Although often overlooked, read-alouds are a great way to get teens hooked on books

When one of our high school teachers approached me three years ago looking for ways to get her low-achieving students excited about books, I suggested she try reading aloud to them. She shot me a skeptical look. I could almost hear her thinking, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Most people associate read-alouds with bright-eyed preschoolers and elementary school kids—not with struggling at-risk teens. But read-alouds are fun for students of all ages. And studies by education researchers such as Stephen Krashen, Jim Trelease, and Janet Allen have shown that reading to kids boosts their reading comprehension, increases their vocabularies, and helps them become better writers. In fact, students who are read to are more motivated to read themselves—increasing the likelihood that they will one day become independent, lifelong readers.

I’m not sure if I convinced my colleague that day, but she was desperate and open to any suggestion that might help her students. And that was good enough for me. Over the last few years, read-alouds have become enormously popular here at Ephrata High School in Pennsylvania—and not only with our struggling students. Today, 12 of our 13 language-arts teachers read at least one novel a year to their classes, and more often than not, their students can’t wait to hear the next installment.

How can you launch a successful read-aloud program for teens?

You’ll want to start by selecting the right book. It’s always wise to read in advance any title you’re thinking of using as a read-aloud. That way you’ll have a good idea if it’s suitable for your students. For example, is the story’s content and language appropriate? Is the gender of the protagonist likely to appeal to most of the group? Also, by reading a book beforehand, you can discover if you yourself enjoy it. If you don’t, find another one fast. Students can quickly sense if you’re feigning or lacking enthusiasm—and that can be the difference between a successful experience or a complete dud.

The first time you read to teens, you’ll want to explain that you’re reading aloud to them so that everyone can share the experience. You may also want to encourage students to pay special attention to a
particular aspect of the story. For instance, who is the hero of the story? Who is the true villain? If your students haven’t been read to lately, you may want to start small—with a poem or short story, such as a selection from Gary Soto’s *Baseball in April and Other Stories* (Harcourt, 1990). Our students prefer stories with strong narrative voices, fast-paced plots, and realistic characters they can relate to, such as *The Lovely Bones* (Little, Brown, 2002) by Alice Sebold and *Whale Talk* (Greenwillow, 2001) by Chris Crutcher.

The best time to read to kids is at the beginning or the end of class. That’s because read-alouds are a perfect transition activity—great for settling kids down when they arrive or calming them down at the end of a session. Our teachers read to their students for 15 to 20 minutes, once or twice a week. Kids get antsy if read-alouds last much longer. It’s also wise to plan your individual readings in advance, so you can end each session at an intriguing or spine-tingling point in the story—leaving your audience begging for more.

Oscar winners Hilary Swank and Jamie Foxx rehearse their lines, and so should librarians and teachers—especially if you haven’t presented a read-aloud for a while. Practice changing the volume, tone, and inflection of your voice to portray the story’s characters and events. And be mindful of your pace: the most common mistake educators make when they read aloud is to read too fast. Remember, too, to keep an eye on your audience. That way, you can tell whether students are spellbound by the presentation—or about to snore and ready for a break. It’s also a good idea to personalize the novel with some interesting information about its author. Our students find it hard to believe that S. E. Hinton is a woman, since she writes so convincingly from a male perspective. They’re also amazed that she was only 16 when she wrote *The Outsiders*. Always be prepared to offer students recommendations of additional titles by their favorite authors. And stay on top of what other teachers are reading to their classes so you can display related books in the library.

Kids like to kick back when they’re listening to a story. To create a more relaxing environment, librarians or teachers might want to lower the lights or even play music if it’s appropriate. Every year, our students look forward to hearing one of our English teachers read *The Velveteen Rabbit*, accompanied by a recording of pianist George Winston’s *December*. It’s also easier for teens to pay attention if they’re facing away from bright windows or distracting scenes. Doodling is another technique that’s terrific for keeping kids engaged. Ellen Goldfinch, a high school librarian at Bishop’s College School in Lennoxville, Canada, advises her students to doodle while listening because it helps them express the story’s images.

Our teachers usually follow their readings with a class discussion, and most of my colleagues encourage their students to keep a journal, write a poem, or draw a picture of what they’ve just heard. But we never grade any of these activities.

Why am I such a strong advocate of reading to teens? Because of the profound difference I’ve seen it make in students’ lives. Two years ago, nothing could persuade one of our ninth graders to pick up a recreational book when he visited the library. But that all changed when he heard a teacher read Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet* (Bradbury, 1987). Soon, the young man was pouring through every Paulsen book we own, and today, he’s one of our school’s most dedicated readers.

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To Learn More...


Here’s a guide that provides detailed strategies for read-alouds, including a fantastic list of titles that fit many content areas.


Krashen points out significant reading research and describes how read-aloud programs benefit students academically.


This fifth edition features an annotated list of recommended titles, and offers a comprehensive list of dos and don’ts for a successful read-aloud experience.