

# Back to School Family Guide

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Families want to know more about what their kids are learning in school, so they can support them at home. In the early grades, they are usually able to offer help. Then, students get older, the content gets more challenging; and students gain ownership over their learning. Suddenly, parents and caregivers can feel like they don't have much help to offer. But that's not the case. Research confirms that families still have a big role to play in helping students learn. It's just a different role.

Especially now, as more learning is happening away from school buildings and on-line, how can families be supportive? In addition to providing encouragement, a study of more than 50,000 students found that relating what middle and high school kids are learning in school to their future life goals is one of the most effective ways families can help.<sup>1</sup> What doesn't work? Trying to be directly involved with schoolwork. It can feel to high schoolers like you're interfering or even confusing them. And this IS the time to encourage students to take more responsibility and be more independent.

This guide was developed so students and their families can understand the most important literacy (in English and other subjects too) content and skills students should learn in high school.

<sup>1</sup>Harvard Graduate School of Education (2009). Hill: Parents need to link schoolwork to future goals. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/09/05/hill-parents-need-link-schoolwork-future-goals>.

# HIGH SCHOOL Literacy

## THIS GUIDE INCLUDES

- **What High Schoolers Are Learning** – What experts say is the most important content (knowledge and skills) for students to learn in literacy during high school.
- **Talking About Literacy with your High Schooler** – Ideas for families and their teens to talk about school.
- **Education Words** – Sometimes, educators and students use words that have a specific meaning in school. Those words are bolded. Understanding those terms will help you speak the same language.
- **Tips for Talking with Teachers** – How high schoolers, parents, and teachers can work together to ensure success.
- **Connecting Classrooms to Careers** – Helping high schoolers see the connection between classroom learning and their future.
- **Tools and Resources to Help** – We've chosen a few internet resources that best match high school content.



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## WHAT HIGH SCHOOLERS ARE LEARNING



Though course titles and content varies, there are some general statements that can be made about literacy coursework in the United States. Typically, high school students take English courses in all four years of high school. These courses are generally titled English I-IV, Freshman English, Sophomore English, etc. Some schools offer International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework for English, and many require a communications studies course. As students progress to later years of high school, additional options for coursework that count towards English credit may also be available (for example, American Literature, College English, Journalism, Rhetoric, etc.), as might Advanced Placement (AP) English courses.

Regardless of the course and the focus of the content title, one key idea holds true: high schoolers should be engaged in reading, writing, and speaking about **grade level texts** of all kinds.

It is important to remember that English courses only account for a small portion of a student's high school day. Reading, writing, and speaking about big ideas from texts should not be limited to English class. Students should be given the opportunity to interact with primary sources in history courses, to read the content of the discipline in the sciences, and to learn from the technical documents necessary to succeed in career and technical education courses, just to name a few examples. High schools should be engaging students in texts across all subjects.

Below are some of the specific skills high school students should be able to do in English class as well as when reading or writing in other subjects throughout high school.

### Reading, writing, speaking, and listening:

- Reading (and rereading) **grade level texts** smoothly and with expression, at a **fluency** rate of around 175 words per minute by the end of the year.
- Tracking an author's position, noting if the reasoning is valid, and evidence is sufficient. Identifying false statements and reasoning.
- Analyzing where materials on the same topic disagree. Are the disagreements on matters of fact, interpretation, and/or point of view?
- Figuring out the meaning of unknown words in text by using context, word relationships, or tools like dictionaries and glossaries. Determining or clarifying the meaning of unknown words, **synonyms**, **antonyms**, **figures of speech** (irony, puns), and words that are similar but not identical (for example, bullheaded, willful, firm, persistent, resolute) based on how they are used in context.
- Making and justifying a claim in writing or discussion. Supporting **claims** with precise and relevant evidence from credible sources. Demonstrating a thorough understanding of the topic or text.
- Citing the evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what is explicitly stated or implied from a book, article, poem, or play.
- Showing something new they have learned from a text or about a topic. This can be in any form – speaking and conversation, letters, journals, stories, reports, diagrams, or essays – and should include sufficient additional detail that fits the form they have chosen.
- Writing essays or other papers in response to text, with an introduction and thesis statement; examples that are linked, logically ordered, and grouped; a conclusion; and mostly accurate spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.



## TALKING ABOUT LITERACY WITH HIGH SCHOOLERS



High school is an opportunity for students to take more ownership over their learning. The content students learn will become increasingly sophisticated. Acknowledging a teen's interests throughout this time can help to engage them in grade-level reading and writing. The more **grade level texts** they read and the more opportunities they have to write in response to these kinds of texts, the more they will improve in their reading comprehension and writing abilities.

In class, teens will interact far more with complex ideas across different genres or categories, evaluate arguments, and expand their literary and cultural knowledge. They will also write and participate in conversations that challenge them to assert and defend **claims** on a given topic. These skills will take them far, not only with literacy, but in their science, social studies, and math classes.

Below are a few tips on how to encourage your teen to consistently read and write.

- **Encourage regular writing:** Students can keep a writing journal; they can write emails; they can take notes about what they are learning; and/or they can research a given topic. Consistent, but varied, writing (for example, short, on-demand pieces and longer, multi-day pieces) will help them to make connections continuously. Writing specifically about what they are reading is an excellent way to improve reading comprehension and knowledge.
- **Encourage regular reading:** Students can read a variety of texts, ranging from newspaper articles and graphic novels to novels and plays. At this age, students should also be engaging in both wide and deep reading of fiction and non-fiction. Encourage them to choose content-rich and complex texts to help them improve their comprehension and increase their **academic vocabulary**. Give them options and allow them to choose what excites and interests them.
- **Encourage the use of technology** as a way for students to engage in reading, writing, speaking, and listening: Students can listen to podcasts and discuss current events; they can use social media to increase their understanding on a given topic; and/or they can blog about issues they care deeply about, etc. High schoolers use social media all the time, and they can use it for learning. They can develop media literacy as they are reading. Ask who wrote it and why, evaluate the specific **claims** made, and think about the impact of the text on readers.





## EDUCATION WORDS



Sometimes, you'll hear educators use a word that has a specific meaning in schools. Understanding those terms will help you speak the same language!

### Academic vocabulary

Words used in academic text, but not in everyday conversation. These words can be found in academic texts, technical writing, and literary texts. The more academic language students can understand, the easier it will be to read complex texts.

### Anchor texts

Texts used to model relevant reading skills and strategies.

### Antonyms

Antonyms are words that mean the opposite. "Big" and "little" are antonyms.

### Claims

Statements that assert something to be true. Claims should be backed up with evidence.

### Close read

A read of a complex text with a focus on **academic vocabulary** and text features. While the teacher can deepen knowledge of this text, students then have the opportunity to discuss, annotate, defend their answers with evidence, and demonstrate what they have read.

### Figures of speech

A figure of speech is a word or phrase meant to create meaning that is separate from the literal definition. A figure of speech might be used to describe, compare, exaggerate, or emphasize something to convey meaning.

### Fluency

The ability to read with word identification accuracy, pacing, and prosody (expression).

### Grade level text

Texts are determined to be appropriate for a grade level based on the content of the text and its complexity, as calculated by Lexile or other computer-based rating systems. Lexile ([www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com)) is the most commonly used source. Texts at 1050 – 1335 Lexile levels are considered appropriately complex for grades 9 – 10 and 1185 – 1385 for grades 11 – 12.

### Synonyms

Synonyms are words that mean the same thing. "Big" and "enormous" are synonyms.

### Text-dependent questions

Questions that can only be answered by referring back to a given text. These questions support students in their ability to use evidence from text so they can present careful analysis, well-defended **claims**, and clear information.



## TIPS FOR TALKING WITH TEACHERS



At the high school level, reading and writing becomes increasingly more complex and sophisticated. Make sure students have multiple opportunities to engage with **grade level texts** so they can improve in **fluency** and comprehension skills.

Throughout high school, students can use the following questions both as a self-assessment and for asking all their teachers about their performance:

- What was I able to understand, write, and talk about as a result of what I read and learned?
- Was I able to write in ways that demonstrated that I understood what I am reading and learning?
- Was I able to use evidence from the text, elaborate on my responses, and write with sufficient depth?
- Did I use conventions (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) and grammar rules appropriately?
- Was I able to speak and listen in class discussions and conversations in ways that demonstrated that I understood what I was reading and learning?
- Was I able to use evidence from the text, elaborate on my responses, and speak with sufficient depth?
- What strengths do I bring to the classroom?

Families can also inquire about the content students will learn in a variety of classes:

- What new perspectives will be learned about throughout the year?
- Are there specific **anchor texts** that can support students with reading comprehension?
- Are there specific texts you would recommend based on student interests?
- What texts will the class read? Will they represent a diverse set of perspectives?
- Will any of the texts read represent the students in the classroom?





## CONNECTING CLASSROOMS TO CAREERS



Helping high schoolers see how what they are learning in school connects to their future is one of the best ways that families can support their kids. In addition to seeking out resources at school and in your community (community colleges are a great place to look), here are a few more ways to get started:

- Help your high schooler think about what jobs they might like to have, and then learn more about the education and training they need for a career in that field.  
<https://www.careerzone.ny.gov/views/careerzone/stem/index.jsf>
- Does your high schooler like building and fixing things? Helping people? Learn more about how interests could lead to a career.  
<https://www.bls.gov/k12/students/careers/career-exploration.htm>
- Have your high schooler visit/"shadow" someone who works in a career in which they are interested. Here are some virtual site visits to get started.  
<https://www.nebraskacareerclusters.com/>
- Has your high schooler expressed interest in a career in the military? Explore military careers here.  
<https://www.asvabprogram.com/>
- Find a pathway to success: A guide to help students learn how to translate their interests into one of 16 career clusters.  
<https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/career-and-technical-education/career-guidance/career-cluster-guides/>
- Learn the importance of math for careers and jobs: What teens need to know and how parents can help.  
<https://www.niu.edu/mathmatters/careers-jobs/index.shtml>
- Are there colleges your high schooler has expressed interest in attending? Together, check out their admissions requirements, including their course-taking requirements. Make sure your student is prepared for and taking the classes they need not just to graduate from high school but to be eligible for college admission.



