Concerned about your teen’s reading and writing habits? Confused by media hype surrounding testing and standards—and what that means for your own son or daughter? Wondering what you can do to help your teen be a stronger reader and writer?

In today’s world, students need to be able to read and write confidently and competently. Parents who are well informed about issues of literacy can help their teens reach that goal. In Reading and Writing and Teens: A Parent’s Guide to Adolescent Literacy, Cathy Fleischer, an English professor and mother of teenagers, helps navigate through the sometimes overwhelming messages you hear about adolescents and literacy. In clear and compelling language, she explains what current research tells us about reading, writing, technology, and standards and testing—and gives specific suggestions for what you can do to help your son or daughter succeed, both in school and outside the classroom.

Offering advice from a host of experts in adolescent literacy, this book helps answer real questions from parents across the country about how to best support their teens as readers and writers.
# Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................ ix

Chapter 1 ........................................... Introduction: What Happens to Literacy during Those Teen Years ........................................... 1

Chapter 2 ........................................... Writing ........................................... 8

Chapter 3 ........................................... Reading ........................................... 25

Chapter 4 ........................................... Young Adult Literature ........................................... 40

Chapter 5 ........................................... Technology ........................................... 54

Chapter 6 ........................................... Standards, Assessment, and Standardization ........................................... 72

Works Cited ........................................... 87

Author ........................................... 89
Introduction: What Happens to Literacy during Those Teen Years

I just don’t understand what’s going on in my daughter’s English class,” confides a mom on the sidelines of her teen’s basketball game. “When we were in school, we read real literature—not this young adult stuff.”

“Kids just can’t write anymore,” complains a dad in the gym, doing his morning workout. “It’s all that twittering and facebooking and who knows what else.”

“I don’t know what to do with my son,” whispers a mom on the night of the school play. “It seems as if he doesn’t know how to speak the English language. What will he do when he has to apply for a job?”

Do these remarks sound familiar to you? As the mother of teenagers, I find myself engaged in conversations like these all the time—as I chat with the parents of my teens’ friends on the sidelines of basketball games, while I hand out orchestra uniforms, or when I run into them at the grocery store. I listen to these comments (and many more) from concerned parents who are truly worried:
they feel that their kids are not reading and writing as much or as well as they
should, they have questions about what’s happening in schools, and they honestly
just want to know the best way to help their sons and daughters be successful.  

And I identify with these parents’ concerns and frustrations: we all want to
find the best path, even as we realize how hard it is to navigate the slippery slope of
our teens’ reading and writing. Schools are so different today from when we were
taught, and the literacy challenges our teens encounter are not only daunting, but
also often seem like moving targets. Compound that with numerous media ac-
counts of what’s wrong in schools, and it’s pretty easy to feel helpless.

I come to these conversations, though, with a slightly different background
from some parents’. As a former high school English teacher and now professor of
English education, I am immersed in the literacy issues that face adolescents in a
variety of ways: working with preservice and practicing teachers, co-directing the
Eastern Michigan Writing Project (EMWP), and coordinating (along with my
colleague Kim Pavlock) the EMWP Family Literacy Initiative. This ever-growing
project reaches out to parents and families to help them learn what they can do to
support their own kids’ reading and writing.

Through this initiative, we’ve had the chance to talk with lots of families
from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. We discuss
their concerns and suggest ideas they can try at home with their children and teens,
drawing on multiple concrete examples we’ve tried with our own families. We’ve
been able to learn from the all-Latino moms’ group, speaking with us through a
translator; the moms, dads, aunts, and uncles in a Title I–sponsored event; an after-
school program in an economically distressed district; and the upper-middle-class
parents who met with us in a writing center. And they all share the same concern:
how to help their kids be successful readers and writers.

Across all the different groups of families we’ve met, the most prevalent
problem we’ve seen is this: parents are inundated by a flurry of what often seems
to be conflicting information about schools and literacy. They see a headline in a
newspaper proclaiming that their teen’s high school is a failing school, according
to a set of standards unfamiliar to them. They turn on the radio on the way to work
to learn that alternative schools offer the only answers to education’s woes. They
attend curriculum night at their teen’s school, where the English teacher speaks
in terms they don’t even recognize about how she’s teaching reading and writ-
ing. They see their own teens communicating in new ways that they don’t always
understand, especially in the digital environment of MySpace, Facebook, or instant
messaging (IM). They hear the term literacy everywhere, but with what seems to be
a whole new set of meanings: from math literacy to science literacy to information
literacy to even health-and-fitness literacy.
What we have found through the Family Literacy Initiative—as parents ourselves, and as those who talk with a lot of other parents—is that some understanding of literacy in general and adolescent literacy in particular can really help us navigate this journey through literacy with our kids. And that’s just what this book is intended to do: introduce you to some research underlying current understandings of adolescent literacy, help translate that research into terms that make sense to you as a parent, and suggest what you can do at home to support your teen.

I base much of this book on many current studies on adolescent literacy, but in particular on *Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief* prepared by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). This document, written originally for teachers, analyzes numerous research studies and summarizes the findings. I’ve tried to translate much of this research brief into language that I hope makes sense to you as a parent, beginning in this chapter with some discussion of what the term *literacy* actually means and how adolescent literacy fits into the bigger picture.

As the book continues, I focus on some specific areas of teen literacy, areas that I know are of concern to parents: writing, reading, young adult (YA) literature, technology, and standards and testing. Each section is organized in a similar way, beginning with a short summary of what we know about the topic, then offering a series of questions and answers about the topic (questions that come directly from parents I surveyed nationwide, and answers from experts in each area), and concluding with suggestions of what you can do at home to further support your adolescent’s growth into literacy.

**What Is Literacy?**

So, let’s start with some basics. What do we even mean by the term *literacy*? For many people, literacy simply means being able to read. Just today on the radio, for example, I heard a report about a bill being considered by the state legislature that focused on testing third-grade literacy—and the test they were talking about was a standardized reading test. But I believe, and researchers agree, that literacy concerns a lot more than reading. At the very least, it also concerns writing. Literate people are those who can both read and write.

But let’s think about that first definition for a minute. Even if we define literacy as reading and writing, another set of considerations comes into play regarding what we really mean by those two terms. For starters, what do you need to be able to read in order to be considered literate? Are literate people only those who can read “high literature” (such as Shakespeare or Milton), or are they those who can read the local newspaper or perhaps a novel by Jodi Picoult? What about other types of reading: a menu, for example, a tax form, or a science textbook? Should you be able to read those in order to be considered literate? And what do you need
to be able to write? Is it enough to write a paper for school, or should you also know how to write a brochure or a poem or a proposal?

Now let’s complicate it with even more questions: How well do you need to be able to read and write to be considered literate? Are you literate if you can read a menu enough to place an order? If you can get a passing score on a statewide reading or writing test? Or should you be able to read a newspaper article, think critically about the point of view expressed, and take some sort of action in response—talking to a friend, writing a letter to the editor, or boycotting a particular store? And what about technology? How do new media fit into this definition? People say that literacy is tied to technology today, but in fact that’s always been the case. Technologies have always influenced the ways we read and write: from paper and pencils, to typewriters and computers, to Blackberries and PDAs. But to be truly literate today, do you need to be able to shift your reading and writing in some new ways so you can research, communicate, compose, and publish online?

I know that’s a lot to think about! But if these ideas seem overwhelming and perhaps even confusing, take some comfort in this thought: the kinds of changes in literacy that we’re experiencing today aren’t so different from the shifts that literacy has undergone in the past. Researchers tell us that defining literacy has always been a complicated task, always changing over time and place. In other words, what was considered literate in the 1920s, for example, is not what was considered literate in the 1940s, and certainly is not what we consider literate today.

Still, in the dawn of the 21st century, all of us—but especially teens—are faced with lots of new ways to think about literacy. In fact, given these many changes, it’s more common today for those of us involved in literacy education to talk about literacies rather than literacy, to demonstrate the many kinds of knowledge and skills that people must possess today to be fully functioning readers and writers. According to NCTE, “the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable” (“Definitions” n. pag.). In other words, to participate effectively in the world these days, we all must take on many new literacies—literacies that are ever growing and changing.

How Does All This Affect the Life of Your Teen?

Experts in teens and teaching know a lot about adolescent literacy: not only the challenges adolescents face, but also the ways in which teachers and parents can help teens become even more literate. (See NCTE’s Adolescent Literacy for more specifics.) Here are a few important themes they have identified:
1. **Adolescents face shifting literacy demands.** What was considered literate behavior for your kids when they were in elementary school (basic reading and writing) changed dramatically once they entered middle and high school. In elementary schools, the emphasis is mostly on the processes of learning to read and write in general ways. But in secondary schools, the focus is increasingly on reading and writing in specific subject areas. Adolescents are asked to make sense of what is a pretty complex concept: understanding how to be readers and writers in these various subject areas.

   Think about that for a minute: there are some marked differences in how you read a social studies text, a novel, and a mathematical graph. And similarly, writing in these different subject areas requires differing skills, from writing a lab report to a literary analysis to a summary, and so on. The biggest literacy challenge for our kids in middle and high schools, then, is to learn to negotiate the differences in reading and writing in social studies, math, science, English, and more.

2. **Adolescents live in a world of multiple literacies.** We know that our kids are members of many different communities: in their classes at school, in the poetry slam club, or on the yearbook staff; with their buddies in the neighborhood or their friends on the baseball team; in their extended family or their religious groups; in their online social networks. All of these communities have differing expectations for literacy and differing literacy practices: they have their own “in” language and ways of communicating, and they often have unique forms of reading and writing.

   Think for a moment about how your own family uses certain words or phrases to carry specific meanings, or how the reading your teen does online differs from the bedtime stories you used to read. Think, too, about your own communities, and how the reading, writing, and even the conversations differ: what you do at work versus what you do at home, at your place of worship, or in other communities of friends.

   What we know about literacy now is that drawing on those out-of-school literacies can help teens make the transition to in-school literacy. What kids need to know, more than anything else, is that the literacies of all their communities are valuable, and that they can draw upon one in order to be successful in another. In other words, these other literacies—which sometimes seem to stand in the way of kids’ development—can be used to enhance in-school literacy.

3. **Motivation becomes increasingly important in adolescents’ lives.** As parents of adolescents, we all know this one! But how this plays out in terms of school in general, and literacy in particular, is interesting: students who are capable of reading and writing—and who may even excel in those areas—sometimes choose *not* to read and write much during the teen years. Research shows us that we need to find ways to engage students in literacy: to make reading and writing matter, to be meaningful in some way to their interests and needs.
How can we help teens get motivated? Often we see that if they have some choice in what they’re reading and writing, when they’re reading and writing, or how they’re reading and writing, teens are more willing to try those activities. Students seem more committed to literacy activities when they can find things to read and write that connect to the issues and concerns that are part of their larger lives. Many teens also seem more interested when they are offered choice in what counts as reading and writing: graphic novels, blogs, video scripts, poems, letters of complaint, wikis, and so on. And there is a big role for adults, both teachers and parents, in this approach: helping to create an environment of choice, helping students find options for reading and writing that appeal to their interests, nudging teens toward interesting alternatives they may not have considered, or just being supportive of any literacy activity that attracts them.

4. **Multicultural approaches to literacy teaching can help with engagement and motivation.** One big source of teens’ disengagement from school (and especially from reading literature) is that they often encounter books and ideas that focus only on people who don’t look or act like them, or who seem distant from their situations or contexts. At one level, this means that teens who have the chance to read and write about others facing similar situations and challenges are more likely to keep on reading and writing (see Chapter 3 for more on this). But it also means that students who rarely have the opportunity to read and write about cultures similar to their own often dismiss books and assignments that seem to be only about one culture.

So if we truly want to pull in all kinds of students to the “literacy club,” we need to be diverse in what we offer them. And of course, this isn’t just about students of certain ethnicities. *All* students benefit from exposure to and discussion about multiple cultures, how authors portray certain cultures, and how those portrayals fit into our worldviews. This isn’t easy stuff to talk or write about, but I can’t think of a better way to start these discussions than to use high-quality books and writing assignments as a beginning step. Parents can do so much for their teens by encouraging them to read and talk about books that depict cultures both like and unlike their own.

*****

I hope this brief background on literacy and the challenges that adolescents face in reading and writing has started you thinking about your own teens and what literacy is like for them. You might even want to take this moment to consult an expert: your own adolescents! What better way to learn about reading and writing and teens than to ask someone who truly knows what it’s like? You may be surprised at what you find.
Introduction

In the next chapters, I’ll offer some very specific information and ideas about five areas of literacy that affect our teens: (1) writing, (2) reading, (3) young adult literature, (4) technology, and (5) standards and testing. As you read, keep in mind the ideas that your teen has shared with you, and see if the information I present fits with the world of literacies surrounding your teen’s life and learning.

Consult an Expert: Your Own Teen

Ask your teen about his or her experiences in literacy. You might want to start with these questions:

• What has the transition to high school been like for you? Have you noticed changes in what your teachers expect you to read and write?
• What’s been easy about the reading and writing? What’s been hard?
• What do you like to read? Is it the same as what you liked to read in elementary school, or is it different now? What don’t you like to read?
• What kinds of writing do you enjoy? What kinds don’t you like?
• Has technology been a part of your reading and writing?

In the next chapters, I’ll offer some very specific information and ideas about five areas of literacy that affect our teens: (1) writing, (2) reading, (3) young adult literature, (4) technology, and (5) standards and testing. As you read, keep in mind the ideas that your teen has shared with you, and see if the information I present fits with the world of literacies surrounding your teen’s life and learning.

Want to learn more about adolescent literacy? Try these sources:


Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success is the final report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. This report summarizes a lot of research about adolescent literacy, offers ideas about what the council believes all adolescent learners need, and calls for particular changes in schools, structures, and legislation to support adolescent literacy (http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/tta_Main.pdf).

Alliance for Excellent Education has published research briefs on the topic of adolescent literacy, most of which make specific suggestions about how to change schooling to support a changing view of adolescent reading and writing (www.all4ed.org).

Note

1. Although I use the term parent throughout this book, I’m using it as shorthand for any adult interested in the well-being of a child. That could be a parent, but it could also be a grandparent, uncle, aunt, neighbor, and so on. This book is intended for all of you!
Concerned about your teen’s reading and writing habits? Confused by media hype surrounding testing and standards—and what that means for your own son or daughter? Wondering what you can do to help your teen be a stronger reader and writer?

In today’s world, students need to be able to read and write confidently and competently. Parents who are well informed about issues of literacy can help their teens reach that goal. In Reading and Writing and Teens: A Parent’s Guide to Adolescent Literacy, Cathy Fleischer, an English professor and mother of teenagers, helps navigate through the sometimes overwhelming messages you hear about adolescents and literacy. In clear and compelling language, she explains what current research tells us about reading, writing, technology, and standards and testing—and gives specific suggestions for what you can do to help your son or daughter succeed, both in school and outside the classroom.

Offering advice from a host of experts in adolescent literacy, this book helps answer real questions from parents across the country about how to best support their teens as readers and writers.