

A blue cloud-shaped graphic with the text "SCHOOL'S OUT!" in yellow, a yellow pencil, and a yellow eraser.

SCHOOL'S OUT!

Seven Simple Strategies for Stopping Summer Learning Loss

As we discovered on a recent episode of “School’s Out,” summertime really is learning time and young people who are engaged with meaningful ways to keep their math, reading and writing skills evolving during the summer are less likely to find themselves playing catch up at the same time they’re trying to learn new things when they get back to school in the fall. Statistics show that young people who don’t do some kind of math during the summer regress a full 2 months in their math skills by summer’s end. For literacy, the stats are even worse. In fact, much of the achievement gap between higher income and lower income students can be attributed to lack of access to summer learning opportunities.

Summer learning, however, doesn’t have to look like a textbook or a worksheet. It’s the perfect time for DOING things – activities, projects, trips, tournaments, and more. Luckily, there are easy, hands-on ways to weave in (or “sneak in”) literacy and math reinforcement as well as practice in critical thinking and problem solving to your summer activities. Below are some broad strokes that can help integrate that skill building into a wide variety of activities.

1. READING ENHANCES OTHER EXPERIENCES

Reading can get a bad rap when you’re graded on how well you do it.....or.....when you have no choice in it. If you have a summer activity that your participants really seem to enjoy, why not build in some time for them to learn a little more about it through reading? Pieces from specialty or trade magazines, information on the internet, blogs, book excerpts, interviews, newspaper articles, song lyrics, your own personal experience as an adult -- all are things you can print up and turn into a packet to be perused during down time – or during reading time. Better yet, your young people can search for and assemble the packet themselves as a resource for those who come after them. And if you’re lucky enough to have your older young people working with those who are younger, be sure to include reading aloud in their job description – both ages will benefit. For read aloud tips, you can check out sites like

<http://www.getsmartoregon.org/getinvolved/volunteer/documents/Brochure-Reading%20Strategies.pdf> ,

<http://www.rif.org/parents/readingaloud/default.aspx> ,

<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/lkstmpl.asp?url=/content/libraries/childcare/readingtips.asp>,

<http://www.briarcliffmanorlibrary.org/readingaloud/tips.html> and

http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Tips_Reading_Teens/

2. PBDDRA (Previewing Before – Discussing During – Reflecting After)

Want to strengthen communication and critical thinking skills at the same time? With all the experiences that your program provides participants during the summer, an easy add-on is talking or writing about what they do.

- Before beginning an activity (event, field trip, project, tournament, game etc...) get participants discussing or writing what they already know about it or have heard about it. Help them put it in

context. Find out what they expect it to be like and what they would like to get out of it. Even if the answers are negative, young people's brains will be engaged and their voices heard.

- In the midst of an activity of any duration, take a moment gather participants together to check in on what their experience is currently like. Is there a word that would describe where each of them at right now? What is standing out to them about what they're doing? Do they have any predictions about how things will go from here? What are those predictions based upon?
- Just after an activity is over, take the time to reflect. Again, this can be done in a discussion, in a survey, in a journal, on a template, in a formal presentation, even unconventionally (collage, drawing, radio interview, rap, dance, etc...). How did the experience stack up against their expectations going into it? What about it was easy for them? What about it was tough? Were there any surprises? Did they learn anything about themselves or others? How would they improve the activity? Did it make them want to go further and if so, how could they do that?

3. Reduce Fear of Writing – by taking it out of the 'essay/report' box

Once again, it's all about choice. Essays, as valuable as they are, are only one kind of writing – and one that many young people have learned to stress over. If you think of writing as communicating your ideas, your opinions, your feelings and yourself, then a world of possibilities opens up to you. Part of our work in summer is de-stigmatizing this aspect of literacy. Whether it's for an exercise, an exploration, a team challenge, an individual competition, or a publication the following are just a few examples of ways you can make the practice of writing intentional yet fun. You can structure them as much or as little as you like.

- Music review
- Movie review
- Video game review
- Book review
- Food review
- Relationship advice column
- Love letter
- Break up letter
- Get back together letter
- Comic book
- Political speech
- Academy or Grammy Awards acceptance speech
- Complaint letter
- Letter to a soldier
- Personal recommendation
- Letter to an ancestor
- Tribute
- Boast
- Roast
- Travelogue
- Then-and-now (comparison with another generation)
- Anthem
- Tradition
- Origin of a favorite word or phrase
- Dramatic dialogue
- Advertisement
- Parental Warning
- Message in a bottle
- Sermon
- Invitation
- Debate
- Plot to take over the world
- Job query
- Prayer for peace
- Family story
- Most embarrassing moment

- Tall tale (with writer as main character)
- Myth (with writer as hero)
- Declaration of Independence (from something)
- Pledge of Allegiance (to something)
- Aphorism
- Made up word with bogus definition
- Rules (of anything)
- Greeting card (serious or humorous)
- Outgoing message
- First chapter of memoir
- Credo
- Cookie fortune
- Profile
- Photo caption

4. Teach Me How

Everyone, no matter how young, has personal assets and things that they're good at doing. Yet so much of our time as educators is spent filling up the "empty vessels" we call young people with knowledge. That one-way street builds one kind of confidence -- accomplishing a task and/or mastering a set skill. This summer we can help young people build a deeper confidence closely connected to the youth development outcomes of self-worth, mastery-and-future, and intellectual ability by turning the tables on teaching. Have your young people present about, write about, or talk about things in which they already have expertise. It can be something cultural, familial, recreational, technical, even academic.

Schedule this "teach back" as an official component of your program, with the "guest expert" designated by name. After all, a little recognition never hurts and there's nothing for learning like teaching. If a team approach feels less risky, let it be a team. Make sure to establish co-created ground rules of mutual respect and remind your audience that their turn will come to lead and be in the spotlight. Add a question-and-answer session after the teach back to round out the experience. You can encourage participants to use photos, illustrations, video, note cards, whatever gets their information across. And if you want the focus to be writing, challenge participants to write clear, step-by-step instructions on how to do something that they're good at. Whether it's making a recipe, playing a video game, caring for an animal, driving a car, swinging a bat, putting together an ensemble of clothes, or playing practical jokes on a younger sibling, writing up how-to is good, personalized practice for clear, concise and communicative writing.

5. Do like the Pros do – Write Now and Edit Later!

Many young writers get hung up on the mechanics of writing, so much so that it stifles the very thing that they're trying to do – put their thoughts down on paper. If you do activities that involve writing and you notice participants stuck, continually erasing, or asking you every two minutes how to spell something try this. Tell them how famous writers throughout history first get their great ideas out, put down the pen or the keyboard, and then go back and tinker with the things that will make their ideas communicate the most effectively (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar,

word choice, etc...). They take off their “writer hats” and put on their “editor hats.” You can even find examples on the Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov) of famous documents, like the Declaration of Independence before and after editing.

To help young writers with mechanics, you can also assemble checklists that they can use to go over their first pass at writing. These lists allow writers to check off basic things like, “All sentences begin with a capital letter,” “All sentences are complete with a subject and a verb,” “Verbs agree with their subject in number,” and “All sentences have end punctuation.” With older or more experienced writers you can raise the bar with items like “It’s clear to whom pronouns are referring,” “Adjectives are descriptive and not flabby,” “There are no run-on sentences or sentence fragments,” “Verb tense is consistent unless change is intentional,” and “Sequence of events is communicated with other words besides ‘THEN.’” You can find checklist ideas at websites like <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/MoraModules/grammarchklist.htm> , http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CommonErrors_Frag.html , <http://4teachers.org/projectbased/24wrt.shtml> , <http://www.granneman.com/downloads/paperchecklist.txt> , <http://www.reallygoodstuff.com/pdfs/147800.pdf>

Lastly, for participants who are really reluctant to write, remember that attitude may be because their writing hands don’t work as quick or as easily as their minds (Dysgraphia). First, make sure that they’re using writing implements of an appropriate thickness for their comfort and that their grip is working for them. If possible, make a keyboard an option for them. And if it’s still a no-go, and you have the time to sit down with them, take dictation. Tell them it’s like having your own personal secretary. Make sure that you don’t write for them. If they get stuck, just keep asking questions. Ask them to talk in complete sentences and, sentence-by-sentence, faithfully put down what they say. Even if you end up with just a paragraph as a product, show them what they’ve accomplished – their thoughts, their words – your hands. The next time, you can alternate – you scribe a sentence – they write one on their own, etc....

6. You can Graph, Chart, Diagram and Survey almost ANTHTHING

How many times did you eat Cheetos this week? How does that stack up to the guy next to you? How long does it take you to commute to your summer program? Is it different on different days of the week? How many people feel that “Avatar” should have won the Best Picture Oscar instead of “The Hurt Locker”? Does their opinion depend on how old they are? What’s the time line on your personal taste in music? Have the changes come faster as you’ve gotten older? Has one recording artist lasted through it all?

In the end, it’s all about making meaning out of information – information on a topic that you, as a young person have some say in. Often during the school year, making physical mathematical representations of information (a/k/a charts, tables, graphs, etc....) is all in the abstract, disconnected from anything that young people would actually like to learn and analyze. Summertime is a great time to hone those skills on topics that they pick and care about.

And for those of us who need to dust off our own graph-making skills, there are websites like www.nces.ed.gov/nceskids/createagraph/, www.teachology.com/web_tools/materials/timelines/, and http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/General_diagram_types where we can find templates to use, and websites like www.internet4classrooms.com/excel_create_chart.htm that help us make them with Excel.

7. Measurement and Money make Math Matter

As with anything academic, young people’s biggest argument against math is often...”I’m never going to use this.” When it’s just an abstract problem on a worksheet it can feel that way. Yet with summer activities there are lots of opportunities to make math a part of the equation. Two of the most prevalent and relevant are measurement and money.

Start with the things in which your participants are interested. Sports and statistics are a natural combination – whether it’s deciphering them from the sports page or creating your own for a particular team or player. Cooking and conversion are another duo – ounces to cups to quarts to gallons, modifying a recipe to serve a different sized group, of calculating grams of fat. Road trips, routes and distance can yield as much in geographic measurement as itineraries, deadlines and schedules can yield in the measurement of time. Both are a great excuse to practice basic computation. And if you’re exploring the natural world, there are always things to measure, compare and classify. One great conversion exercise recommended by the National Summer Learning Association is getting young people to break down and analyze the ingredients in the ever popular “Energy Drinks” that are so pervasive. Convert those milligrams and micrograms of sugar, chemicals and caffeine into proportional teaspoons or ounces of different colored water or sand or anything and you’ll soon see a tangible physical representation of just what it is you’re taking into your body.

Finance doesn’t have to be high to be high interest. Before investigating the National Debt, why not work on the basic budgeting and cost analysis skills that make modern life possible? Again, if you’re cooking, you’re also buying food to feed a certain number of people for a certain price. If you want a future in sports, there are contracts and financial terms to get a jump on understanding. If you’re planning an event there is comparison shopping to do with percentages, fractions and decimals to be used. And if you’re an entrepreneur, there are a whole host of revenues and expenses to map out and consider. They may not look like skill drill, but all of these applications can be converted into word problems – created and solved by your participants. And if your participants want to budget in real life for a real project addressing a real cause, they can check out resources like www.genv.net/ that provide seed funding and support for “Youth Ventures” that benefit the community.