

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

School of Hard Knocks Guide to Literacy

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Okay, so you have the big outreach event. Jamal, a 17-year-old hoops star, becomes a Christian. Then he shows up at your Bible study. You ask him to read John 3:16. His fluency compares to a second grader's.

Frankie, who's as dependable as the Energizer Bunny, is applying for a job at the local drive thru. He's pumped. You'd hire him in a heartbeat. You peek at his application. Fabian's handwriting looks like hieroglyphics.

It's open-mic night at youth group. The topic is explosive and should ignite discussion like firecrackers. But due to their limited vocabulary, your teenagers communicate with shoulder shrugs or "Ya know what I'm saying?"

No. You don't know what they are saying. Or, as Frankie would spell, *I don't kokn what you're saying.*

Welcome to the world of urban youth ministry in Chicago, a melting pot of ethnicities and issues, where nearly half of public high school freshmen dropped out before getting a diploma in the past seven years¹. Like others involved in urban ministry, I know this can lead to a series of unfortunate events worse than Lemony Snicket's. Welfare dependency, juvenile delinquency and a multi-year scholarship a state penitentiary instead of state university are just some of the things a drop out can expect². Now if you believe you can skip this article because you work in the 'burbs, don't turn the page yet. Students everywhere are floundering in basics such as reading and math. According to the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP), 37% of our country's fourth graders were below the reading achievement Basic level, meaning, they could barely read Veggie Tales Books, listed for 9-12 aged readers at Amazon.com. Only one out of

17 seventeen year olds could read complex materials such as the statistics sighted in this article.

And if you grew up reading web pages instead of paper pages, your reading skills are different than those who grew up during the dark ages of the 70's. You're more likely to just scan this article than actually read it, doing so while multi-tasking. That's why it's written in web style, with text in concise scannable chunks. It's too important for you not to read.

As youth workers, you need to be concerned about education. If a kid can't read Dick and Jane, you can forget about Deuteronomy. And that's what it's all about.

So what do you do as a youth pastor? Transform your youth center into a holy hooked-on-phonics haven? Spend your entire budget on talksheets that end up in the circular file? Nah. Just try some of the things I learned in the School of Hard Knocks. While it's been said that "experience is the best teacher," in urban youth ministry it's the only teacher. So if you tweak your program with a few of the following tips, you can work on literacy basics without your kids realizing it.

But What Is Literacy, Really?

We all know that literacy is reading text and understanding it. But it goes deeper than that. There are three components to literacy that unlock the meaning of text—fluency, phonics, and comprehension. And just like the combination on your Masterlock, you have to tackle the literacy components in order for literacy to happen.

More important than trying any single tip, you want to create a community of encouragement. You need to speak dreams into youth, affirming that they can achieve goals. If they see that you believe in them, they'll start believing, too. And since your youth room doesn't have the trappings of a school, your kids can't "fail." Make sure each student feels like a winner, no matter what.

The Ultimate Literacy Tool

The Bible, written by shepherds, fisherman, and ex-convicts, is a great literacy tool. All of those tongue-twisting names and places provide great phonics exercises. Those different translations? They help students with overall comprehension. (So encourage students to bring different translations to compare). And the "misfit" authors? If these guys could accomplish great things, that makes it easier to convince your students that they can, too.

So, have your students translate a Bible story into a play. Take liberties with it (e.g., Confessions of Samson's Hair Stylist or Nehemiah guest stars on This Old Wall or King Solomon's Rags to Riches infomercial). Make copies of it for everyone and practice, practice, practice. Along with

unleashing their creativity, the simple of practicing their lines aloud will help their fluency.

Don't sweat the kids who remain quiet. Call on eager volunteers instead. Kids who struggle with literacy skills fear "their secret" will be found out in front of their peers, so if you push them to participate when they don't want to, they'll stop coming to your program.

Have Fun with Phonics

Phonics, as we all know, is the process of sounding out words. (Sorta makes you wonder why it isn't spelled foniks.) Practicing words and their sounds blended aloud helps struggling readers connect the written word and to the spoken word.

Here are a few ideas:

NebbaWhateva. Ask students how they would spell some of those tongue-twisting names of the Bible. NebbaCanNezzer makes more sense than Nebuchadnezzar, Efeezzens breaks fewer spelling rules than Ephesians, and just why is there a P in Psalms? Take a minute to sound out new words, biblical places, or names.

U, Lord, r My Shepherd. Translate your memory verse into a text message, then text it to your students. While this may not be grammatically correct, it'll help youth connect sound to text.

I Know You Think You Understand What You Think I Said...

If students can't remember what they just read, they're having problems with comprehension. They might know the words, but they don't connect the pieces into larger thoughts. If you want to help them ramp up comprehension, try one of these ideas:

Tune In and Turn On. Before you dive into a story, build a background for your students, painting a picture with words. This asks for their attention and turns on their imaginations. Help them smell the air in the desert, feel the dust and heat, hear the sounds of carpenters hammering and sawing.

Write On! While two-thumbs text messaging can be fun, it can't replace five-finger pen and paper journaling. Journaling helps students transform what they read into their own thoughts as well as practice basic handwriting skills. Encourage students to purge their brains daily, dumping their thoughts on paper.

Reflection, not Rejection. While journaling is a good time for reflection, make sure it doesn't turn into a time for students to be overly critical of themselves. Remind them to write positive things, from goals to things they like about themselves.

One-Word Journal. Have your teenagers sum up their thoughts on a lesson into one word. (Not an easy assignment.) Then have them dialogue with you using as many words as it takes to explain their answers.

Picture Journal. Instead of writing their journal entries, every once in a while have your students journal by drawing, doodling, or cutting out photos and making collages. The point? No words. This exercise will help students translate their thoughts into different forms.

Double Doh! Never read student journals unless you ask and they give you permission. If they wanted you to peek at it, they'd post it on Facebook.

Not Everyone Will Become Good Readers, but Everyone Is Good at Something!

Take Daniel, for instance—another favorite student of mine. This 300-pound kid has nostrils so crusted over that it's a miracle he can breathe. Daniel also has a serious learning disability: He fell out of a window when he was a toddler, leaving him with a permanent brain injury and no short-term memory. While Daniel can't remember what you just told him, he can remember the day he fell out of window, wishing God could rewind time.

Meanwhile, there was another boy in the youth group, Kevin, who had an insatiable appetite for Funions® and was scary smart. If Kevin could ask God one question, it would be about carbon dating and radioactive isotopes.

Kevin and Daniel are best buds.

Every now and then during youth group, after Kevin asked a question that would baffle the intellectuals at the local university, Daniel entered the discussion, making a comment that would shut everyone up. Daniel simply had faith—a simple faith, but a real faith.

While Daniel will never be “successful” the way Kevin will likely be, Daniel will always be successful in his relationship with Christ.

As far as I know, there isn't a test you have to take with a number-two pencil to get into heaven. If there were, we'd all be in trouble. But working on educational skills such as literacy in your youth groups (in subtle but meaningful ways) is a great way of letting teenagers know that your beliefs aren't limited to God alone—you believe in them, too.

Adapted from *School of Hard Knocks Guide to Literacy*, TastyFaith

NOTES

1. Chicago Tribune, February 2008. The report, CPS Graduation Pathways Strategy and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, analyzed the district's dropout numbers since 2000.

2. Literacy facts

National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP)

The ability to read and understand complicated information is important to success in college and, increasingly, in the workplace. An analysis of the NAEP long-term trend reading assessments reveals that only half of all White 17 year olds, less than one-quarter of Latino 17 year olds, and less than one-fifth of African American 17 year olds can read at this level.

By age 17, only about 1 in 17 seventeen year olds can read and gain information from specialized text, for example the science section in the local newspaper. This includes:

- 1 in 12 White 17 year olds,
- 1 in 50 Latino 17 year olds, and
- 1 in 100 African American 17 year olds.