

Reading Walks

Guide for Teachers

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What is a 'reading walk'?

This simple yet innovative method is a way of stimulating the imagination of your students and connecting them **intellectually, emotionally, and creatively** with natural environments.

Reading carefully selected passages from novels, poems, or non-fiction texts as you explore these spaces together enables students to **contextualise and expand their subject knowledge**. Reading walks are designed to enrich the curriculum across a variety of subjects and provide students with memorable and enjoyable experiences in nature.



How do I plan a reading walk?

Here are **5 things** to think about as you plan your reading walk with examples to give you inspiration.

1. Aims

What is the purpose of the reading walk in your subject?

For **Geography** teachers, you might want to deepen their understanding of the complex interaction between social systems and ecosystems which shape our environment.

For **English Literature** teachers, perhaps you want students to critically engage with a variety of literary texts, encouraging them think about the value of stories and the imagination in a time of ecological crises.

For **Biology** teachers, perhaps you want to develop their scientific imagination and understanding through vivid descriptions of biological processes and concepts in relation to local environments and concerns.

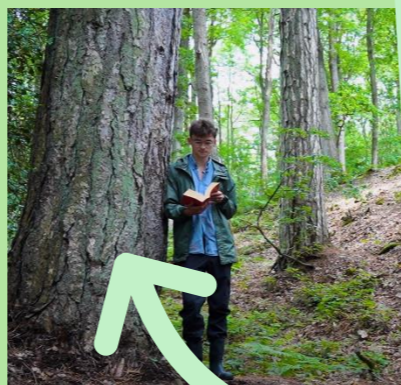
Ask colleagues in other departments if they would like to plan a reading walk together, drawing upon each other's subject specialism to create a truly **interdisciplinary** learning experience.

2. Locations

Choose any local greenspace that is **accessible**. This doesn't have to be far away or in a designated nature reserve – it could be a local wood, cemetery, allotment, playing field, or urban park.

When deciding the route, look out for **points of interest** along the way. This could be a particular tree, or site of historical significance, or a feature that relates to something being described in the texts - anything which catches your eye and stimulates questions, particularly if you can link to topics or ideas in your subject.

Try to choose **3-5 different spots** along the route where you can pause, read, and ask questions.



This Douglas fir tree was ideal for reading a passage describing an Ent from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, after which we discussed the role and function of anthropomorphism in the literary imagination and science communication.

3. Texts

See the **Forest Reading List** resource (via link overleaf) for suggested topics relating to trees and forests. Ideally you want a good **mix of styles, genres, modes, and perspectives**.

You can mix fiction and nonfiction, poetry and prose, or texts which were written at different periods or geographical contexts. This variety will add interest along the walk and offer opportunities for students to critically compare texts.

Select passages or poems which take no longer than five minutes to **read aloud at a gentle pace**. You can read them yourself or ask the students to take turns to read. The important thing is that the group is listening and paying attention to their surroundings, rather than looking down at a text.

4. Questions

These can be as **open-ended** as 'what did you think to the way x was being described?' or 'how do you feel standing in this space listening to the passage?'.

You might want to ask them more specific questions about a particular idea or phrase in the text, or ask them how it relates to a **key concept or curriculum topic**.

When planning your questions, think about ways you can encourage students to think both about the text *and* their immediate surroundings. Often, there will be an aspect or feature in their environment which can prompt questions about the text, and vice versa.

The idea of the reading walk is to **allow the textual and actual to interact** or overlap in their minds. When that happens, the text becomes a kind of **perceptual tool**, drawing attention to things in their environment, or helping them perceive it differently.

In other words, the best questions are those which encourage students to **read their environment** closely and critically, exploring curriculum topics and ideas from alternative perspectives.



In a reading walk with Biology students, we read the poem 'Fallen Beech' by Jason Allen-Paisant which compared the life, death, decomposition, and regeneration of a fallen beech tree to the timescale of human life.

I invited them to look at the way a fallen tree opens the canopy and allows ground flora to establish on the forest floor.

I then drew attention to the fungi, invertebrates, lichen, and moss decomposing the deadwood used to create the sculpture we were standing inside. I asked students:

What does the poem tell us about human timescales of life and death in relation to the timescales of a tree?

How might this shape how we think about our wider relationship with the natural world?

5. Activities

A reading walk is not just an intellectual exercise, but a **sensory and emotional** one, too. Try to make your walks interactive by asking students to engage with texts and their environments in a variety of ways.

Sometimes pausing on your walk and asking students to simply observe their environment in silence, is extremely effective way to **sharpen their perception and awareness**, while encouraging a calm and contemplative state of mind.

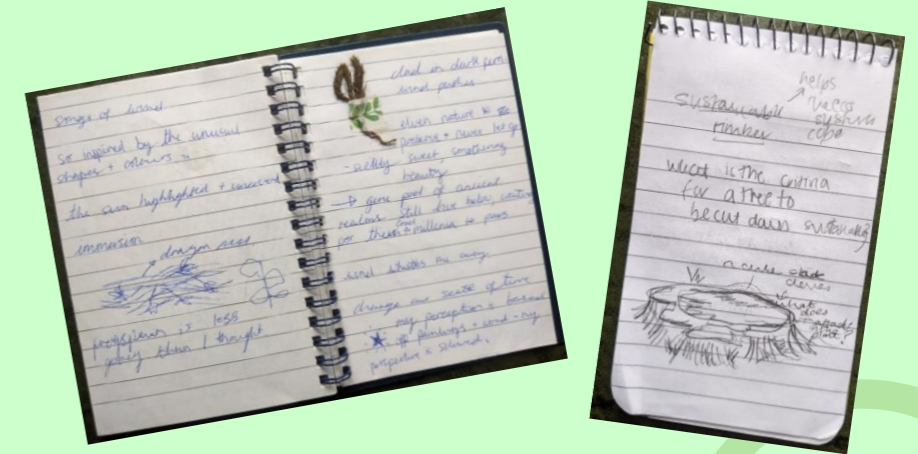
Why not invite them to close their eyes and use their other senses to experience their surroundings? **Listening** to the reading, whilst listening to the natural soundscape around you, can be a fascinating experience



Have each student jot down their thoughts, observations and sensations during the walk in pocket-sized notebooks or **journals**. Give them the freedom to do this in whatever way they feel most comfortable with – simple notes to sketches or poetry.

This will encourage students to mingle their responses to the text to their responses to their physical surroundings.

It also allows them to **record their ideas** to reflect on at the end of the walk or later in lessons.



Try to incorporate interactive elements to your walk to engage students and encourage them to interact with their surroundings in fun and interesting ways.

Examples:

'Eye to the Sky': Ask students to walk along holding a mirror under their nose facing up to the sky.

Walking blind: pair students up and ask one of the pair to be blindfolded. This should sharpen their other perception of sounds, textures, and smells.

Zoom in: There are powerful and cheap handheld microscopes you can bring along, revealing the intricate and beautiful microworlds at our feet.

Stop and go: Chop up your text into sentences, paragraphs, or stanzas, and ask students to take turns in reading. After each piece, walk a little bit further before reading the next. This will break down the text into bitesize chunks to contemplate as you walk.

Creative reflection: At the end of the walk, or back in the classroom, ask students to respond creatively to the reading walk either through sketching, painting, or creative writing



Discover more resources at: <https://readingwalks.short.gy/interdisc-edu>
Contact: readingwalks@contacts.bham.ac.uk

