

LEARNING BEYOND THE BELL

Supporting and resourcing homework programs across Victoria

Tips on improving students' literacy skills

There are many reasons that a student may be behind their peers when it comes to literacy. Unfortunately when a student is struggling with literacy, their self-esteem can be seriously affected which can go on to cause further problems down the track. If they have reached Years 2 or 3 at Primary School and are having difficulties, their attitude in relation to school is likely to be negatively influenced by this. If their literacy skills do not improve as the years go by, a student can become more and more reluctant in relation to reading and writing. As tutors working individually or with small groups of students, you have a real chance to support students who are struggling with literacy at their own pace, and in an environment which is safe and encouraging for students.

If you are tutoring a student who has literacy difficulties, be sure to inform the coordinator of the homework club. They may be able to liaise with the student's teachers to get feedback on suitable activities for the student to do. The tips below however will give you ideas on strategies to use in helping low literacy students.

When working with a student who is struggling with literacy, above all remember that your primary purpose is to engage the student and to build up their confidence.

Reading regularly

One of the easiest things you can do with a student whose literacy level is low is just to listen to them read - even just 10 minutes in a homework club session will help. Choose texts for them to read that are at or a little below their current reading level. The text should be considered too hard for them if there are more than a handful of words per page that they can't read. Always find books of interest to them and remember it doesn't matter if a Year 9 student only wants to read magazines about soccer – they are still reading and that is what is important. For older students not wanting to read “younger” books try graphic novels or similar – things that have illustrations and less text. Be sure to use graphic novels specifically made for children and young adults.

Sharing the load

For students whose literacy skills are low, it can feel daunting to be reading a whole document/book on their own. If you are reading with a student, take it in turns with them to read. Depending on their skill level and the length of what you are reading, this may mean anything from reading alternate sentences or paragraphs through to alternate pages or even chapters.

Visual clues

If a student is having difficulties when reading, encourage them to look for visual clues in accompanying pictures, photos or diagrams. For books without any visual accompaniment, find something visual that will



assist the student in understanding what they are reading. This could be anything from a drawing of the solar system, to photos from Australia in the past, a diagram of the human body or the student viewing a DVD of a novel they are reading. Be very careful with the latter suggestion though and ensure that the DVD is authentic to the book... many a student has failed an exam by basing their answers on a movie version of a book instead of the actual book!

Context clues

If a student is unable to read a particular word, work with them at narrowing down what the word is likely to be by its context. As adults we continue to do this, if we come across a word we don't understand. For example: The dog played with the b..... The word at the end of this sentence beginning with "b" is far more likely to be bone, branch or ball than bison, bugle or budget.

Word Knowledge

As children, when we first listen to books being read to us and then go on to learn to read, we build up a considerable knowledge of how words work. As we are reading we then use this knowledge to work out unfamiliar words. You can help students with this process when they are having difficulty reading a particular word. For example if the student does not recognise the word understand, cover the "stand" section of the word. Do they recognise "under"? Then cover the "under" section of the word, do they recognise "stand"? If they recognise both or either of "under" or "stand" they will be on the way to reading the word. There are many words in the English language made up of two words e.g. sunrise, seashell, watermelon, supermarket where this approach can be taken.

Word beginnings and endings

The beginnings and endings of words can hold clues for helping students to read. If I can read running, jumping, skipping and doing, then I am on the way to being able to read shopping. To start with I will know how the end of the word will sound and may be able to work out the "shop" section by context. The same is the case with the beginnings of words. If I can read mischief, missing and misfit then I am on the way to reading misalign. To help students see this, cover or underline sections of the word to indicate what they already know.

Phonetics

When a student comes to a word they don't know, encourage them to sound it out. Remember though, over half the words in the English language are not phonetic so it would be unwise to use this as the only approach.

Common difficulty areas

English is a complicated language – there are many aspects of it that can be confusing. Common areas where students tend to make mistakes include tense (has or had), plural (mouse or mice), contractions (I will or I'll) and punctuation (including capital letters, commas, quotations marks and apostrophes). If you are working with a student and find that they regularly have difficulties with one of these or another grammatical area, spend a couple of weeks focussing on that particular area to increase their understanding.



Word correction

When listening to a student read don't be too pedantic about absolutely every word being correct. Correcting a student every few words will not help their confidence or engender a love of reading. For example if a student reads 'house' as 'home', don't worry about it unless it is absolutely vital to the context of the story.

Readability

Learning to read can be difficult if there are many new words in the text that the student does not know. If the student does not own the book they are reading, photocopy the text and get them to highlight words they don't know. Discuss what these words mean and learn them with the student prior to them re-attempting the text.

Print size and font

For some students a page of small text can feel overwhelming. It may help to photocopy and enlarge the text size for ease of reading. Some fonts are also much easier to understand for beginner readers than others. Obviously the first font in this sentence *is easier to read than the second*. If you have any way of controlling the font in the text for the student, do so. Students may also find it useful to use a ruler or piece of paper as a guide to indicate where they are up to.

Key word lists

All subjects have key words that are connected to that topic. Knowing and understanding the meaning of these words and being able to recognise them will assist any reading and consequently any writing done by the student on that topic. This is regardless of whether the student is studying VCE Psychology through to a primary school unit of work on dragons. Some homework clubs at the start of the year look at key words related to the subjects a student is studying to ensure they can recognise and correctly understand them all, this is particularly useful for secondary school students. An example for VCE students can be found under the glossary section of each of these subjects on this website: <http://vcenet.com.au/index.cfm?sec=2&ms=2>

Frequently used words lists

There are many words in the English language that occur with a very high frequency. There are a variety of frequently used word lists available. These lists may be found by either Googling "High Frequency words" or "Frequently used words". The basic premise of all these lists is if students can learn to recognise the words and spell them, this is a good start to being literate.

Summarising

Frequently with homework tasks, students will need to be able to read a text and then summarise the key points from it. To assist students to do this, get them to highlight key words and statements in the text as they read it. When they have finished highlighting they can then re-look over the text and see the main points, ready to use in a summary. Some students may need assistance in learning how to do this, so work with them until they get the idea.



Talking books

A talking book is a recording of a book being read, generally on CD or downloaded from the net. They can be of great benefit to students learning to read. The ideal ones are those where the student has the accompanying book so they can follow the written text as they listen to it being read - this will help their literacy skills. For students at a secondary school level this can be a great way of introducing a text they are having a lot of difficulty reading and/or getting in to.

How books work

Literacy skills require knowledge of how books and other written texts work. For example initially a student needs to understand: which is the front of a book; that the text goes from left to right; and the role of the different parts of a book, e.g. the contents page. Students also need to learn alphabetical order in order to use an index or to find an item in an alphabetical list. If a student displays confusion with any of these areas, work with them to improve their understanding.

Inspiring others

Some students with little interest in reading may not see it as a worthwhile or inspiring activity. This can be particularly the case with boys and young men. Their father or other men in their lives may show very little or no interest in reading. Reading and books do not tend to get a lot of mainstream media attention either. How often do you hear any of the well known sports men publicly talking about a brilliant book they've read? Most Australians could readily list the names of ten famous Australian sports people but could be struggling to name ten famous Australian authors. Working as a tutor in a homework club is a wonderful opportunity to act as a role model for young people. Display your passion for reading and for books that you have read!

For more information:

www.cmy.net.au/LBB

