

# Personal Reading Consultations to Lead Students to Great Books

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by Tom Bober, December 2018

I became a librarian because I wanted to help students in my school love to read. Entering the position, I quickly learned there were many different challenges that come with being a building leader in the quest to help develop children's reading lives.

Luckily, there are also many valuable resources to support librarians in our efforts. If you want to explore what research says about your upper elementary students and reading, look at Margaret Merga's new book *Reading Engagement for Tweens and Teens*. If you are looking for inspiration to create and build a culture of reading in your school, watch Melissa Thom's recent webinar "[Developing and Nurturing a School-Wide Culture of Reading](#)." Both of these resources speak to different elements that comprise your role as a leader of reading in your building.

One quiet way that I lead is through the work I do with individual students to connect them with books that they will want to read. Shortly after I began as a librarian, I noticed that there were students who were not connecting with books. My book talks didn't catch them. Suggestions from other students or teachers did not entice them to read regularly. They were not finding books on their own.

To help address this concern, I offered teachers a personal approach for students. I would meet with students individually, talk with them about their lives as readers, and match them with personalized picks. Requests trickled in at first. Now they come more regularly, from teachers, parents, and from the students themselves, who feel like they want some help on their reading journey.

I've noticed that students come for several reasons that many of you probably also see. Some students abandon books and have gone a long time without finishing something. Others cycle through the same series over and over. It is not unusual for parents to worry that their child is "stuck" in one genre or format and request that I speak to him or her.

As you can imagine, this practice provides opportunities to talk to adults as well, which means I can also compromise and advocate for a student when necessary. I may talk to parents about the benefits of graphic novels or certain types of nonfiction while also agreeing to see if the student and I can find a bridge of interest into another format or type of reading. I let teachers know that I never expect a student to abandon the books they love, but I can share books with them that I think they may grow to love also.

When I have my one-on-one time with students, I've learned that certain elements help us have a successful experience.

## **I must honor the student's time.**

Distractions are disastrous when a student already has some disenchantment with reading. I decline requests to meet with a student when his or her class is in the library. Instead, we usually set aside two twenty-minute meetings. The first is for us to talk about what that student does connect to when it comes to reading. The second is for me to talk about books that I think the student will connect with. I make my selections from the collection in between.

## **I am honest with the student.**

This whole process has to be built on some trust, so I tell the student exactly why he or she is there. I might share a concern that a parent or teacher shared with me and then ask them if there is any validity to that. Often, a student feels the same way or has some other concern that this discussion gives them an opportunity to express.

## **I have to know the collection.**

If I am going to spend twenty minutes giving very specific book talks to a student, I must have books in mind that I think match his or her wants and needs. If I do not know my collection well, this is impossible. It doesn't mean that I have to read every book, but I read as many as possible and know what many more are about or why they are appealing to other students. This is also a reason I give myself at least 24 hours in between our meetings. It gives me time to brush up on some titles that I may not know as well.

## **The student is ultimately in control.**

I also share my goal with the student: often to get him or her to commit to trying a certain number of books with an understanding that they are not required to finish them. I usually hope that for every ten books I book talk with a student, the student will choose three. Typically, it is higher. The student leaves with a book if he or she needs one

and I share a Google Doc that has the rest of the list with the student and teacher.

**Finally, following up is key.**

A brief check-in during the class's next visit to the library can let me know how the student is feeling about their reading choices and experiences. I can offer congratulations or encouragement and talk with them about what they have read in the past week.

I think this process does more than just help students engage with the literature in our library. It models the thinking that happens when we make selections about books we are considering reading and lets students know they are not alone when they need help on their reading journey.

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