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SUMMER Reading GOES HIGH TECH

How educational apps, video games, and cell phones are changing summer reading.
By Jennifer L. W. Fink

SUMMER READING

You know how important it is for your students to read throughout the summer to avoid the dreaded “summer slide.” You also know that they’ll spend a good part of their vacation tethered to digital devices, including smartphones, computers, and gaming systems. So why not use their affinity for all things digital to their advantage?

Not long ago, “summer reading” meant settling under a shady tree with a hefty book. Shady trees are still around, but books with pages can seem as out-of-date as vinyl records to many kids, especially older ones. Today, they scroll through content online, swipe pages on tablets, and manage a near-constant stream of media.

According to a survey of more than 294,000 students by Project Tomorrow, 60 percent of sixth through eighth graders have access to a laptop, 34 percent have a smartphone, and 13 percent have a tablet. Even the youngest students are using high-tech devices: 37 percent of K–2 students have access to a laptop, 16 percent use smartphones, and 10 percent use tablets. Less-connected students often have access to desktop computers and the Internet, either at home or at a local library.

Teachers can take advantage of these digital devices to enhance students’ reading and writing abilities. “Anything can be a text,” says Ryan Van Cleave, a professor of literature and media studies at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. Video games, for instance, often include written text, as well as characters, settings, and a narrative arc. Lumping them (along with texting and surfing the Web) into the “unproductive summer activity” category only serves to alienate students.

“We need to encourage students

10 websites for summer readers

From grammar games to news magazines, almost all free!



STONE SOUP The online version of the classic lit magazine by kids, for kids, where students can go to read stories and submit their own. stonesoup.com



LITTLE WRITE BRAIN A story-creation site where kids design characters, choose templates, and can save created e-books for free. littlewritebrain.com



EDUPUP Educational gaming site covering nearly every field of learning—math, science, history, logic, vocabulary—and some “just for fun.” edupup.com



STORYPLACE A variety of free stories for preschoolers and grade schoolers in Spanish and English; each includes an online activity and similar books. storyplace.org



STORYLINE ONLINE Classic children’s books read by actors (Ernest Borgnine, *The Rainbow Fish!*), plus related learning activities. storylineonline.net



IT'S A MAD LIBS WORLD The classic game goes online; a variety of Mad Libs apps are available for the iPhone and iPod Touch as well. itsamadlibsworld.com



GROLIER ONLINE A one-stop reference site for kids offering a variety of tools: dictionaries, encyclopedias, maps, and videos. go.grolier.com



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC YOUNG EXPLORER Text is highlighted as narrator reads, and games and links compel students to pursue topics. nationalgeographic.com



GOGONEWS A way for kids to keep up with current events on a free, age-appropriate news website. There’s also a GoGo app for the iPhone. gogonews.com



SCHOLASTIC SUMMER CHALLENGE Kids track their reading minutes and compete against other students around the world. Parents and teachers can monitor children’s progress and find book lists, activity ideas, and more. scholastic.com/summer

SUMMER READING

to find texts and writing opportunities that interest them and play into their passions,” Van Cleave says. “If a child wants to be a famous baseball player, ask him, ‘What are the best books on baseball? Find them, and report back to me.’” The baseball lover in your class might balk at the idea of a trip to the library but light up when you point him to the Internet, with permission to visit all his favorite baseball sites. Once he’s developed his own summer reading list, suggest ways he can share his research with other baseball fans in the class and around the world. He may want to discuss his findings on

a Google or Yahoo group, or start a baseball book blog of his own. Quite probably, your students are already familiar with these tools. They may be surprised to find that what they thought of as fun, or even goofing off, might also be considered learning and research.

Harnessing High-Tech

Many, if not most, students embrace reading and writing in the digital realm. And according to the research, they’re far more engaged when approaching literacy this way, says Zein Odeh, English curriculum coordi-

nator at the Toronto French School in Ontario. “They know how to use these platforms.”

Jill Lauren, an independent learning specialist and author of *That’s Like Me: Stories About Amazing People With Learning Differences*, agrees. “Kids are telling me that they love reading on their Nooks, Kindles, and iPads more than holding a book.” One of her seventh graders was thrilled to discover that the book she wanted was available on Kindle. “She said, ‘I may not remember to bring the book, but I always have my Kindle with me, so when I have free time, I will read it.’”

10 hot apps for skill building

Whether they’re into science, sports, or drawing, kids can spend the summer developing their reading, writing, analysis, and logic skills with these outstanding apps.



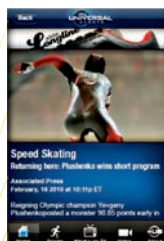
STORIA

This rich e-reading environment offers hundreds of books curated by Scholastic editors, plus tools for kids and adults. scholastic.com/storia



NASA

Free text and stats on our solar system, plus stories, photos, and videos; Third Rock radio broadcasts a mix of music and NASA news. nasa.gov



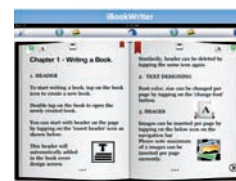
UNIVERSAL SPORTS

Year-round coverage of sports worldwide for avid athletes; plus, Olympics stories from London this summer. Free. universalsports.com



IDIARY FOR KIDS

Journaling platform encourages kids ages 5–13 to write and draw. Free version limits entries; full version runs \$1.99. tipitap.com



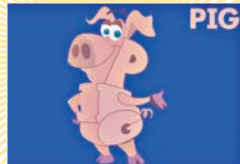
IBOOKWRITER

E-book creation tool lets kids add video, photos, or artwork via drag-and-drop. One book with free version; full version is \$5.99. agileboard.com



MEEGENIUS

Free app with library plus bookstore; choice of “read it myself” or audio option, which highlights the text on-screen. meegenius.com



BUILD A WORD

Free version encourages students to spell words phonetically; full version, for \$2.99, allows an adult to input spelling words. atreks.com



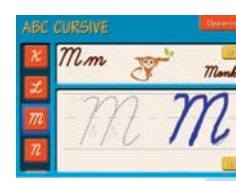
SIGHT WORDS

Free kid-tested games in English, Hindi, and more reinforce common early-elementary sight words. eflashapps.com



ABC TRACER AND ABC CURSIVE WRITING

Both of these free apps reinforce proper letter formation. First, they show the proper way to write a letter; then the student traces the letter using the proper sequence of strokes. If she starts moving in the wrong direction, an unpleasant squeaky sound plays. itunes.apple.com



Teachers report that digital devices even seem to be expanding kids' reading horizons. Students who have access to an e-reader device or app are frequently on the lookout for free downloads—and many classic novels such as Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* fit the bill. Kids are also inspired by the digital reading choices of their peers. "When students at my school borrow a Kindle from the library, they have access to the books that have been recently downloaded by other students," says Nancy Boyle, curriculum coordinator at the Cushing

Academy in central Massachusetts.

Of course, without guidance, many students will happily spend countless summer hours playing video games and visiting websites that have little educational value. That's where parents and teachers come in, Lauren says. "They really need to stay involved to make sure that kids are using technology to their advantage."

Teachers can help by introducing

students, and parents, to great websites and digital applications that encourage reading and writing. "We need to show our children all of these different mediums, and they need to know how to manipulate and use all of them, whether we're talking about books, newspapers, magazines, or digital devices," Odeh says. "This is the way the future is going, and we need to prepare our students for that future." □



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