

Why Do Students Read? Why Do Students Write?

By Tuller Merrifield

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If you have children or grandchildren attending public schools in Lake Havasu City, you are probably aware of the tremendous effort teachers invest in developing students' reading and writing skills. Teachers at every level, from kindergarten through high school, are committed to preparing your children to face the challenges of a rapidly changing world. We are also tasked by the State of Arizona to demonstrate student proficiency through standardized tests, such as Galileo and the AIMS, but passing these tests is a reflection of heightened skills and not an end in itself. If kids are reading and writing well, they pass the tests with ease. Kids who are interested in ideas will read, and when they have something to say, they'll write.



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Several years ago, I encouraged one of my Honors Junior English students to read Ayn Rand's novella *Anthem* and to submit an essay to the Ayn Rand Institute's Essay Contest. This student won Second Prize and received a check for \$1000 for her efforts. Last year, I decided to take advantage of a gift of books for our high school from the ARI with only one string attached—that I teach the novels in my class and have my students submit essays to the ARI Essay Contest. My sophomore students read *Anthem*, and my junior students read *The Fountainhead*, and every one of my Honors English students submitted an essay. Five students received Honorable Mentions and checks just for reading, thinking, and writing about the provocative ideas presented in these novels. This year, my students will be reading and writing about Ayn Rand's novels for a second year. The ideas in Rand's novels are thought provoking, and the potential for

financial reward is an added incentive for students to read and write.

Another wonderful opportunity for high school students to read and write comes from the We the People program taught by Jaime Festa-Deigle. Students in this senior level Civics class are assigned to teams and given constitutional questions to research. Many teachers at the high school and members of the community at large contribute to coaching these teams as they prepare for local, district, state, and national competitions. This year, all six teams from Lake Havasu High School won in regional competition against two other schools. In January, our teams will compete at the state level. These students have had to learn about the US Constitution and how it is being and has been applied. They must become conversant with Supreme Court cases that have changed or refined how this document is applied. They must relate the Constitution to historical and current events, write three essays defining their questions, and support their ideas orally for a panel of judges—real judges, attorneys, and legislators. In addition to being a wonderful, hands-on preparation for becoming educated voters, this program gives high school students a way to read, think, write, and speak about constitutional issues that affect every American citizen.

Teaching kids to read and write well is more than just reading novels and writing essays; it's more than passing standardized tests. Kids read and write when they take an active interest in the world around them, when they become interested in ideas, and when they discover that they have ideas of their own to share.