

# Why Do Liberty Students Do So Much Reading?

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Most American schools dedicate several hours each week to “literacy.” A majority of time is spent teaching children the fundamentals of reading strategies, such as making inferences, predicting, classifying, and “looking for the main idea.” The purpose of these exercises is to bolster test scores, independent of real knowledge. In contrast, Liberty strives to develop the appreciation of language, increase specific knowledge, and provide meaning to students through the achievement of *Primary Literacy*, *Mature Literacy*, and *Moral Literacy*.

## Primary Literacy

Primary literacy begins with phonic recognition. Our Charter states, “*Children will be provided deliberate, coherent, direct instruction in letter-sound correspondences. Practices which teach children to rely on word-memorization (the look-say method) and guessing (through illustration and/or context) will be avoided.*”

Once phonetic decoding skills are introduced, fluency must be developed. Fluency allows students to focus their mental energies on comprehension rather than decoding. **Fluency takes practice - a lot of it.** Select stories from Open Court and Accelerated Reader (AR) are used for development of fluency at Liberty. While necessary for practicing early literacy skills, these books can bore students and may not develop language appreciation.

Children need to discover at an early age the peculiar satisfaction that comes from experiencing form in language, as in nursery rhymes and poetry. When this occurs, children will continue to prefer the sound of beautiful or interesting language as they later select books for meaning.

Furthermore, we believe young children should be shown incrementally what is outside their realm of experience. Children who are exposed to complex speech patterns learn to express themselves earlier and more fluently than those spoken to in careful sentences.

In the early grades nursery rhymes, poetry, fairy tales, and captivating stories, beyond the students’ own reading abilities, are read aloud to children. In addition to the development of language appreciation, this practice fosters the desire in children to master the difficult skill of reading in order that the students might gain personal access to the exciting world of stories.

## Mature Literacy

*“Mature literacy develops as students become acquainted with a broad and rich body of knowledge and become familiar with many well-written, diverse and meaningful works of literature.”* (LCS Charter)

According to E.D. Hirsch Jr., one reason children lag behind in reading ability, and are thus prevented from achieving mature literacy, is a huge vocabulary deficit. Hirsch advises, and Liberty advocates, time devoted to activities that “foster vocabulary, domain knowledge, and fluency.”

Domain knowledge is the threshold level of knowledge needed to understand a topic. If one knows nothing of the game of baseball, for example, one can’t comprehend the sentence: “Jones sacrificed and knocked in a run.” The more domain knowledge acquired, the easier it becomes to read and understand a wider variety of material.

In today's schools, the teaching of the kind of specific knowledge needed to become a fully-literate individual, is woefully inadequate. The texts and literature used in most American elementary schools are, for the most part, of a trivial nature. There is no shortage of material on topics like pets and sharing, but little on history, geography, and science.

At Liberty, vocabulary and domain knowledge are developed by teaching the rich body of content knowledge defined in the Core Knowledge Sequence. Vocabulary is further developed through Greek roots and Latin language instruction.

Finally, in order to immerse students in word knowledge and expose them to many well-written, diverse and meaningful works of literature, we have supplemented the Core Knowledge Sequence with (primarily) classic works of fiction – stories which have withstood the test of time. In accordance with Liberty’s Charter, “*The literature is chosen not only for its*

*place in the core body of knowledge, its multi-cultural representation, and its rich use of language, but also because it provides access to deeper meaning of universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy children's minds.”*

### **Moral Literacy**

At Liberty, character education is achieved through a program of expectations, modeling, and study of historical and literary figures. Stories and other writings in our curriculum are intended to help children achieve moral literacy. That achievement involves recognizing the virtues, understanding what they are in practice; and developing a desire to do what is right. How is this accomplished?

**First**, children need specific illustration of what is good and bad so that what is morally right and wrong can be known and promoted. Through the power of imagination children become vicarious participants in a story; they share in a hero's choices and challenges and identify with his suffering and triumph. Because a child's allegiances are based not so much on right versus wrong, but on who arouses his sympathy, it is important to choose stories in which virtue wins over vice, as in fairy tales and other classic works. Frequent and strong identification with virtuous and victorious heroes allow children to rehearse and strengthen their commitment to goodness.

**Second**, reading and literacy promote fascination. Nothing compares with a story that begins “Once upon a time...” The imaginative process gives us hope because we want to believe that in the stories of our lives we too can make the right choices.

**Third**, reading and literacy create a living link to our culture, its history and traditions.

**Fourth**, by teaching domain knowledge, children will become a part of a common world, a community of moral persons. Reading affords us the opportunity to do what we can't often do in life - to become thoroughly involved in the inner lives of others. As with visiting foreign cultures, the sustained involvement with a character in a story enlarges a child's sympathies and gives them those broad, wholesome and charitable views that are the reward of both travel and reading.

*“...Shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up? We cannot...Anything received into the mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts...”* PLATO's *Republic*

For more information on Liberty's approach to literacy, see Policy 7.13 **Reading and Literacy** and Policy 7.14 **Literature Acquisition**.