

Motivating “Reluctant Readers”

About motivation

If adolescents are two, three, or more years behind grade level in reading, they've probably already experienced years of frustration and failure, and they may come across as unmotivated, unengaged, and skeptical of any new literacy class or program. When teaching older students, then, the challenge isn't just to provide systematic instruction but also to help them build trust in their teachers, confidence in their own abilities, and enthusiasm for the work they do in school.

However, teachers shouldn't assume that every unmotivated student has trouble reading and writing.

Over time, students who struggle with decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension do tend to become disengaged. But there are also many students who tune out in the classroom, and who earn failing grades, though they are in fact highly literate.¹ They might even be avid readers, poring over the newspaper in the morning and favorite magazines at night. They might have their own web pages and blogs, or write stories and poetry outside of school. And yet, since they might have blown off their reading tests, assessments, and homework, their teachers may believe them to be low-level readers.

Whether students are merely bored or truly struggle with literacy, though, the advice is more or less the same: research strongly suggests that adolescents be given significant freedom in school to read and write about topics of their own choosing; that their teachers help them find interesting and suitable reading materials; that their teachers give them plenty of opportunities to interact with their classmates, especially to discuss what they read; and that their teachers define very specific goals for every reading or writing assignment.

Next steps

- **Encourage students to make their own choices.**

Researchers strongly recommend that literacy instructors give older students plenty of opportunities to choose reading and writing topics that interest them, to choose from a number of possible projects and assignments (e.g., to write a research report, create a Web site, or do a Power Point presentation), and to choose whether to work alone or with specific reading and writing partners.

- **Help students to select their reading materials.**

Students may know what topics interest them, but they don't necessarily know how to pick books that are "just right" for their interests and reading level (i.e., books that are attractive and interesting, and that offer them some challenge but not so much that they'll become frustrated and give up.) It can be difficult to help struggling adolescent readers find the right books, though, since most beginning-level texts are written for much younger children. Fortunately, a number of commercial publishers have begun to create texts that are "high in interest and low in frustration," and new titles are being produced quickly.

- **Make sure that students have sufficient background knowledge.**

If students already know something about a given topic, they tend to feel more confident and motivated to read about it, and they tend to comprehend more of what they read. If the topic is a new one for them, then give them enough background information and vocabulary to get them started successfully.

- **Help students define good reasons to read and write.**

If the goal of an assignment is merely to gather facts for a test, or to check off a course requirement, students aren't likely to put much effort into it. Research backs up the common-sense idea that students try harder and become more engaged in their schoolwork when they have a more compelling purpose in mind, such as to figure out something that they've always wanted to know about a favorite topic, or to become knowledgeable about a topic so that they can make an impressive presentation to their classmates. Also, it's often useful to ask students to help define their own goals for the assignment and to give them feedback along the way, letting them know how much they've accomplished already and how much more work they still have to do to meet their goal.

- **Encourage discussion and other opportunities to work in groups.**

When assigning (or encouraging) students to work in groups, teachers shouldn't assume they can leave those students to their own devices. In order to be productive, discussions and group work have to be planned carefully and supervised over time. But when such interactions go well, they tend to pay off greatly not just in terms of increased comprehension but also in terms of student engagement, confidence, and interest in schoolwork.