



Turn Your Boys INTO READERS!

Make your classroom more guy-friendly, and watch the boys thrive.

By Pam Allyn

When it's time to choose science projects, does the aerodynamics of Nerf gun darts appeal to you? What about the habitats of black widow spiders? When it's time to choose reading material, do you run—not walk—to *Captain Underpants* or *Guinness World Records 2011*? Many of the boys in your classroom do. Since the vast majority of elementary school teachers are women, we need to make a special effort to choose topics, books, and projects that will engage the boys in our classroom.

Unfortunately, girls still outscore boys in reading proficiency levels; the gender gap is startling and concerning. The myth that boys won't read or that it's not "cool" for boys to love reading plays a big part in how these low levels come to be. Low expectations from teachers, and an

assumption that boys prefer physical activity, mean that boys often don't find classrooms very "boy friendly."

Of course, this doesn't mean that boys actually hate to read (or don't at all). Interested in how my male friends spent their proudly boisterous childhoods, I am amazed how often they will say to me, "Oh, I hated to read as a kid!" Though upon further reflection they'll reveal, "Well, I read lots of *Mad* magazines and comics...and *Boys' Life* too, and war histories..."

Boys do read, and in this modern world of new technology and irreverently humorous books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, we must do the one thing that people find so hard to do sometimes: listen! Boys' interests, as silly or bizarre as they might be, can help you cultivate your classroom into an engrossing reading world for boys and girls alike. It's up to us as teachers to make that classroom a truly friendly place for all of our readers.

As part of my research, I've created an easy to remember acronym, READ—Ritual, Environment, Access, and Dialogue—to help us create the best boy-friendly environment possible. Here's how to implement the READ strategies in your own classroom.

Ritual

Traditions hold the power to create positive momentum in a boy's reading life. Be sure to make time to read aloud to your boys every day. Take a simple survey at the beginning of the year to collect any favorite subjects. Then find books on those and include them in your read-aloud schedule. Going beyond the weepy Newbery winners and including high-interest topics will make boys fall in love with the experience of sharing a good story.

Let the room feel boisterous and fun while your kids are selecting books for independent reading. Add music as a nice touch to transitions when students are selecting books or finishing reading time. Spur physically joyous associations with reading by incorporating stretches and movement.

Be creative, and don't forget that your students might have a great idea for a daily ritual such as a poem of

the day (yes, boys love poems!) or a weekly "ad campaign" for a favorite new book choice.

Environment

Ask boys what the best reading environment for them would be (don't guess—listen). Do you like reading

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alone or with a group? Being read to or reading to yourself? Do you like some light music or do you like a quiet room? These are important questions to ask, and can lead the boys to eagerly look forward to their individualized reading environments each day.

This might involve allowing boys to select unusual reading spots. If one is passionately involved in a text underneath a beanbag, I say let him claim

that comfortable condition (so long as no one jumps on him!). Have students build their own reading nooks, or see if they enjoy reading outside, or aloud on your school's theater stage.

Try asking all of your students: What would it take for us to become lifelong readers? And remember to

keep it fresh: You might set up a reading tent one day, or allow kids to read on the playground. As students grow and their reading preferences change, they may wish to redesign their reading spots to meet new needs.

Access

Surround your students with books and text of all kinds, especially nonfiction and poetry—the two genres boys

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clamor for in my reading initiatives, and the least likely to be found on many of our bookshelves.

Allow your boys to determine which forms of reading most fit their unique reading worlds: Don't sneeze at graphic novels, video game manuals, game instructions, and cereal boxes.

Champion book series, such as the offbeat Wayside School series by Louis Sachar, which can generate a boy's long-lasting relationship with a text. The same goes for comic books, graphic novels, and other series. Get totally psyched by the boy who is engrossed in a complete series, and cheer him on until he reaches the finish line.

Make sure there are books in your library written by both male and female authors, featuring male and female protagonists and covering a wide range of topics that excite all of your boys. Don't stereotype what those topics may be; including books on classical ballet in your library and reading them aloud could be as intriguing to

your boys as the books about bugs, sports, and race cars.

This leads into the broader topic of assumptions. Try not to make them. Recently, a group of teachers I know bought a stack of sports books because their hunch was those were the books the boys were looking to read. Well, they all went for the LeBron James books, but not the other hundred the teachers had purchased about basketball. When asked, the boys said: "We love LeBron! It's not about basketball!" Dig down and ask lots of questions to help you understand what motivates your boy readers: "Why did you choose this book? What makes you love it?"

Dialogue

The final part of the acronym may be the most important. Get your boys reading by talking to them and really listening. Ask questions you don't know the answers to. Stop the "Who is the main character?" kind of question and ask, "What is your deepest think-

ing about this chapter?" or "What did you find surprising about this book?"

Make reading a social and interactive experience by having boys read aloud to each other. Make it fun: Once a student laughs out loud during his turn at Alan Katz's *Smelly Locker: Silly Dilly School Songs*, the next boy reads.

Use verbal and written dialogue to foster a feeling of authentic engagement between the boys and their reading, regardless of the method of communication. If your boys seem endlessly attached to computers, cell phones, and other forms of technology, have them blog, tweet, or e-mail reactions to you and to one another!

I encourage you to stand up for your boys' reading selections. Make them feel proud of what they are reading and value what they truly want to read. If they feel this from you, the classroom will be completely boy-friendly. Always ask the question: Does this work for both girls and boys?

Happy reading!

20 Top Books for Boys



5 Books to Inspire Your Boys' Inner Journeys

- 1. *Anno's Journey***, by Mitsumasa Anno. In this wordless picture book, Anno takes readers on a European tour. The detailed illustrations allow children to tell their own stories along the way.
- 2. *The Boy Who Invented TV: The Story of Philo Farnsworth***, by Kathleen Krull. This testament to perseverance reveals how open fields near his home inspired 14-year-old Philo's big idea.
- 3. *The Art Lesson***, by Tomie dePaola. This tale of a boy whose passion for drawing is threatened is a lesson on individuality and self-expression.
- 4. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***, by Sherman Alexie. Alexie's fictionalization of his childhood is both funny and poignant.
- 5. *Harry Houdini***, by Vicki Cobb. With wonderful accompanying photographs, this informative biography is as magical as Houdini himself.

5 Books That Satisfy the Sci-Fi and Fantasy Fanatic



- 1. *The Maximum Ride series***, by James Patterson. This series blends action, adventure, superheroes, and sci-fi. Boys will enjoy following the book's protagonist, the witty and sarcastic tomboy Max.
- 2. *Superhero***, by Marc Tauss. Maleek, a young boy with superhero powers, embarks on a journey with his robot, Marvyn, through time and space to try to restore the green spaces of New York City.
- 3. *The Sandman series***, by Neil Gaiman. What would you wish for if you could have anything? Find out what happens when someone captures the King of Dreams, and anything becomes possible.
- 4. *The Way Back Home***, by Oliver Jeffers. A boy finds an airplane in his closet and decides to fly it into space. After a crash landing, he must bond with the Martian he meets to fix his spaceship.
- 4. *Ender's Game***, by Orson Scott Card. This classic book, which has inspired countless other tales, tells the intense story of Ender, a boy genius who sets out to save the universe from a malevolent alien race.

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5 Weird, Disgusting, and Ultimately Engrossing Books

1. Parts, by *Tedd Arnold*. This zany story concerns a boy who is falling apart. Literally. The comical illustrations capturing the narrator's imagination are riveting.

2. Oh, Yuck! The Encyclopedia of Everything Nasty, by *Joy Masoff*. This book is for kids who are curious about body lint, slugs, acne, snot, creepy-crawly creatures, and other unpleasant but puzzling mysteries.

3. Sir Fartsalot Hunts the Booger, *Kevin Bolger*. This hilarious quest story for kids is set in the Kingdom of Armpit, as Prince Harry, Sir Fartsalot, and Sir Knotaclew band together to take down the evil Snotty Scoundrel!

4. Walter the Farting Dog, by *William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray*. Let's face it: Passing gas makes kids laugh. Who better to do this than a household pet? This is a silly story that will make your boys squeal with glee.

5. The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Gross Junior Edition, by *David Borgenicht and Nathaniel Marunas*. "How to Survive Lice" and "A Field Guide to Flatulence" are headings that indicate what this handbook offers to its readers: tips for surviving gross "emergencies."

5 Books to Make Boys Love Poetry

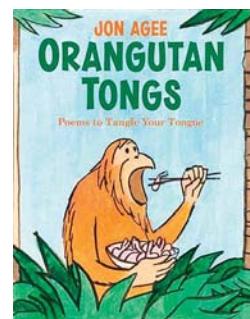
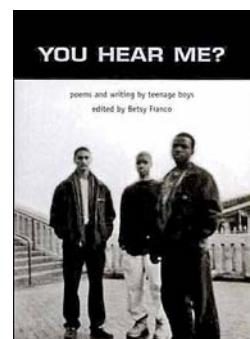
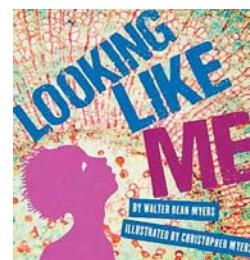
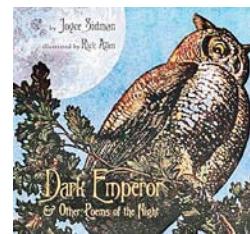
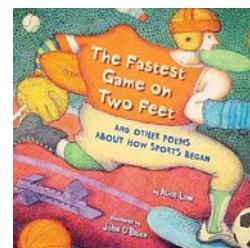
1. The Fastest Game on Two Feet and Other Poems About How Sports Began, by *Alice Low*. A fascinating collection that tells the origins of sports, from ancient athletics to modern games.

2. Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night, by *Joyce Sidman*. This collection explores the dynamic world that comes to life each night, from owls and bats to spiders and crickets.

3. Looking Like Me, by *Walter Dean Myers*. Through Myers' beautiful poetry, we witness a celebration of the bonds between father and son and the love that families share.

4. You Hear Me? Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys, edited by *Betsy Franco*. Franco's anthology of open, honest, coming-of-age poetry is written by teens, for teens. Older boys will certainly identify with the content and unique voices.

5. Orangutan Tongs: Poems to Tangle Your Tongue, by *Jon Agee*. A perfect book to start boys on poetry. Filled with wacky rhymes, this book will keep the laugh volume on high. □



Pam Allyn is the author of *Best Books for Boys: How to Engage Boys in Reading in Ways That Will Change Their Lives*, available at scholasticstore.com.