

August 22, 2021

Dear Parents,

The central goal of any English classroom is to establish a reading habit in the busy lives of students. I hope we can recapture the pleasure and passion of readers. This letter is long, but the assumptions it rests upon are too important to be treated in a superficial manner. Please take the time to read this so you understand why this is an essential part of my classroom and a weekly grade for your child.

In years past, I have selected literature that I thought would be interesting for students. Depending on the particular student, those choices were hit or miss - sometimes the child loved the book, sometimes not. This year will be different. Instead of forcing students to read only the books I assign, they will be allowed to choose most of their texts within the guidelines of literary merit and Lexile level (reading level). I think this approach will help even the most reluctant reader find literature that they can love.

Of course, good literature looks at life experiences from a variety of perspectives and forces us to consider the world in ways we may never have imagined. Authors are often brutally honest in examining how we humans respond to difficult situations. Sometimes we are heroic, sometimes we are not - but a good book will expose truths about the human condition, allow us to confront our worst fears, and guide us to live through them.

I won't know the details of every book students read and refer to this year, and I won't remember the details of all the books I recommend to students. What I seek for all of my students is a compulsion to read – for pleasure, for knowledge, for curiosity, or information – that will keep them into the pages of a book past our assigned time for reading – past our weekly page goals.

This has tremendous benefits. Here are a few:

- Reading relieves stress. High school is stressful.
- Reading takes us out of the present and into another time and place. It is a perfect escape. Finding ways to temporarily suspend our chaotic realities is good for mental health.
- Reading builds stamina to prepare students for college and the workplace. Reading for an hour or two in one sitting is a basic expectation in college.

- Reading difficult manuals and corresponding with colleagues and clients is an expectation in many workplaces.

In this class we will exercise muscles soon to be strained in the coming years. Reading for fluency and stamina has been proven to improve the reading rate of students. Frequent reading develops confidence and an appetite for books as well as teaching vocabulary in context, which improves writing. This only happens when students find books they want to read. However, the truth is, some of those books might make you uncomfortable.

Reading challenges us to think critically. There is a lot of talk in the media that “students won’t read,” but I believe students substitute distractions (their phones, TV, etc.) if they feel no passion for the book *assigned* to them. Students who haven’t been readers will suddenly become quite passionate about reading with the right book in their hands.

But those books might challenge your values. Your child may choose to read *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins, which delves into a teenager’s drug addiction, or *Minutes* by Jodi Picoult, which deals with a school shooting, or *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, which chronicles violent child soldiers in the Sudan.

We have to trust these young people, who are now on the cusp of adulthood. We have to trust that books won’t corrupt them any more than *Breaking Bad* or *Taken* or *The Walking Dead*. It’s much more important that they are reading.

Because the students will be choosing for themselves, **it is entirely likely that your child will come across a book that has situations, language, or even art that is disturbing or conflicts with your family’s beliefs or morals.** If you wonder why they are reading these books, I will answer, “Your son or daughter chose it.” I might have recommended it because I read it and loved it, or the book may be unfamiliar to me because your child checked it out from the library or heard about it from another student.

The bottom line is that I won’t place a tight filter on what is read in this class and I’m asking for your support in this. That being said, **I understand and fully support that you might not find every book appropriate for your child.** I respect your right to monitor your child’s reading and encourage you to do so. Please read along and discuss the book with your child if you’re concerned about the content. I think you’ll be surprised at the level of maturity your child will show when it comes to examining and reacting to even controversial literature. **But if you don’t want your child to read a particular book, please have that family discussion.**

For classroom purposes, I will assume that you have given them permission to read whatever they've chosen. Other than clearly objectionable books like Harlequin Romances or unpublished fan fiction or literature that is just too easy for them, I will trust that you and your child have agreed to what s/he is reading and I will not ask them to choose a different title.

If a problem arises, please contact me to discuss it so we can work on a solution. To facilitate your decision making, here is a link to a site that has reviews for parents. It might be helpful when making a family decision about texts that are appropriate. <https://www.commonsemmedia.org> If you can't find the book there, a Google search should help you find what you need.

We will still be reading a few whole-class books (not independent or choice books) and a variety of short stories, articles, and poems from the textbook. For AP Language students, those books will likely include *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. For American Literature students, those books will likely include *The Crucible* and *Of Mice and Men*.

Please feel free to email me if you have any questions.

Thanks for your support,

Ms. Vincent

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PS: Please come to class and share a book with us. Share your passion for reading and get to know these amazing students at Ola. I would love to have you join us!