Winter literacy traditions

Keep your youngster’s language arts skills strong during winter break. Fit reading, writing, speaking, and listening into family traditions with these activities.

Celebrate reading
Give books a starring role on special days by holding read-a-thons while you sip hot chocolate. For instance, you might read winter-themed books on the first day of winter (December 21). Or on December 31, read about different ways people celebrate New Year’s Eve around the world.

Share news
Help your child launch an annual family newsletter. He could ask relatives to submit short articles about important events during 2019 and then write an article or two of his own. Have him add headlines, draw illustrations, and write captions to complete the first edition!

Tell stories
Swapping family stories during gatherings builds your youngster’s speaking and listening skills. Pull out photos to spark ideas, perhaps ones taken at a wedding or reunion, and invite your youngster to contribute details as everyone reminisces. What songs were played at the reception? What games did he play with his cousins?

Inspired to write
Fill a basket with items that will give your child writing practice. Here are ideas for creating an “inspiration station.”

- Greeting cards. Let your youngster cut cards in half and turn the fronts into postcards. She can write messages on the blank sides and mail the cards to relatives.

- File folders. Ask your child to glue a magazine picture on one inside panel of each folder. Help her write a story about the picture and glue it on the other inside panel. She could add a title on the front.

- Homemade writing paper. Have your youngster decorate the borders of plain white paper with stickers or stamps. Use a ruler to draw lines she can write on.
100 “magic” words

Did you know that just 100 words in the English language account for about half of the words beginning readers encounter? Ask your youngster’s teacher or search online for a list of these high-frequency words, and use them to play the following games.

Word search. Arrange Scrabble tiles in an 8 x 8 grid, spelling several of the words vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. Give your youngster a list of the words you hid. Can she find them all?

Spot the comma

Fun Words

When you’re out and about with your child, try to spot as many commas as possible! You’ll help him learn where commas belong and what jobs they do.

See a comma? Read the words it goes with, and tell why it’s there. For example, your youngster might read “lettuce, tomato, and cheese” on a restaurant menu and say that those commas separate words in a series. Or maybe you’ll spot “December 12, 2019” on a newspaper (a comma goes between the date and year). Can he find a place where a comma should be or a comma that’s used incorrectly?

Five-finger retelling

Parent to Parent

At school, my son Noah retells stories that he reads so the teacher can see how well he understands them. He recently learned a new retelling strategy that we’re enjoying at home: the five-finger retelling.

We read a story together, and Noah holds up each finger as he retells a different part. For his thumb, he introduces the main character. Then, he holds up a second finger and describes the setting. When he holds up his third, fourth, and fifth fingers, he explains what happened in the beginning, middle, and end of the story.

This has really helped Noah retell stories in sequence, and it works for more than books. We’ve used five-finger retelling to talk about everything from Noah’s day at school to sporting events we’ve attended.

Q&A

Reading at the “right” level?

My daughter often wants to read books that are too hard or too easy for her. Shouldn't she stick to books at her reading level?

Reading levels help teachers select books that challenge kids just enough to make them better readers. But your child can also enjoy and learn from books that are above or below her level.

When she reads easier books, she gains confidence, becomes a more fluent reader, and develops a love of reading. More difficult books challenge her vocabulary and comprehension skills and give her a sense of accomplishment—even if she doesn’t “get” everything.

Encourage her to explore any book she’s excited about. If she struggles with a book, offer to read it aloud. She’ll be more motivated to read, and the more she reads, the stronger her skills will grow.
A family book nook

A cozy place to curl up with a book or magazine can inspire your child to read more. Use these steps to carve out a special book nook for your family.

1. Create. Even the smallest space can become a reading zone. Together, choose a quiet spot away from distractions. For example, your youngster might suggest a corner of the family room or basement, or a space between two bookcases in the living room. Let her add a comfortable seat (favorite chair, beanbag, big pillows) and a lamp.

2. Organize. Help your child collect containers to hold reading materials. Maybe she’ll put magazines in cereal boxes, small paperbacks in shoeboxes, and bigger books in baskets. She can cover the boxes with construction paper and label them (“Science magazines,” “Mysteries,” “Biographies”). Tip: Include a special box for library books, and have her add sticky notes with due dates.

3. Enjoy. Make using the book nook part of your family’s daily routine. You might read the newspaper there in the morning. Your youngster can use the spot for reading assignments after school. And family members might take turns relaxing there on evenings and weekends to read novels or listen to audiobooks.

Analogy challenge

Build your youngster’s reasoning and vocabulary skills by playing with analogies, or comparisons that show how two things are similar.

Analogies encourage your child to think about relationships. Here’s an example: “Top is to bottom as in is to ____.” Ask your youngster to think about the relationship between top and bottom (opposites) to determine the missing word (out, the opposite of in).

Take turns making up analogies and discussing how to solve them. Say you write, “Wind is to blow as sun is to ____.” Your child can think about how wind and blow are related (the wind blows) and then consider what the sun does (shines, rises). For more practice, have him try analogies at factmonster.com/analogy.
Spice up your writing

Encourage your youngster to view creative writing assignments as opportunities to try new ideas. The following tips can improve his stories and make writing even more fun.

Foreshadowing

Authors sometimes drop hints about what's going to happen later in a book. If a big thunderstorm will be important in your child's story, he might mention his character's fear of storms early in his tale.

I mentioned this idea to Kieran and helped him make up a story to go with the first problem, $6 \times 24$. He wrote, “Six buses traveled to the museum. Each bus held 24 students. In all, 144 students went on the trip.” Then he decided to connect all the problems into one big story. For $8 \times 45$, he continued: “The museum had 8 exhibits. Each had 45 artifacts. There were 360 artifacts altogether.”

When Kieran finished, he read his story to me. He agreed that the activity helped him picture the math and come up with the right answers. I think it also strengthened his storytelling skills!

Comically speaking

Stretch your child's imagination with this activity that lets her practice writing dialogue—the conversations characters have with each other.

Choose comics. Let your youngster cut some of her favorite comics from the newspaper or print some from the internet. She can put small pieces of masking tape over the conversation bubbles to block out the existing words.

Write new dialogue. Each of you can pick one of the comics, think about what's going on in the pictures, and write lines for the characters on the pieces of tape.

Share your versions. Take turns reading your dialogue aloud. Then, choose new comics and make up conversations for those characters.

Reading and writing gifts—on a budget

I'd like to give my daughter gifts that will keep her reading and writing during winter break—and when it's over. My budget is tight. Any suggestions?

You'll both keep reading when you create coupons good for library visits together. These make great gifts for your child, and they're free! Another idea is a magazine subscription related to her interests (perhaps National Geographic Kids, Fun for Kids, or Ask). Many magazines offer deep discounts during the holidays.

For a writing-related gift, you could visit a craft shop or dollar store and fill a gift bag with fun writing treats. You can find notepads in different shapes and sizes, colorful pens, and pencils with interesting erasers. Also consider a diary, as well as books of crossword puzzles, word searches, or Mad Libs.