

# Four Guidelines for Summer Reading

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In my previous post, I wrote about the research that links enjoyment of reading to reading achievement. Perhaps one of the most enjoyable times to read is over the summer. No reports. No tests. No vocabulary lists. Just getting lost in a book. Sadly, most kids don't turn to summer reading—even when it's a school requirement. What happens when kids don't—or do—read over the summer?

- 1) Kids who don't read during summer vacation lose two to three months of reading achievement. ("[The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores](#)")
- 2) Elementary students who read 10-15 books at home over the summer gain as much in reading achievement as students who attend summer school. ("[Addressing Summer Reading Setback Among Economically Disadvantaged Elementary Students](#)")
- 3) Middle school students who read only five to six books over the summer don't suffer from that summer reading loss. ("[Summer Reading and the Ethnic Achievement Gap](#)")

Those three important studies are enough for parents and teacher to wonder how we get kids reading during summer months.

Here are my four guidelines for summer reading. These are my thoughts, my parameters, created with my biases, my hopes, my ideas. All of us want to do far more than boost reading achievement with summer reading. We want to boost reading enjoyment. I hope this short list acts as a springboard for discussion in your own school as you and your colleagues think about how to encourage summer reading that's mostly about developing a love of reading.

## Read Whichever Books Look Good to You

Summer reading isn't about reading a certain number of titles from a list someone else has compiled. It's not about finishing *A Tale of Two Cities* before the first day of tenth grade. It's not about reading books at a certain Lexile level or AR level. It's not about preparing for a test, keeping a dialectical journal to be submitted, or logging a certain number of hours or titles in a journal that will eventually be graded.

Summer reading is about holding a book in your hands. I suppose that also means an e-reader, but e-readers just don't come with that great book smell; they don't have the heft of a paper book or the worn cover you see each time you open it again. E-readers certainly don't have the grainy feel of paper against your fingers, so I'll stick with a book. Summer reading is about kicking off shoes, staying up much too late, reading all day with no one

caring that's what you're doing. It's about rushing through one to get to the next or lingering as long as you want. It's about vicarious experiences that let us become a girl in an attic, a boy in the wilderness, a kite runner in a far-away land. And that type of reading begins with personal choice.



Personal choice, though, doesn't mean teachers (and parents) shouldn't make suggestions. For your students who do not see themselves as readers, personal choice could become overwhelming. How do you make a choice when you don't know genre, don't know authors, don't know how to decide what you want? Students want that independence of making their own choice, but our least skilled readers are also the least skilled at making a choice. Respecting students' need for independence while simultaneously helping them make a choice is key.

In August 2013, Dick Allington wrote a smart [article](#) that reminds us of the problems with recommended- and required-reading book lists. I agree with his comments. But suggestions titled "My Favorite Authors" or "The Books I Think My Fifth-Graders Will Love" or "The Titles Last Year's Ninth Graders Said They Loved the Most" or "OMGosh I Can't Wait to Read These Books" are quite different from a list of fifty titles with the directions to "Read 10."

A final word about lists that help students make a choice: add a short description of each book. Don't put *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen on your sixth-grade list without adding, "This book is about a boy near your age who is lost in the wilderness. It is exciting and will make you wonder if you, too, could survive a plane crash and being alone with only a hatchet to help you survive." Such short descriptions become invaluable when late in July one of your students finds the list in the bottom of his backpack.

### **Nudge Students Throughout the Summer**

Encouraging students to read over the summer is good, but encouraging them *throughout* the summer is even better. You can keep interest going in several ways.

1) Do you have a family webpage? Keep it updated throughout the summer with your “I Just Finished and LOVED!” list and make sure your child know you’ll post updates weekly or every other Tuesday.

2) Do you have a Facebook page set up for communicating? Some of you will gasp in horror, while others are nodding, “Yep, I do.” Update that page often with books you’re reading that your children would enjoy and ask students to respond with what they are reading, too. That specific tag, “Amanda, I can’t wait to read what you have to say about Wonder!” encourages that two-way conversation. You’ll be surprised at the number of students who aren’t Amanda but still offer their comments as well.

3) Mail something! Postcards to their children over the summer telling them about the next YA or children’s book they just read. Some give stamped and addressed postcards to their children so they can write back to them with books they’ve read.

Whether you use Goodreads, Twitter, Facebook, your school webpage, or handwritten postcards, these gentle nudges about what you’re reading and thoughts for what they might enjoy next help keep them reading all summer.

### **Give Kids Permission to Read Easy**

In this time of the Common Core State Standards, with the push for rigor, with new Lexile bands that suggest our students should be reading more and more complex texts, with the rush to make sure [kindergarteners are college and career ready](#), let’s remember that rigor resides in our interaction with a text and not in the text itself. A student lost in a book, measuring himself against the main character, arguing with a decision made, laughing at antics, and holding his breath in the harrowing escapades of the hero, is reading with far more rigor than the student trudging through a book that makes little sense or the book that is filled with unknown vocabulary and syntax that leaves him convinced he does not like to read. Summer reading – when the teacher is not around – is not the time to assign the difficult texts you want to help children learn to understand next year.



## Celebrate Reading Series Books

Nod your head if you like to read. I suspect all of you did that. Now think back to your childhood reading and nod your head again if, at some point, you read a series book. Perhaps you are of the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* generation. Or maybe you're part of the *Babysitter Club* decade. Maybe you grew up with a boy named Harry Potter or you ventured into a land called Narnia. Whether your series was *The Little House on the Prairie*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, *Animorphs*, *Goosebumps*, *Dear America*, *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, *Boxcar Children*, or *The Bobbsey Twins*, there is a great chance that if you're a reader today, then as a child you read a series book.

In fact, the research on this is clear: a critical step in becoming a lifetime reader is, at some point, being a series book reader. This correlation between series books and lifetime reading was examined as long ago as 1926 in a [study](#) of over 36,000 readers. The conclusion reached, in 1926, when there were few series books, was that these books are an important part of establishing lifetime reading habits.

The benchmark work on this relationship, though, is found in a book titled [Voices of Readers: How We Come to Love Books](#) by G. Robert Carlsen and Anne Sherrill. In their study, Carlsen and Sherrill also found a strong positive correlation between avid reading as an adult and series-book reading as a child or teen. Perhaps it's the comfort of knowing the characters that makes them so enjoyable. Perhaps it's the cliffhangers at the end of each chapter that lure us to read one more page that makes them so enticing. Perhaps it's because as we move from one book to the next, we learn more and more about this author's style and begin to feel as if that next new book is an old friend. Whatever the reason, we love them. And because we love them, we get lost in them; we turn page after page; we wonder if Nancy will escape from the hidden attic even though the fact that the next five Nancy Drew books sit beside the bed is a clue she does. But because we love them, we read page after page after page. We develop stamina. We become readers.

### And This All Leads to my Hopes for Summer Reading

I hope your children will enjoy summer reading. I hope they will have the experience of losing themselves in a book and at the same time, I hope they will find themselves in a book. I hope they finish a book they loved with more understanding of themselves, the people around them, and their world. I hope they discover that in opening up a book, they are opening themselves up to more: more experiences, more knowledge, more empathy, more *what ifs* and more *could be's*.

This entry was posted in [Comprehension](#), [Reading](#), [Reading Enjoyment](#) by [Kylene Beers](#).