mother, stop and have all the kids blow a kiss. If the character waves to his/her friend, have all the young readers wave. The third way to incorporate physical movement into reading is to have the kids listen for a specific word or phrase and do a motion every time they hear it. For example, all the kids might pretend to lick an ice cream cone every time the owner of the ice cream shop in the story meets a new customer. Younger audiences respond particularly well to this type of interaction. This type of interaction also has the unique capability of creating muscle memory unlike the other types. This type of interaction keeps the young readers engaged as they listen for the next phrase or word that requires a hand motion.

### Types of Interaction

#### 6.2 Speech Contributions

This type of interaction relies on the audience (if they're being read to), or the readers, to contribute a verbal response. The most common use of this type of interaction is having the students or young readers read aloud. This is quite effective in small groups, but can grow tiresome for the readers waiting for their turn in a large group



## Speech Related Continued. . .

setting. Another effective use of speech contributions, is to have the young readers repeat a refrain or phrase that appears in the text often. This is most often found in poetry. Again, this type of interaction keeps the readers listening for those key phrases.

### Types of Interaction

#### 7.1 Silent Response

This type of interaction is most useful for older readerships. Silent responses entail a written or drawn response. Here, the young reader processes their connection to the literature on their own. Because the supervisor can't provide a verbal link back to the story (the fourth step in the question sequence), this type of interaction with literature is better for older audiences who are better equipped to provide that link themselves. For a younger audience, having them do simpler tasks such as draw a line with a specific color that is related to the story would be an easier way to incorporate this final type of interaction into their reading. Also, the drawing option can be expanded out to other creative projects such as dioramas or sculptures. This type of response is good for right-brained, creative thinkers. A powerful tool, silent responses

encourages students to respond through creative venues, providing that connection to literature through a means that speaks to them. The most difficult for the reader, this fourth type of interaction is better for older audiences.

Interaction can be a powerful tool to keep youth absorbed in a work. The *right* interaction can be instrumental in helping youth foster and develop a connection to literature on their own. This connection should be the ultimate goal of reading to youth -- a connection which prompts youth to pick up and enjoy reading of their own volition. It's at this crucial juncture where lifetime readers are built.

#### 7.2 Summary

The benefits of reading should be available to every youth. The trick is finding the technique that will spark a young person's connection with literature. With more educators, parents, librarians, and storytellers facilitating positive reading experiences, more children will grow up to be lifetime readers.

## SUMMARY OF MAJOR POINTS

There are four main categories of interaction to draw from that encourage children to read and respond to literature:

- (1) **Asking Questions**
- (2) **Physical Movement**
- (3) **Speech Contributions**
- (4) **Silent Response**

### Question Sequence

- (5) **Ask the Question**
- (6) **Expect an Answer**
- (7) **Acknowledge Any Answer Given**
- (8) **Link Interaction Back to the Story**