

Sixth Grade Reading and Writing: What to Expect

by Julie Williams

English Language Arts, the only subject required every single year from kindergarten through twelfth grade, becomes especially important in the middle school years. Elementary teachers typically spend a large part of the day on English, usually integrating it into a wide variety of subjects. In sixth grade, teachers will usually focus hard on skills, knowing that reading, writing, and communicating will be important for success in all subjects, whether that means analyzing history, solving math word problems, or creating a lab report.

So what will your child actually study? For a detailed look, you'll need to consult two key resources: first, your state academic standards, available on the website for your department of education. Second, make sure you request a course outline from your school (these are usually available at Back to School Night in the fall). Why both? In virtually all states, the standards focus on key skills, but *how* a teacher gets to them may vary widely not just from state to state but from district to district, and even class to class. Here are some common themes you *can* expect:

Reading. It's not just something you learn in first or second grade - it's a highly complex skill that kids will hone over a decade. Expect lots of books in sixth grade, and loads more complicated thinking, talking, and writing about them. Over the year, teachers will try to introduce a wide variety of literature that will include novels, plays, poem collections, and nonfiction pieces. Teachers will heavily emphasize *comprehension*—what happened in that story? What does it mean? How does it remind you of your own life? They'll also link to themes in writing such as style, tone, point of view, and credibility—nuances which are generally beyond the reach of younger, more literal-minded students.

Writing. As your child advances in school, writing will become more and more important. Back in the early grades, teachers may have just wanted to encourage “production,” but middle school standards call for kids to manage several kinds of writing, and to do it with correct grammar and punctuation. Expect practice with different sentence structures, especially compound ones, and with all forms of punctuation. Expect your child to complete more than one draft of any important piece of writing, and to be responsible for identifying any errors in verb agreement, tense, and spelling as well. In particular, expect that sixth graders will practice writing short essays of more than one page, in which they take a point and argue it to conclusion. Seventh and eighth grade classes will build on this skill, but sixth grade teachers will work hard to set good foundations. In addition, most sixth graders will do at least one assignment requiring research. Want to help? If a kid hands you a piece of writing, try not to put your own pen to your kid's paper. Talk with your child, brainstorm changes, but make sure she is the author, and feels proud of it.

Vocabulary and Word Use: Vocabulary is a powerful link between reading and writing. In sixth grade, expect teachers to go deeper than before, introducing literary concepts such as connotation, denotation, simile, metaphor, and allegory. Although you may also see formal vocabulary lists, you should rejoice if they are linked to actual reading and writing assignments. Research shows that this

practical, “integrated” approach is the best way to help kids not just learn new words, but put them into use. Whatever the instructional method, celebrate any time your kid tries out a new word, especially if that includes playing around with more than one meaning or context.

What to watch for: As kids are asked to handle so much more on their own, you may run into reading and writing gaps you didn’t foresee. If your child seems bored and turned off, or is often either unusually withdrawn or agitated—tell your teacher immediately. In reading, some kids succeeded with the careful support elementary school teachers, but may not be comprehending the more difficult stuff that’s assigned in middle school. In writing, sixth graders frequently stumble over the task of taking an idea and sequencing it over several grammatically correct pages. Your child may have jumped a stage without realizing it, and will benefit from extra help. Learning differences can also show up at this level. Don’t hesitate to seek help—remember, just because it’s middle school doesn’t mean you can’t call your teacher!

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