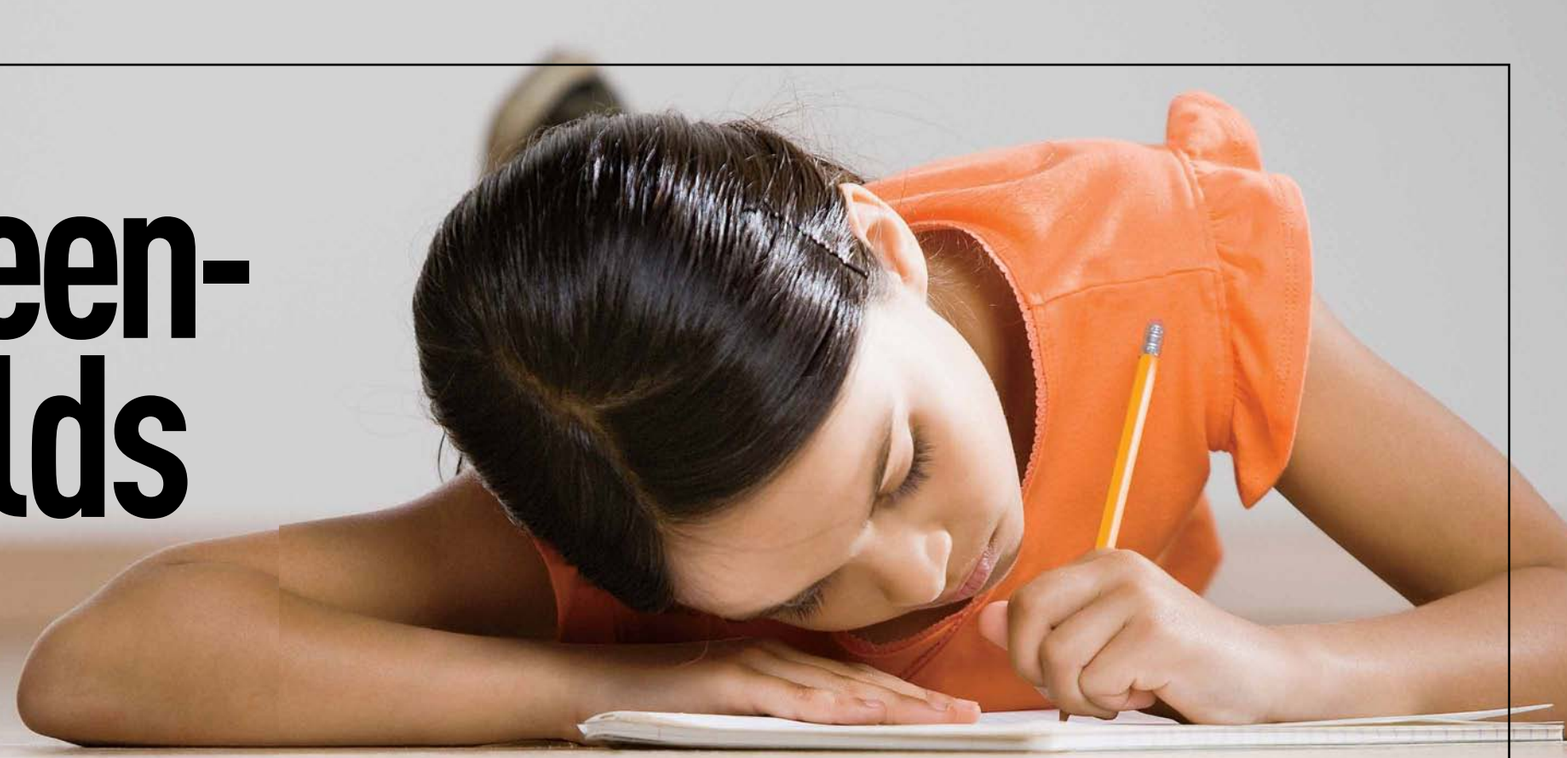
# 13 for Thirteen-year-olds



What does it take to reach a middle school reader? Literacy expert Laura Robb recently shared her top strategies in a webcast for Scholastic fans. Here's what she had to say.

## 1 Respect students' search for self.

We want our adolescents to read well, to write well, to communicate, and to learn. But adolescents are unique in that they are emerging from childhood and asking the big questions: "Who am I? And where do I fit in in this world?" And we have to respect that when we create a classroom environment. Part of the search for self is a need for independence and to feel responsible for one's own life and decisions. Another component is that teens love their peers. We have to create projects and tasks that tap into students' need to be social, but also move them forward with high-level thinking because they are at the age where they can handle it.

## 2 Embrace blogging.

Adolescents thrive on blogging, and you can use blogs for many different purposes. I front-load kids, or get them ready to read, through blogging. And I've found I hear the voices of kids who are usually silent. That's very powerful. It's also a great way to foster reading because you have to read quickly, and everyone wants to respond. So you see children, even those who struggle, concentrating on their classmates' comments so they can enter the conversation. Last year, I worked in a seventh-grade class, and we blogged within literature circles. I did two or three guided lessons to establish expectations, and then each group blogged about its book every time we met. I learned more as a teacher than I would have by observing one group at a time, because I could view everyone's responses and have a conversation. And again, I could move them along. So, it's a very powerful tool.

## 3 Send texts in class.

We all know that teens love to text. I get permission for students to bring in cell phones, and then invite them to take on the persona of different characters and text back and forth as if they were that character. And they love it. They write their texts out for me so I have them documented. These are the kind of things that motivate children. We have to remove barriers like "Well, that's not part of what school traditionally is." We don't want to live in the 21st century and teach as if we're in the 19th century.

## 4 Take words apart.

Teachers are often asked to use phonics and word families, which is successful with many, but not all, students. What I recommend for kindergarten on up is word study. I use Words Their Way, a program developed at the University of Virginia that asks kids to sort words and become familiar with word patterns. There are many different ways to spell long *a*, for example, and we try to get students to see those commonalities, and then teach them the "oddballs." We also study roots and stems and prefixes and suffixes. I teach kids how to pronounce basic prefixes and suffixes, and then the root is usually just a small part of the word. We remove the prefix and say it, remove the suffix and say it, look at the root or stem and ask whether it is familiar, and put the word together. I find that a lot of kids who can't pronounce words because of weak decoding ability become more familiar with vocabulary when they hear it. Then it becomes familiar.

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## 5 Build vocabulary.

I will never forget one seventh-grade boy who was reading on a third-grade level. I looked at him and asked, "How can I help you?" And he said, "Give me words. I don't have words." My heart broke. So, in addition to word study, I model how I use context clues to figure out words. And then I have the kids practice and think aloud with a partner. Context clues don't always work, so I also do a lot of pre-teaching. If we're learning about immigration, for example, we might build 20 related words throughout the unit. Statistics show that kids who have the best vocabulary are readers, and I always tell students, "Look, here are the statistics. It's your choice. I will help you all the way, but if you want to do well, you're gonna have to do a lot of reading."

## 6 Have students use readers' notebooks.

Writing about reading is so important. Some research has just come out of the Carnegie Institute, by professor Steve Graham, which says it's a great way of improving comprehension. I use what I call anchor texts, which are short sections from picture books or longer stories, to model reading. I show students how I look at that section and connect it to the bigger ideas in the text, or to an issue that we're studying. I stop and think aloud. And I always ask my kids to have their notebooks open, so they are ready to record a response, a hunch, or just a few words that pop into their minds. They develop their mental model of what it means to be a reader and have the text affect your heart and your mind.

## 7 Use mentor texts.

I want writing to be as natural as eating your oatmeal every morning, so I have students read mentor texts and study them with a writer's eye. We look for techniques that students can transfer to their own writing, such as organization and plot. Some teachers use peer texts or their own writing as examples, but I prefer to take a text from a professional writer because it is strong and we get to enjoy it first. And then we start taking it apart and look at how the writer uses dialogue to advance the plot, for example. Kids come away with a better understanding of writing than when you try to explain the individual elements out of context.

## 8 Give students choice.

Last year I did a survey of adolescents across the country on writing. And we found that they were very negative about having to respond to writing prompts. I know you have to do it sometimes, but you can't teach writing through prompts. I also found that a large number of adolescents were writing on their own. In fact, I was in a ninth-grade class, and the teacher was tearing her hair out because there were five kids in the class who refused to write. I met the teacher at the end of the day in the library, and one of the kids was there on a computer, reading and typing. I tiptoed around the room to watch, and this student was reading a blog and writing some wonderful responses. I told the teacher, "This child can read very well. He can write. It's just that he's not motivated to write from a prompt or read from a book that you've chosen all the time." We all want choice.

# 13 for 13-Year-Olds

## 9 Respect the genres.

When I had my own classroom, my library was organized by genre. I did not use the Dewey decimal system because I've found that teens want to go right to the genre that they love, whether it's realistic fiction or mysteries. That's not a bad thing. A knowledge of genre helps readers navigate text because you know what to expect. With folktales, for example, you know to expect a moral or lesson. In addition, genre helps with writing. So often I hear teachers tell kids, "Write a short story," but the students don't know how a short story works. When you teach genre, it's like having a road map for writing. Students can follow the road map they've gotten from the mentor text, and then bring themselves into it and take those wonderful detours that make it unique.

## 10 Meet one on one.

I always tell teachers, "Five minutes of one on one is worth a whole class lesson or 20 minutes of guided reading." Because I can read the body language, I can hear the voice and get a sense of where that child is emotionally. I can make a connection by finding as many positives as I can in that child's work to get them to open up. I always ask the kids, "Tell me why. Why was that hard for you? Why didn't you do your homework?" They have good answers. Sometimes they say, "I dunno," and I say, "I'll try again tomorrow because I think you really do know." My conference table is apart from the classroom, so it's very private.

## 11 Get rid of your desk.

The last five years that I taught, I took the desk out of my classroom so I never sat. I believe it's my responsibility to walk around the classroom, making observations and taking notes. I carry a clipboard with sticky notes, because if I see something that I need to follow up on, I don't trust my memory. I think of my rounds as mini-conferences. For example, if a student is struggling to write, I'll take the pen and say, "Tell me what you want to say." And I write. And then I'll say, "You've got such good ideas. Can you put two more down for me?" I always try to stay aware of the need to build their self-confidence and self-esteem. It's fragile at this age.

## 12 Have kids share recommendations with one another.

Every month, my students share a book of their choice with the entire class. It takes two or three minutes, so if you have 30 kids, you take two class periods. It's worthwhile because peer recommendations are so motivating. I also have a wall covered with construction paper, and if students love a book and want to recommend it, they can record the title and author on the wall, write a few words, and sign their names. And kids can go and read the board for suggestions. Finally, when I bring new books into my classroom, I book-talk them and put them in a very visible place. I might say, "Joshua, this book is for you. It's all about World War II. You're a World War II buff. Read it and then pass it on to somebody else." It's all about respecting students' tastes, giving them choice, and helping them to develop a personal reading life.

## 13 Don't ask kids to do things you wouldn't do yourself.

I always tell teachers, "Think of yourself. Would you want to write a summary of every chapter you read for independent reading at night?" Absolutely not. I told one teacher who was going to do that to bring me her journal, and that ended that assignment. We're teaching children for life, not just for our classroom. So if I wouldn't want to do something, I find another assignment. And I ask for feedback from my students, too. Trust them, because they are the ones who really can give you the answers. □