

Hello parents and guardians of American Literature students!

A central goal of American Literature is to establish a reading habit in the busy lives of high school students. I am hoping we can work together to recapture the pleasure and passion of readers. This letter is long, but the assumptions it rests upon are too important to be treated in a superficial manner. Please take the time to read this and know what you're signing before you do.

Recent studies in neuroscience show that our brains are hardwired for story. In her groundbreaking book, *Wired for Story*, Lisa Cron explores why the brain craves story:

Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution--more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to. Story is what enabled us to imagine what might happen in the future, and so prepare for it...Story is what makes us human, not just metaphorically but literally. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that our brain is hardwired to respond to story; the pleasure we derive from a tale well told is nature's way of seducing us into paying attention to it.

Through selecting their own books and writing their own narratives, our students, I hope, consider this: the way we respond to our struggles (and those of the protagonists we meet) is not just what we do but **who we are**.

What I seek for all of my students is a compulsion to read—for pleasure—for knowledge—for a passion for story or information that will keep them turning the pages of a book well past our assigned time for reading. In fact, in addition to in-class reading time, our students will be expected to read for **two hours a week outside of class**. This has tremendous benefits. Here are a few:

- **Reading relieves stress.** Junior year is stressful. Reading takes you out of the present and into another place and time; it is a perfect escape.
- **Reading builds stamina to prepare students for college.** Reading for an hour or two in one sitting is a basic expectation in college. In this class we will exercise muscles soon to be strained in the coming years. Reading for fluency and stamina has been proven to improve the reading rate for students. Fast reading develops confidence and an appetite for books as well as teaching vocabulary in context, which improves writing, but it only happens when students find books they want to read.
- There is a lot of talk in the media that “students today won’t read,” but I believe students substitute all of those other distractions (social media, video games, TV, etc.) if they feel no passion for the book assigned to them. In my experience, students who haven’t been readers since elementary school will suddenly become quite passionate about reading with **the right book** in their hands. But those books might challenge your values. Is that okay with you? Can your child choose to read *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins, which delves into a teenager’s drug addiction?

I believe we have to trust these young adults more. We have to trust that books won’t corrupt them; instead, books nudge them on journey away from corruption and towards **reflection, empathy, and purpose**. The most important thing is that they’re reading. So you may pick up a book left behind on a nightstand and open to a passage with the details of someone being abused and wonder why reading it is a

homework assignment, and I will answer, “Your son or daughter chose it.” I might have recommended it because I read it and loved it, or the book may be unfamiliar to me because your child borrowed it from another student. The bottom line: I will not place a tight filter on what is read in this class, and I’m asking for your support in this. I hope you will talk to your child about what he/she is reading this semester.

If you’re concerned about the content of what your son or daughter is reading, I highly suggest you get a copy and read it cover to cover. If you want to know more about a book your child is reading, please try our school library website, the American Library Association website, or even Amazon.com. Or call me—I’ll tell you what I know.

Because I respect your role as parents and the traditions you hold sacred, if you want me to more closely monitor your child’s choices this semester, by all means, call me and we’ll work out a plan that we can both contribute to.

If you sign this, it means you understand books won’t be banned in my classroom and your child will be allowed to choose what he/she reads.

Thanks for your support,

Kristin Leclaire

P.S. Our classroom benefits every year from cast offs. **Please send books you no longer need to our library**, especially ones you’ve loved, if you can bear to part with them. Better yet... come to class and share a book with us. Share your passion for reading; get to know these amazing students. I would love to have you join us some afternoon. Thank you.

I have read and agree to the contents of this letter.

student’s name

parent’s name

Adapted from Kittle and Gallgher’s 180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents