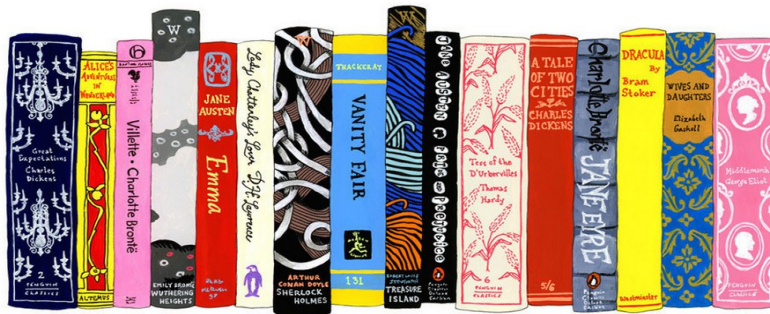


A Beginner's Guide to Classroom Libraries



A guide for new ELA teachers who want to build a classroom library and aren't exactly sure where to start.

Introduction

I have created this guide as a future ELA teacher myself. I'm currently an MAT student in Secondary English Education at the University of Georgia. Throughout my first year, I've heard a lot about classroom libraries and how essential they are to the success of students. It's usually something we talk about in passing, and while I, like many young teachers, have grand plans for what my classroom library will look like and include, I had no idea what it would take to make that plan a reality. What I wanted was for someone to hand me a handy "how to." When I realized that didn't exist, I figured I would have to make one myself. This guide is the result of reading tons of articles and teacher blogs (listed at the end of this guide), an interview with a practicing classroom teacher whose classroom library is essentially her classroom, and all the ideas sparked in the process.

Where to Start

This was my big question when I took on this project. I need a classroom library, great, but where do I start? For those of us teaching middle and high school students, one of the most important things we can do is to build a classroom library with books that actually *appeal* to students. Because all of our students will inevitably have different backgrounds, identities, reading levels and interests, it is essential to include a diverse selection. While it's tempting to try to build your classroom library by picking up tattered old books with outdated covers for a few cents at the thrift store, all you'll really be doing is wasting those few cents. Most students are not going to pick up a book with a boring, poorly-designed, falling apart cover. If that's all your classroom library is, you may as well use the space for something else.

The Books

Most recommend something like 10 books per student. For a teacher who is just starting out, that may be unrealistic, but it can absolutely be a goal to work towards. As stated before, your classroom library should include a diverse selection of books that hold appeal for students. "Diverse selection" does not mean simply

books with people of color as main characters. It means a selection that includes all genres and writing styles, characters with different backgrounds and experiences, diversity of reading level and text complexity, etc. As ELA teachers, a lot of us are more inclined to stock the library with works of fiction (I know that's my first instinct), but making sure there are a variety of non-fiction texts is important considering many students prefer non-fiction. Diversity can also mean including different *kinds* of texts (think outside the book!). You may want to consider having magazines, newspapers, picture books and books on audio, etc. One other essential point that I would stress here is that books that represent a variety of experiences goes beyond books that have characters of different colors. It also means having books with LGBTQ characters (ideally protagonists), characters of different income levels, protagonists with disabilities, from different countries, etc. We need diverse books, but we also need diversity within those books. Make sure your diverse books aren't all about the struggle and hardship of being of a different race. Those books are important and should be included, but so should books like Jenny Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* that feature an Asian American girl dealing with that age-old teenage drama: crushes on boys. That being said, finding these books is easier said than done, and no teacher has endless amounts of time on hand to locate them. Luckily for you, I've begun to compile a list (found @ mollyreadsalot.wordpress.com/downloads). I will also say, the more you read, the more communities of readers you're plugged into, the easier it gets to stay up-to-date on new books coming out. You can also keep track of awards like the Prince, Newberry, Coretta Scott King, or National Book Awards. Follow enough of the right people on Goodreads and you'll never be short on great, new books to add to your wish list.

How to Get Them

My first piece of advice would be to start as soon as possible. If you're a pre-service teacher like me, start now. The sooner you start building your library, the better. That doesn't necessarily mean going out and spending hundreds of dollars on brand new books. If you spend enough time looking, you can find YA and other current books in good condition at thrift stores. Every time I go to the Goodwill now, I make sure to stop by the books section. I recently found a hardback copy of *Eleanor & Park* in great condition. Good used book

stores and annual library book sales are also great resources for any teacher trying to increase the selection of books in their classroom. In addition, Scholastic will hold occasional warehouse sales that are a great place to get new books for far less than their cover price.

Make sure people in your life *know* that you're trying to build your classroom library. Lisa Hall, a teacher at Rockdale Career Academy outside of Atlanta, is well-known to her peers and colleagues as someone who is always looking for new books for her classroom. As a result, she has inherited entire classroom libraries from teachers who have retired or changed jobs. If you don't know a ton of other ELA teachers, though, you can always create a wish list on Amazon. Generally I am not a fan of buying books on Amazon, and in my perfect world I'd buy all my books from independent bookstores, but at this point in my life that would mean having a very limited selection to offer my students. If buying off of Amazon, or encouraging those in your life to buy books for your classroom library in place of the usual Christmas/Hanukkah/birthday gift, means getting more books into the hands of kids, I think it's okay.

Lastly, there are grants and organizations that will get you books for free. Instead of listing them here in awkward paragraph format, you can find them in their own section at the end of this guide.

Creating the Space

Seating & Decor

Okay, so you have some books. Now what? The space is almost as important as the books in it. Consider for a second the kinds of spaces you like to read in. Chances are most of your students prefer those kinds of spaces, too. That's not always the easiest feat to accomplish in a classroom, especially as a new teacher, but it's worth the effort if it increases reading amongst students. The space includes everything from the way the books are displayed to the places there are to actually sit and read. The latter is where friends and family come in. If you have a large enough classroom, put out a call for donations of old or unwanted furniture, rugs and lamps. If that doesn't yield what you need, head to your local thrift store. If you're short on space but still want to provide more comfortable seating, bean bags are always a good option, and apparently dog beds

are perfect since they hold up so well (Thanks, Dr. Kajder, who knew?!). While you're at it, raid your parents' Christmas decorations and hang up some string lights. Making a comfortable, inviting classroom library does not have to break the bank, but it may mean getting creative. [Side note: Don't hesitate to ask students for suggestions!]

Displays & Organization

The second part of this equation is the way your classroom library is set up and the ways in which you display the books. Part of knowing what books to display and how to do so to create interest is knowing your students, but that does not mean you can't have creative, enticing displays at the beginning of the year. Don't underestimate cover appeal. Featuring books students' eyes will be drawn to cannot hurt. It also can't hurt to make sure you have a lot of *different* books prominently displayed. With any luck, you'll put out that one book that will pull a reader in, but be sure to include a short blurb about the book. The fewer barriers between them and picking it up, the better. Once students know their way around the classroom library, give them the responsibility of creating displays. Books chosen and recommended by other students will hold more weight. If you have avid (or not-so-avid) readers in your class, challenge them to create a "if you liked this, read this" display. Or have students pick their favorite book, cover it with brown craft paper, and let them write blind date descriptions for the book. Those are only a couple of suggestions, and if you allow space for it, students will get creative. Organizational systems are more personal, but don't hesitate to include students there, too. The responsibility for upkeep doesn't have to be on you alone. Students can have a role in organizing, shelving and reshelving, keeping track of books and who has what checked out. Lord knows we have barely any spare time as it is. Chances are, though, the more involved students are, the more books they come across, the more likely they are to find books they'll enjoy.

How to Use It

If you stopped after the first two sections, your students may read more, some may get something out of it, but after putting in all of that effort into creating a classroom library, it only makes sense to get as much use

out of it as possible.

Check-Out System

As someone who has just built their classroom library, and whose selection cannot sustain a large number of losses, you may decide that classroom library books stay in, well, the classroom. However, if students can spend more time outside of school reading, the more gains you will probably see in their literacy schools. Not to mention it can be hard to build in time for in-class independent reading (but we'll get to that later!).

Creating a system for checking out books can be as simple as having clipboard with a list where students record what they checked out and when. If you want to get a little fancier, well, there's an app for that! I have an entire folder on my phone of teacher apps, not that I've even used them yet. One of my favorites is called "Book Buddy." You can scan the bar codes of your books (or enter them in manually, occasionally) into the app. It's free up to 50 books, so you may end up spending a few pennies on it, but it's a great way to keep track of books. When you go to any book on your list, you have the option of marking the book as "loaned" out, and you can include the name of the person it's loaned to. You can then see all the books you currently have loaned out, and mark them as returned when you get them back. The nice part is it requires a kid to come to you to get their book checked out, instead of leaving it to them to write their name down. I would probably forget to do that sometimes, too. Ultimately, though, you pick and design the system that works best for you.

Using it as Part of Your Curriculum

The first step is building in time for reading. It may seem impossible, when confronted with standards and tests and the pressures of being an early career teacher, but it does not have to be. If it is built into the class itself, independent reading can be used as the basis for assignments. You could assign students to create a character profile for one of the characters from whatever they're reading at the moment. Independent reading texts can be used for vocabulary development, as Lisa Hall was quick to point out when I interviewed her. If you say that every week students should identify at least five words from their independent reading text and define and learn them, you're meeting a standard while also giving your students the opportunity to read

outside of the narrow selection of canonical texts typically offered. It also means that students can begin to see how they can build knowledge from spending time reading.

Reading conferences and reading journals are also a great tool to get the most out of your classroom library (and school library, for that matter). If you can manage it, try to sit down with each student every one or two weeks to talk with them about their independent reading. There are tons of different templates available out there on the internet for what to discuss with students, but feel free to create your own. Talk with them about what they're reading, why they chose it, what it's about, what predictions they have, favorite quote so far, what book they think they might like to read next, etc. You may even consider asking them to read you a portion aloud so you can keep track of how their reading fluency is developing. Because you won't necessarily get to talk to every kid every week, have them keep a journal. This does not have to be something that is hyper-organized or requires "academic" writing. Rather it can be a space for students to keep their ideas about what they're reading as well as about what they might like to read. It's not an essay, but if you grade them on whether or not they take the time to reflect and not on their grammar and spelling, they'll still be building their writing skills.

A more ambitious project you might consider is creating a unit around a topic or theme that incorporates your classroom library. Students can choose a primary text themselves, so long as it addresses the topic of the unit. Not only will you have students somewhat more motivated to read throughout the unit, but they'll have an opportunity to try and select texts for a purpose as well as really have to think about whether or not it really fits with the theme at hand. An example of such a unit, this one concerned with the idea of "community," can be found at mstanseysclass.wix.com/communityunit.

Funding & Book Sources:

First Book

www.fbmarketplace.org

We Give Books

www.wegivebooks.org

The Heart of America Foundation (Books from the Heart program)

www.heartofamerica.org

Reading is Fundamental (RIF)

www.rif.org

Kids Need to Read

community.kidsneedtoread.org/

The Library of Congress: Surplus Books Program

<http://www.loc.gov/acq/surplus.html>

Snapdragon Book Foundation

<http://www.snapdragonbookfoundation.org/>

The Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries

<http://www.laurabushfoundation.com/>

Dollar General Literacy Foundation

http://www2.dollargeneral.com/dgliteracy/Pages/grant_programs.aspx

Scholastic:

Warehouse sales

<http://registration.scholasticbookfairs.com/events/warehouse/>

Scholastic Reading Club

Scholastic Teacher Store

International Book Project

<http://www.intlbookproject.org/home/our-work/get-books/>

Lowe's Toolbox for Education Grant

<http://www.toolboxforeducation.com/>

Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN)

<http://www.alan-ya.org/awards/>