

Football Literacy

Using the Gridiron Game to Get Boys Engaged in Reading

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Section I: Surveying the recent research on the reading gap between boys and girls

Section II: Where the boys are: Football and the NFL in the 21st Century

Section III: Football Literacy Tips & Project Ideas for Educators

Section IV: Further recommended football books & resources

Section I: Surveying the recent research on the reading gap between boys and girls

Boys and Reading: The Latest Research from the Center on Education Policy

The March 2010 report from the Center on Education Policy was a noteworthy study on gender differences in academic achievement in many ways. First, it quantified in stark terms the reading gap that exists between boys and girls, including the differing gaps found in all US states.

The report also documented a more persistent general trend against boys' achievement in schools, including the fact that girls are closing the gap and catching up with boys for math skills.

“The most pressing issue related to gender gaps is the lagging performance of boys in reading,” the report stated.

“There is a consistent achievement gap,” noted the Center on Education Policy’s President and CEO Jack Jennings in a conference call with reporters. “Something is going on in our schools that is holding back boys.” For more information on the study from the Center on Education Policy, visit their Web site at www.cep-dc.org.

More articles, studies, & books on “boys and reading”

Below is a list of more coverage of the “boys and reading” issue in recent educational trade magazines and books, including:

- Library media: the April/May 2007 issue of *Library Media Connection* and the September 2007 edition of *School Library Journal* both further illustrated the trend with feature articles on the need for boys to read more, including advice for educators, recommended titles, activity ideas, and more.
- Teacher-related media: Scholastic’s *Instructor* magazine weighed in on the crisis in their September/October 2008 issue, in a wide-ranging article by Peg Tyre, the author of a related book titled *The Trouble with Boys. The Reading Teacher*, a publication of the International Reading Association, provided more findings in an article in their November 2009 issue.

- Education/policy media: In the larger sphere of educational media, leading publications like *Education Week* are constantly publishing additional studies' results, and assign specific writers focusing on the trend.
- Books: In addition to Tyre's book *The Trouble with Boys*, a number of trade and professional development books have been published of late on the subject of boys and reading and gender disparities in academic achievement, including *Why Boys Fail* by the *Education Week* blogger Richard Whitmire, among others.

Whitmire echoed the Center on Education Policy in a recent interview on the ABDO Web site, speaking of a wider failure of schools engaging boys: "Boys look around the classroom, conclude that school is for girls, and pursue other interests. Being rewarded academically no longer interests them."

The variety of research on boys and reading has one thing in common: each documents a number of serious societal and personal effects that the continued lapse in reading proficiency between boys and girls means today, and for the future: more Ds and Fs, more suspensions, more reluctant readers, more referrals to special ed., higher dropout rates, less lifetime income, a serious deskilling of the workforce, higher incarceration rates, and even an increased suicide rate, among other effects.

Section II: Where the boys are: Football and the NFL in the 21st Century

When ABDO first decided to publish our new series and its companion database, *Inside the NFL*, we knew this would be a series and database that would interest boys. This is the best way to engage readers – present them with books and reading materials that are personally interesting to them.

A recent study on reading preferences highlights these interests:

"...the results indicated that boys' top five reading preferences in a school or public library centered on animals, sports, science, literature, and biography."

- American Library Association (emphasis added)

It's hard to overstate how prevalent football and the NFL are in the lives of young men and boys. Consider these facts on football and the NFL, and how they are among the most personally interesting topics available to boys and young men in US:

- Football is America's top team sport, with 63% of men surveyed indicating they were either a fan or interested in the game.
- 77% of NFL football fans are male. - 2006 Gallup Poll
- 99% of boys ages 12-17 play video games, and 65% play every day. A top video game is Madden NFL.*

- *Teens, Video Games, & Civics*, Pew Research Center, 2008
(For more on Madden NFL and video games, see below)

- There are over 30 million people in fantasy football leagues in the US, including an estimated 1.5 million tween and teenage boys. (“Fantasy Football” involves players acting like a general manager, drafting and managing players across a number of teams each week, including quarterbacks, running backs, receivers, etc. who then score “fantasy” points based on their game performances.)
- The Super Bowl is traditionally the most watched TV event every year.
- The NFL continues to set viewership records on cable TV. The October 2009 ESPN Monday Night Football broadcast of the football game featuring the Minnesota Vikings (with quarterback Brett Favre) playing the Green Bay Packers, his former team for 17 years, was the most-watched cable broadcast in history. The 2nd most watched show on cable was an Eagles-Giants game in 2008.
- The NFL continues to grow merchandise sales, with great growth in the children’s, teen, and women’s segments.
- The NFL aired its annual draft of college players during prime time hours for the first time in the spring of 2010, and drew record ratings for two nights in a row.
- The NFL is the most popular sport among African-American males. “The NFL, though, is more popular with African-Americans than is the NBA. Blacks made up 12.8 percent of the audience for pro football last year compared to 9.2 percent for basketball.”
– *Media Life Magazine, 2006*
- The NFL attracts young Hispanics; the average U.S. Hispanic viewer, at 27 years old, is 10 years younger than the average general market viewer. NFL games were the five highest-rated English-language shows among Hispanic households and NFL games were the highest rated English-language show among Hispanic households in 14 of the season’s 17 weeks. – NFL and Nielsen Co.
- Millions of tweens and teens play football each year in youth leagues sponsored by local businesses, and for their schools when they reach high school age. The letter jacket, dressing up for game day, keeping grades up so they can make the team — all of these are typical experiences for boys ages 13 and up, and a rite of passage and source of pride and identity as well.

***About Madden NFL, the most popular video game in the US**

The video game business in the US is now bigger than the movie business, surpassing movies in gross dollars for the first time earlier this decade. Therefore, like movies, video games can be a powerful “media tie-in,” an effective way to attract reluctant readers and foster personal interest reading.

Madden NFL is named for one of its principal developers, John Madden, the Hall-of-Fame NFL coach who won the Super Bowl with the Oakland Raiders in the 1970s. He's also well known for his broadcast work, including several years in the booth for Monday Night Football.

- The 2008 Pew Research Center on teens and video games listed the top games in order of popularity as: 1. Guitar Hero, 2. Halo, 3. Madden NFL, 4. Solitaire, 5. Dance Dance Revolution, and 6. Madden NFL 08 (the game has annual editions). The answers "Madden NFL" and "Madden NFL 08" are essentially the same, since the game's annual editions are so similar. When recounting the tallies this way, a more general description of the game - Madden NFL - was the most popular.
- Millions of copies of Madden NFL are sold on the first weekend the game is available each year. There is even an "urban legend" of a "Madden Curse" – that the player featured on the cover of that year's game will have a bad year.
- Madden NFL players are predominantly male. The game features sophisticated playbooks from each team, classic and current rosters, the ability to create new teams and players, and more.
- Madden NFL play is multi-generational – young kids often play their older brothers, friends, fathers, and grandfathers.
- Video games are often social events for males and their friends. This is a great chance to create a "football reading group" in your school or library by researching which boys game together.

Inside the NFL: technology and larger blocks of text for reading practice online

"We wanted our *Inside the NFL* series and database to have content that not only respected the knowledge young readers have of the game today, but also to allow them a chance to work through large blocks of text to develop their reading skills," noted ABDO Editor in Chief, Paul Abdo. "We developed the series and database with sportswriters who have written for wire services and NFL publications, to be sure we had authoritative information that did not 'talk down' to today's football fans," he added. "If you know boys from 4th grade and up who play Madden," Abdo said, "Then you know how we wanted our books and database to respect their astonishing knowledge of the complexities of the game — as well as give them the history of the game they may not know about."

NFL-themed Web sites are among the most popular sites on the Internet. "We researched the popularity of sports-driven Web portals like those on Yahoo, MSN, or AOL, for example," stated Abdo. "These sites are visited by young fans who want the latest info on roster changes, or injuries, because they want updates on their team, or who they should 'play' in their fantasy league," he added. "Our *Inside the NFL* series is a great way to harness boys' interest in computer time reading about sports. But instead of just reading a quick couple sentences about a player's injury update on AOL, for example, readers of

Inside the NFL will tend to spend time with larger blocks of text, leveled for reading success. They may read dozens of ‘pages’ or even several ‘books’ online without even realizing it. They’re just reading and reading because they’re crazy about football,” he added.

Section III: Football Literacy Tips & Project Ideas for Educators

Below are some ideas for using our *Inside the NFL* series and database to foster further learning with research projects and other literacy tips.

Research American History with *Inside the NFL*

Use the database for easy keyword searches like “Great Depression” or “World War II” to find information on how the league survived through these eras, which players were known for fighting in the war, and more.

The Color Barrier in the NFL

Most young sports fans know Jackie Robinson was the first baseball player to break the color barrier and play for the all-white major leagues in the mid-20th century. Do they know which players were the first African-Americans to play in the National Football League and the American Football League? Use our database to find out and start a report on these brave men.

Franchise History

Have football readers research their favorite team’s history. Include the requirement that they interview family or friends who attended games in the past, older fans’ recollections of games and players, past stadiums, glorious or heartbreaking moments for the team, and more. NFL teams all have marketing and PR contacts who work for the team – these also make excellent contacts for interviews for multiple-source report writing, especially for older teens.

Write a game recap

Sports writing is unique craft that can help hone writing skills. Go through your city or area daily newspaper on Monday with boy readers, when the weekend’s games are recapped in detail for sports fans. Encourage students to write their own game recap. This is a simple but effective writing exercise that’s great for teaching how to select a theme (what was the game-changing play? Who was the star of the game?), using stats to back up your theme, and more. Great for local team games, too.

Create a play

Challenge your more knowledgeable football readers to create a play that includes a full diagram of X’s and O’s, a written explanation of the play, a name for it, how it is supposed to work, and a public speaking time to share the play and thoughts/questions with other readers and players. This is great for high schools with serious football programs, or for middle schoolers, too.

Section IV: Further recommended football books & publications

Our *Inside the NFL* series and database makes a great cornerstone of your football literacy collection. We also recommend these resources for your collection needs and football readers:

Fiction for younger football readers:

Try the football books by Tim Green or Matt Christopher for solid fiction choices themed around the game.

Periodicals for YA football readers

American Football Monthly: If you're in a high school with an active football program, your coaches and players will love you for this. About \$40/year, the subscription includes access to video on their Web site as well. Play diagramming, best practices for coaching and playing techniques, ideas for developing players, advice for team morale, and more.

Fantasy Football Magazine: The #1 magazine for the 30 million fantasy league players in the US. Good for ages 15 and up.

Sports Illustrated: The top sports magazine in the US for decades. Watch for the swimsuit issue if that is the sort of thing that will cause trouble in your school. Still has some of the best football reporting available.

ESPN: The Magazine: The top cable station for sports has a great magazine, too. Bigger trim size than SI allows for great diagrams and text features.

Trade Books

The Ultimate Super Bowl Book: This recent book is an astonishing history of the league told through the lens of sports' biggest game. By Bob McGinn, an award-winning sportswriter who is considered ground-breaking for his stats and game analysis. A serious piece of scholarship but still readable for ages 15 and up.

Sports Illustrated Super Bowl: Large pictorial of the games throughout the years.

Blood, Sweat & Chalk: The Ultimate Football Playbook: How the Great Coaches Built Today's Game: A history of plays and the coaches who made them. If you have an NFL team in your area with a famed coach, this is a must.

Football for Dummies: Even die-hard fans will be surprised by this book's information. Can be read by 11-12 year olds, and good for 13 and up, too.

Favre by Brett Favre: The game's most enigmatic and compelling player tells his story.

Check for other famed players' biographies and trade books in your local bookstore – the football section at your local bookstore is always receiving new books, because it's a

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To order *Inside the NFL* series and database

Call toll-free 1-800-800-1312 or visit www.abdopublishing.com

large category for trade publishing. Biographies, memoirs, coffee table books, season highlights in paperback, and other formats are a regular part of publishing about the NFL.

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