

TEEN READS ONNS NON READERS DON'T READ (AND HOW YOU CAN CHANGE THEIR MINDS) CHILDREN ARE NOT BORN WITH A NATURAL AVERSION TO READING. WE KNOW THAT. WE SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE INTRODUCE TODDLERS TO BOOKS. THEY FALL IN LOVE. THEY CARRY THEIR FAVORITES AROUND AND ADMIRE THE PICTURES OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

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Why, then, is reading such a problem for so many elementary and secondary students? What turns so many little book lovers into adamant book haters? Instead of speculating, I went straight to the source—real-life reluctant readers in my classes spanning the past two decades.

One day, at the start of my English class, I asked, “How many of you like reading?” A few students raised their hands tentatively. Then I asked, “How many hate reading?” A sea of hands waved wildly, churning up the air with their negativity. We then spent the entire class period discussing our feelings about books and reading.

I worked hard to convince those students that reading was a skill, not a natural-born talent, and that they were capable of learning. I offered the analogies of

basketball, since many of the boys were NBA hopefuls.

“You can’t sink a free throw if you never get on the court,” I told them.

Because we had developed a solid rapport based on mutual respect and trust, those students agreed to give reading one more try. Together, we created a new set of expectations and rules about reading.

With each new high school class, I kept the discussion about reading as one of our introductory activities. Later, when I began tutoring young struggling readers, I asked the same questions: How did you learn to read? Did you ever enjoy it? Why do you hate it now? The same answers cropped up time and again. Here are the reasons students offered to explain their aversion to reading and some possible solutions.

REASONS 1-3



REASON 1 Reading Gives Them a Headache or Makes Their Eyes Hurt

DO THIS: Recent research suggests that nearly half of people who are labeled as learning disabled actually suffer from scotopic (light) sensitivity. People with light sensitivity find reading difficult and sometimes painful when the material is printed on glossy paper. Fluorescent lighting or other lights that cause glare on the page make reading even more difficult. High-contrast print, such as black letters on white paper, is the most difficult for light-sensitive people to read. Unfortunately, such high-contrast print is the most common format for texts and other school materials.

If you have students who are generally cooperative but start to wiggle and squirm as soon as you ask them to read independently, be alert for signs that reading is uncomfortable. They may squint, frown, rub their eyes, try to shade their books, hold their books far away or very near to their faces, blink rapidly, or lose their place repeatedly when reading. Often schools mislabel scotopic readers as dyslexic (they may or may not suffer from dyslexia, as well) and give strategies that don't work, because the glare and discomfort remain. (To learn more about vision therapy for problem readers, visit covid.org.)

REASON 2 They Can't Read as Fast as Their Peers (and Get Left Behind)

DO THIS: Allow students to read at their own pace, even if it means that those slower readers don't cover as much ground as their quicker classmates. While they are reading at their own individual pace, they will learn to read.

One first grader I worked with, Kayla, was in such a hurry to read everything quickly that she wasn't processing anything. When I asked her to slow down and read one sentence, then tell me what it said, she was fine. But when I let her read without interruption, she began racing along, stumbling over words, and was unable to answer basic questions about what she had read. "Why are you reading so fast?" I asked her. She sighed. "Because I have to go fast. That's how we do it at school."

"I don't care how fast everybody reads in school," I said. "I want you to slow down and read at your own pace. And one of these days, I promise, you'll read as fast as everybody else. Maybe even faster."

Kayla wasn't completely convinced, but she agreed to slow down. And her mother agreed to allow Kayla to skip some of her chores on their family's ranch so she could spend more time after school reading. In less than two months, Kayla went from failing grades back to straight As.

REASON 3 They Fear They'll Have to Read Out Loud and Others Will Laugh

DO THIS: Consider making reading aloud purely voluntary in your classroom. Give students the option of reading to you one-on-one so you can assess their skills and progress. In addition to easing some of the stress, letting students opt out of public reading may improve the attendance, punctuality, and morale in your classroom. Don't allow other kids to laugh at the ones who do read, and beware the sneaky snickers. If you ask students to read aloud in your classroom, you owe it to your readers to make sure that nobody shames or humiliates them for trying. And if you have shy or timid students who never volunteer, work with them individually until they develop the confidence to read aloud. (Some kids will never volunteer, but that doesn't mean they aren't learning—and at least you won't have made them dread reading.)

Some teachers call on students to read aloud as a way of keeping them awake or alert in class, but you could call on a willing volunteer who is seated next to your drowsy or daydreaming student instead. When his classmate begins to read, the daydreamer will tune back in without feeling embarrassment or hostility toward you.

REASONS 4-6

REASON 4 They Expect to Be Tested on What They Read—and to Fail the Test

DO THIS: I know, I know, testing is important, especially today. So give the standardized tests when you have to. But if you have the choice between testing students about their reading or giving them an opportunity to honestly respond to their reading, go for the honest response. There will be plenty of time for testing once your students improve their reading skills and their self-confidence as readers.

Try reading a few short things as a class. After each one, open the floor to comments. Ask, “So, what do you think about that?” Accept every comment as valuable. If nobody comments, say, “Well, let’s let that one percolate for a while.” And move on to the next activity. Let your students see that reading isn’t a chore, a competition, or a test. It’s a lifelong skill that we use to gain information, find a new perspective, and tickle our brains or our funny bones. As one of my former students wisely pointed out, “You don’t have to discuss the crap out of everything you read. Some things you just read. That’s it.”

I’m not suggesting abandoning tests or assessments, just changing the format. For example, when reading as a whole group, we can stop and ask students to jot down their response to a single question about the reading assignment—Which of the characters is the most honest? Why in the world did he do what he did? What would you have done in that situation?—and give them credit based on the thought and effort devoted to the answer, instead of whether the answer is “correct.” When you do test students in a more orthodox manner, don’t use the same format for every test. Instead of asking them to select the correct answer on a multiple-choice or matching quiz, try open-ended short essay questions or reading journals. Ask them to think of three good adjectives to describe a specific character and give examples of things those characters said or did to support the students’ choice of adjectives. Ask them to rate the story’s conclusion and explain why they give it a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

REASON 5 They Believe They Have to Finish Every Reading Selection, No Matter How Long or Difficult

DO THIS: Have you ever put down a book halfway through because it just wasn’t compelling enough to you? Yes? That’s why I suggest letting reluctant readers stop and move on to the next when they don’t like a book. Not forever. Just until they become good enough readers that reading isn’t a dreaded chore. Forcing kids who don’t read well to finish material that is far above their ability level or that has no relevance to them can ruin reading for them. Good readers will tackle anything because they know that they will be rewarded by gaining a new perspective, acquiring new knowledge, or entering a completely new world. Poor readers don’t experience those rewards, so it’s difficult to convince them that reading can be enjoyable.

This may go against your teacherly grain, but I urge you to consider it: Tell your students that you will expect them to read half of any article, story, or novel that you give to them. At the halfway point, you will take a class vote to see whether the majority of students want to finish the given selection. If more than half vote against the text, ask your students to write a brief critique of it, and then move on to the next activity. One of the reasons this approach is so successful is that it gives students the feeling that they have a choice in what they read. And once they know that they can vote to stop reading a story or novel, surprisingly, they will often continue reading it!

REASON 6 They Fear Their Opinions Will Be Wrong

DO THIS: So many teary students have told me about the same experience: A teacher asked them to write their opinion about a book or story. The student worked hard on his or her essays and expected high marks for effort and content. Their teachers assigned either a D or an F that was to the student inexplicable. Those teachers sent a clear message: Your opinion is worthless.

If you ask for an opinion, accept what you get and grade the writing on composition and content. Reward their honest effort and encourage them to develop their ideas logically and completely. If you allow your students to maintain their dignity, they will continue to try and to progress. With maturity and practice, their reading and writing skills will improve and they will be better able to appreciate literature that demands a more sophisticated approach.

Once students can intelligently articulate their opinions, they will be ready to learn how to analyze a story on its literary merits. (“Boring and stupid” is not a literary critique.) Then, you can push students to use specific references to the text to make their point, using vocabulary and terms that you have taught them, such as *plot*, *dialogue*, *irony*, and *tone*. It may be helpful to teach these two different critical approaches as the “personal” versus the “professional” response.

REASONS 7-10

REASON 7 They Always Get Put Into the “Slow” Group, Which Makes Them Feel Stupid

DO THIS: I have come to believe that our first experience with reading influences our perceptions of our intelligence, even as adults. Here’s why. If you ask adults, “Do you consider yourself above average, about average, or below average?” most of them have a clear picture of where they fall on the intelligence spectrum. But what I find most interesting is that when I ask those same adults how old they were when they formed their opinions of their own intelligence, nearly all agree that they decided how smart they were during the first few years of school, when they were learning to read. Call them bluebirds and sparrows, stars and stripes, bears and bobcats, children always know who are the fast readers (translation “smart kids”) and who are the slow readers (translation “dumb kids”). They know exactly where they fall on the reading-speed spectrum, and they believe this directly correlates to intelligence.

If teachers can find a way to group students that doesn’t depend on their reading ability at least some of the time, I think they can avoid the situation where students correlate their intelligence to their reading group. Better yet, teachers can create classroom environments where students sincerely want to help each other and don’t tease or torment the slower students. Sometimes students who process information slowly turn out to have much higher IQs than fast processors. Finding ways for slow readers to shine in other areas can be an effective way to help students understand that there are multiple forms of intelligence and that reading is one of many skills, but not necessarily an indicator of intelligence or the ability to learn.

REASON 8 They Believe They Are Too Far Behind to Ever Catch Up

DO THIS: When students read below grade level, they don’t understand that increasing their skills to the next level isn’t as hard as they think. A ninth grader whose test score places him at a fourth-grade level, for example, thinks he will run out of time before he can catch up with his peers. So first explain that a grade level in reading doesn’t correspond to a calendar year. It is just a measure of how well a student reads a specific level of complexity in vocabulary and sentence structure.

Encourage students to learn how to derive the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context and to practice reading every day in order to improve their reading rate. One method I have used successfully is to give them a one- to two-page-long magazine article. They read for one full minute until I say, “Stop.” They circle the last word they read. Then I teach them how to count the words on a page. (Add together the number of words in four individual lines, then divide by four to get the average number of words per line.) Then students count how many lines they read, multiply that by the average, and get their one-minute word count. The next month, we read the same selection and assess their reading rates again. Students will nearly always improve if they have been making an effort in class. They’ll see that practice doesn’t make perfect, but it certainly makes improvement.

REASON 9 They Have No Interest in the Material They Are Required to Read

DO THIS: Struggling readers will blossom if you give them material that is so interesting they can’t resist reading it. That’s the trick: finding something so compelling that students forget they are reading.

You may have to abandon textbooks for a bit, even if they do contain interesting stories. Textbooks by definition are not interesting. (I sometimes make copies of a story or poem from the textbook and distribute it to students who enjoy it and they are surprised to learn after the fact that it was in their textbook all along.) Find some compelling magazine articles about people the same age as your students. Check anthologies for essays on controversial subjects such as gun control or immigration; most essay collections come complete with discussion questions and writing prompts. Look online for true adventure, crime, and sports stories and articles on topics of interest to young people—how to be popular, find a friend, get into college, or choose a pet, for example.



REASON 10 They Get Lost and Can’t Remember What They Have Just Read

DO THIS: Many struggling students who can technically read quite well don’t understand what they are reading. They somehow missed the important point that when we read we must create a mental reference. Without that reference, words are just words. One boy described his experience this way: “It’s like I’m reading one of those signs in front of the bank where the letters move. As soon as I read the words, they disappear.”

You don’t have to be a reading teacher to help students with reading comprehension. First, explain that when we read, we create a mental picture of what we are reading. As we add details, the picture becomes clearer or changes to adjust to new or different information. If you lose the picture when you are reading, you are starting to lose your comprehension. Back up until you can see the picture again, and continue reading. To do this as a class with a story or article, you can read a paragraph, ask students what they see, and discuss their different visions. This will help students who still don’t get it to understand what you are talking about. Then read the next paragraph and stop again to ask students to describe their mental pictures. When I do this with a class, they usually become very excited because they finally (some for the first time) understand why some people (yes!) love to read. □

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