

Middle Schoolers Make Great Book Reviewers

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Abstract: *Demystify the book review process for your students by teaching them to write their own book reviews. Middle schoolers have definite opinions about what they read. Book reviewing teaches them to articulate their views and share them with their peers. Book reviews are authentic writing practice and an opportunity for students to consider purpose and audience. Using this flexible unit curriculum any school librarian can teach students in grades 6-8 to review books over six meetings.*

Introduction

Providing library instruction for middle schoolers can be tricky, especially if you are in a fixed/flex schedule where you see the students for just a few meetings unconnected to a class project. At Rising Tide Charter Public School, I developed a unit for teaching book reviews that I could adjust for different grade levels and for scheduling inconsistencies over the year. Book reviewing can be done remotely as effectively as in person, so it worked well in the virtual environment using online tools during the Pandemic.

Purpose and Standards

Book reviews lend themselves particularly well to middle school library instruction. Students are familiar with product reviews, and understand that book reviews are an authentic writing task. It is easy to make the case that reviewing books is a real world skill. Book reviews are a short enough product to fit into just a few meetings, but can be expanded into related writing or technology lessons. Middle school students are at an age where they are eager to express their opinions and identity, and book reviews provide a way to do so constructively. Book reviewing allows the librarian to validate student reading choices, encourage leisure reading, and facilitate book discussions.

Writing book reviews aligns to middle school reading and writing standards. Students writing book reviews summarize the book (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2), describe characters and plot (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3), and draw textual evidence to support their views (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.9). Connecting the unit to standards helps to demonstrate the value of library instruction.

Book Review Unit

The unit is structured around six lessons that can be expanded or contracted as needed. The first lesson centers around choosing a book to review. The librarian can use this time for a general library orientation, activities around book choice, or a lesson about fiction genres. This first lesson is different depending on grade level and library experience. By the end of this meeting, students should know where and how to find a book they will enjoy, and have had time to check one out.

The second and third lessons introduce book reviews as a concept and break down the format, so students can begin writing. During the second meeting, the librarian shows students book review examples and goes over the elements of a review. I like to show students reviews by other kids, both on the internet, and examples students wrote in previous terms. During this lesson, I also provide an overview for the rest of the lessons, so they know what will be expected of them. During any remaining time, students can talk about what book they might like to review, check out books, or read. In the third lesson students receive the graphic organizer and fill it in to outline and start drafting their book review. For my class, I allowed students to review any book they had ever read as long as they remembered it well enough to write about and had strong opinions about it. Their reviews could be positive or negative, and they could choose a book in any format (graphic novel, audiobook, novel, nonfiction, etc.). Sometimes my students needed to start several graphic organizers before settling on a book. Again, if possible the librarian should set aside time for browsing, checking-out, and free reading.

Figure 1
Book review graphic organizer

BOOK REVIEW NOTES

Book Title: _____ Name: _____
 Author: _____ Grade: _____

SUMMARY
 What is the book about?
 Avoid spoilers!

OPINIONS
 What made this book worth reading or not? What did you like/dislike? Why?

Who should read this book? To what audience would you recommend it?

I give this book __ stars.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Book reviews don't have to be positive. You can write about a book you didn't like. Whatever you write it should help other people decide whether this is the book for them.

You can write this to recommend awesome books to other middle schoolers, tell your teachers why they shouldn't teach a book in ELA, or suggest a great book to younger kids. Who should know about this book and why?

Keep it short! It's not a book report. Just give people enough to decide whether it sounds interesting. Write at least 2 sentences, but no more than 2 paragraphs. Be careful not to spoil the ending!

Q: What book should I review?
 A: Any book you've ever read. Pick one you remember well and have strong feelings about.

The next two lessons center on writing and revision. Once students have their graphic organizers filled out, they are ready to start writing. My students create Google Docs for their reviews and share them with me. Although they do not have to follow the graphic organizer exactly, I require students to include their name and grade, title and author of the book, a brief book summary, and their opinions about the book. During the fourth meeting, I conduct a short lesson about audience. Students are guided to clues that reveal an author's target audience. They also choose a target audience for their book review. Students who choose a book required for school may write their review with the teacher who assigned the book in mind, recommending whether or not to teach it to future English classes. They often recommend books they read for fun to friends or younger siblings. Students may also think about whether their book is similar to other books they enjoy, recommending their book particularly to fans of *Dog Man* or *Ghost Boys*.

In the fifth lesson, I provide more writing time for those who need it and ask students who are done writing to pair up for peer editing. Using the peer editing form, students can help their partner to make sure they didn't leave out any critical information and make suggestions to improve the book review. Librarians teaching this unit should see if their English department has a particular way of doing peer editing and may wish to use the local method if they do. After making revisions based on peer suggestions, the speedy students can have free reading time or help others edit.

Figure 2
Book review peer editing form

REVIEW PEER EDITING


Editor's Name: _____

BOOK DATA Does the reviewer tell you what book they reviewed? <input type="checkbox"/> Book title <input type="checkbox"/> Book author Who reviewed the book? _____ Did they include...? <input type="checkbox"/> Their name <input type="checkbox"/> Their grade level	Read the whole book review. Check if true... <input type="checkbox"/> Makes sense to people who haven't read the book. <input type="checkbox"/> Helps people decide whether or not to read the book. <input type="checkbox"/> Grammar, spelling, and usage are correct.
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Mark the review to point out spelling, grammar, capitalization errors.

Mark sentences that are unclear. Make suggestions to improve clarity and flow.

Is there anything else you want to tell the reviewer?



The last lesson is for students to present their book reviews to peers. I never force students to present, especially if there is no grade associated with library instruction. But, I talk about presenting reviews throughout the process, so students can get used to the idea. Book reviews are intended for a public audience, so it makes sense for students to share their recommendations with their classmates. I spend more time on expectations for the audience than the presenter, since I expect classmates to be quiet, attentive, and supportive whether the presenter reads their review verbatim, or talks off the cuff about the book they reviewed. I also try to share reviews in the school newspaper or library website. Always ask your students for permission to publish their work before sharing it publicly.

Figure 3**My students' book reviews published in their online school newspaper**

The Rising Times

HOME INSIDE THE TIDE OUTSIDE THE TIDE CREATIVE MAGAZINE



REVIEWS

Middle School Book Reviews

1/7/2019

For Ms. Klein's first term Skills classes, some of the Rising Tide middle schoolers wrote reviews of some books of their choice.

Nyla Lavoie, 7th Grade
Loser by Jerry Spinelli

I chose to review the book *Loser* by Jerry Spinelli, because it's a really inspirational book about a kid named Donald Zinkoff. Starting from kindergarten, you get to experience his life all the way to the end of fifth grade. It's a very realistic novel, and the words just make you want to keep reading. Donald has always been an outcast his whole life, however he isn't aware of it. If you read this book, you too will get to experience Donald Zinkoff's crazy life.

Eliza Burrey, 8th Grade
Kane: The Throne of Fire by Rick Riordan

Carter and Sadie Kane are back with new friends and a new quest, one that is possibly more dangerous than the last. For this quest they need to find Ra, the old senile sun god who was forced into retirement hundreds of years ago, and he hasn't been heard from since. But there are also new enemies bent on destruction and awakening Ra's old enemy Apophis, a giant serpent prophesied to devour the Sun itself and loose Chaos upon the world as we know it. To beat this new enemy they need to travel further into the Duat than any mortal ever has before, and find an new old friend previously thought to have been lost.

This is the perfect sequel to *The Red Pyramid*, the first in the series, and is filled with the same witty banter and humor supplied by the two young narrators between, and during, scenes. This would certainly appeal to younger audiences but may appeal to all ages. The story is easy enough to follow, you just need to pay attention, and the narrators clarify terms and names where it would be helpful.

This book would appeal to anyone who likes the *Percy Jackson* series by the same author, or anyone who likes Egyptian mythology in general.

If you like this book I would recommend reading the rest of the series and the *Percy Jackson* series as previously mentioned.

Savannah Furtado, 5th grade
Fuzzy Mud by Louis Sachar
Publication Date: March 21, 2015

This is about a girl named Tamaya and a boy named Marshall. One day Tamaya and Marshall took a shortcut to school and got lost in the woods. They tried to find their way back home but ran into a boy named Chad. Chad was mad at Marshall for answering a question in class. He also stated that in seventh grade your supposed to act dumb, before they had time to leave Chad quickly punched Marshall in the face and said "your next Tamaya". Marshall quickly got up and said "Tamaya run"! To be continued

This book is recommended for fifth grade and over. My opinion on this book is that it is a very interesting and adventurous story. If you are into adventure and mystery solving this book is definitely for you.

Lily Meyer, 5th grade
Shooting the Moon by Frances O'Roark Dowell
Publication Date: January 29, 2008
Genre: Realistic fiction and historical fiction

Shooting the Moon is a great book for people who like war or historical events. This book falls in the category of realistic fiction because it could happen but it might not. The character is described as brave and caring. The book is great, but it will leave you on a cliff hanger so be prepared. This book takes place in Vietnam where the main characters father is a colonel in the war!

I love this book and think you should give it a shot!
My rating 5/5 stars.

Lila Yamin, 5th grade
The Wild Robot by Peter Brown
Publication Date: April 5, 2018
Genre: Adventure

The Wild Robot is an amazing book! I think this book is for ages 7-12. *The Wild Robot* is an adventurous book, but it is also sad. My favorite part is when we meet Brightbill. Brightbill is one of the main characters. *The Wild Robot* teaches all of us a lesson because it shows trust, leadership, responsibility, and teamwork. Roz is the main character and Roz is the robot. She crash landed on a island and that is where the book starts. *The Wild Robot* is amazing and I think that *The Wild Robot* deserves 4 stars.

David Ingerme, 7th grade
Furious Fires by Julie Richards

The book *Furious Fires* is a nonfiction book, which in my opinion is pretty good. The author is Julie Richards. If you are interested in fires and want to learn more about them then this is the book is for you. A good part of the book is when it explains things about fires, and what it does for the life cycle of the forest. Overall, I would rate this book 3 stars.

During the writing process, I look over students' graphic organizers and book review drafts to see how they are doing. I often add in mini-lessons where I see general needs. My students frequently need guidance around capitalizing proper names and formatting book titles. I found it useful to chat with teachers and reading specialists about student book reviewing during the unit. Their insights about their students' reading and writing are helpful for tailoring the curriculum to each class.

Adaptations and Extensions

Depending on your students and the time you have with them, you may need to provide adaptations or scaffolding. If you are working with special education students or English language learners, you should speak with their English teachers to see if and how you can adapt the unit to support them. One option would be to read a book together as a class and have everyone review that book. If you want to focus on reading instead of writing, students

could present book reviews in a video instead of in writing. Review Individualized Education Plans to make sure you are allowing students to use any resources they might need, like using voice to text software for writing or listening to audiobooks when they read.

There are many ways to extend the book reviews into additional lessons or extracurricular activities. Now that students know how to review books, they may wish to write reviews for the school newspaper or share reviews on the morning announcements. They may review other media like movies or video games. You may want to start a book club that writes book reviews. Student book review clubs can get ARCs from publishers, so students can review galleys.

Conclusion

Book reviews are an excellent authentic writing task for middle school students. Teaching book reviews provides students with a real world skill they can share with their school and community. Additionally it is a wonderful way to remind your school that the library promotes literacy and that students still read for fun. Sharing student written book reviews supports the reading culture of your school.

Biography

Katie Klein is a PhD student at the University of South Carolina. She spent ten years as a middle and high school librarian. She earned her MLIS from Rutgers University.