

Adolescent Literacy

This topic explores approaches to improving the literacy skills of adolescents so that they can succeed in content-area classes and enjoy reading.

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Introduction

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 3).

Many students, for various reasons, reach middle school and high school without adequate literacy skills. Causes may include learning disabilities, mental retardation, frequent school changes, limited literacy of parents, or inadequate instruction. Once a student falls behind his or her peers, development of literacy skills may be hampered by lack of access to appropriate materials and instruction and by motivational issues stemming from repeated experiences with failure. Students who are reading two or more years below grade level tend to have difficulty in content-area classes in secondary school (Report on Learning Disabilities Research, 1997). Often, they avoid reading and as a result fall even further behind over time. This presents a major challenge for educators and parents trying to help students succeed in the general curriculum and avoid the emotional and social consequences of repeated failure in school.

While most people associate literacy with the ability to read, there are other kinds of literacy as well. In the more general sense, literacy refers to the ability to understand and use symbolic information (text, formulas, codes, statistics, etc.) to function successfully in the world. So, in addition to reading, literacy encompasses numerical and mathematical skills (sometimes called numeracy), writing skills, computer skills, and other technology-related skills. Other new literacies include areas such as economic literacy, critical literacy, and media literacy. Literacy includes those skills needed to access, understand, and make use of school texts, but it also includes many skills that have important applications outside the classroom, such as understanding a wilderness trail guide or interpreting a weather map on the Internet (Alvermann, 2001).

Starting in the upper elementary grades, students are expected to be able to use reading as a tool to access texts for many purposes. Students are expected to read longer works of fiction and be able to discuss plots and themes. In order to read content-area materials in history, science, and mathematics, students need to understand and be able to use specialized vocabulary and symbols. They also need to be able to find, comprehend, interpret, and assess the validity of information found in the media, on the Internet, and in print sources. These and other literacy skills grow in importance as students move from elementary school into middle and high school.

References

The following sources were cited in this Introduction. For additional research and resources, see our links to other pages on this topic below.

Alvermann, D. E. (2001). [Effective literacy instruction for adolescents](http://www.readingonline.org/editorial/edit_index.asp?HREF=/editorial/november2002/). Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference. Retrieved June 10, 2003, from http://www.readingonline.org/editorial/edit_index.asp?HREF=/editorial/november2002/

Moore, D. W., Bean, T. W., Birdyshaw, D., & Rycik, J. A. (1999). Adolescent literacy: A position statement. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 97-112.

[Report on learning disabilities research: Hearing before the Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives. 105th Cong.](http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth/reading/nih_report.html) (1997). (Adapted from testimony of G. R. Lyon, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development). Retrieved June 10, 2003, from http://www.idonline.org/ld_indepth/reading/nih_report.html

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