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## Battle of the Books: Reading Contests and Information Literacy

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# Battle of the Books: Reading Contests and Information Literacy

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**T**he *Reading Excellence Program Overview* (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) lists “the development and maintenance of a motivation to read” as one of the six dimensions of reading for Grades K–3. Reading motivation is important in every grade. Giving children reasons to love reading has inspired librarians for the last century. Many of us who go into children’s work want to share our own passion for books, and to encourage our young patrons to become information-literate.

Reading skills are evaluated on the basis of standardized tests. Many people do not realize that these tests also measure the speed with which children can read. If a child spends too much time figuring out the answer to one question, others will not be answered. Thus, a fluency in reading is very important.

How do students gain fluency? Through practice—reading lots and lots of materials. “Reading yields significant dividends for everyone—not just for the ‘smart kids’ or the more able readers. Even the child with limited reading and comprehension skills will build vocabulary and cognitive structures through reading” (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). However, children may not read enough to gain fluency. Reading, a quiet activity, does not always appeal to active children. Librarians, teachers, and parents need to give them reasons to read. Often, a chance to socialize can lure these kids in. Some of these methods include reading discussion groups (i.e., mother-daughter book clubs), literature circles, and reading contests.

Battle of the Books, in existence since the 1930s, has proved itself to be such a lure. It requires reading and understanding many different titles on a given list, generally chosen by the librarian or teacher. Students form teams and test their knowledge of these books against others. This competitive aspect appeals to many children.

These contests expose children to a variety of literature, not just the books that are in a particular classroom or home. Children read on many topics, learn new words, and experience worlds beyond their own life. Science fiction author Ursula Le Guin explains the value of this variety: “There are different ways of thinking, being, and doing things. Both science fiction and fantasy... let you think through an alternative without actually having to do it. Which, I think, is really one of the functions of all


fiction—to let you live other lives and see what they’re like. It widens the soul...” (Justice, 2001). This richness can appeal and motivate children to read.

The structure of Battle of the Books is easily adapted to local needs and conditions. School districts and libraries can sponsor the activity separately, or work together to reach as many children as possible. Contests can take place any time, and in any setting—in a classroom, a school gym, a public library, or even a television studio.

Children from the same school or different schools can compete. In my rural county, teams from four different schools recently battled against one another at the county educational services headquarters. One of the four was a parochial school, and the contest gave these children from varied backgrounds a chance to be together in an academic setting. In Providence, Rhode Island, children from different independent schools join in multi-school teams, so they are working *with* students they would not otherwise know.

Battle of the Books works for all ages. Children in grades 4–8 are beginning to enjoy controlled competition, and older students also like taking part. Battle of the Books has been used as a teen vacation reading program. Battles take place at the branch libraries, and the winners compete at summer’s end in the main headquarters.

Given the program’s longevity, many resources supply booklists and contest questions making it easy to get started. My two books give detailed instructions and booklists with questions. *Battle of the Books and More* focuses on grades 6–8, while *Books, Battles and Bees* does the same thing for grades 3–6. There are discussion groups on the Web, and a search will turn up numerous references. (To find Web information, make sure you add “and not censorship” to your search, or you’ll bring up intellectual freedom articles as well!)

Keep this type of activity in mind when you are addressing information literacy guidelines. It will prove useful when working with teachers on various aspects of reading. In spite of the rash of computers in our libraries, librarians still know and love books. Books and reading is our area of excellence, and also our expertise. We are reading teachers, too. 

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