

## English Department Philosophy of Reading

**Our Philosophy of Reading, as well as our other pedagogical methods, closely aligns with the School's Mission statement, "Seeking Truth, Building Character, Nurturing All."**

**Furthermore, our methods are also informed by Randolph's Academic Principles of "Individual Learning, Relational Learning, and Community Learning." Please see this link for those guiding principles: <https://www.randolphschool.net/academics/>**

Literature communicates powerful human truths; yet, it is not always an authority on truth. Often it advances an author's agenda, exhibiting biased cultural or historical perspectives. While literature may explore common dilemmas of human nature, it also creates new, revolutionary ways of thinking. It helps us to understand, question, and create purpose. It helps us to understand others and ourselves. Literature is "meaning making." Therefore, teachers regularly ask students to define literature's goals, question its agendas, and investigate its relevance.

As students enter high school, they confront a multitude of social, academic, and personal challenges. We explore those issues through great literature. Our classrooms are places where we can safely and effectively question our preconceived notions about the world in which we live. Literature requires us to entertain ideas that we might never have considered before. It requires us to converse with outsiders, strangers, cultures, time periods, and unconventional thinkers. In doing so, we identify the universality of the human experience.

We live in a highly symbolic world, and students must understand this power. Literature helps us to think symbolically, to communicate with symbolism, to parse and to explicate the symbols of others. Literature is also a mirror. It can liberate us by showing us our hidden beauty, but it can also reveal ugliness. In the Randolph Upper School, we invite students into this struggle: to research, to consider, and then to judge.

Discussing Literature teaches students analytical and communication skills that are key to college preparedness, modern career settings, civic engagement, and family life. Thematic interpretations may hinge on bold symbols but also minute, powerful language choices. Effective reader response teaches that details are important.

Challenging literature forces us to understand context and to use discernment. Because literature's purpose is often to provoke in order to spur new ways of thinking, teachers preface challenging or unconventional texts by reminding students that they can understand a text and entertain an author's ideas without embracing them. By forcing readers to be patient, to analyze, and to revisit our ideas, we understand and can even empathize with an agenda. This patience encourages critical thinking. We do not prejudice and support the old adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover." After analysis and discussion, we fairly critique it.

Sometimes a teacher's job is to challenge students to discuss uncomfortable topics. A student's job is to articulate an effective reader response. Being patient involves being "brave enough to listen" to the author's ideas and other student perspectives. Part of literature's appeal is that it allows students to explore multiple interpretations. Moreover, sometimes students may find no concrete answers to a text's complexity, and instead are reminded that Randolph's mission promotes "Seeking Truth" *–but not necessarily finding it.*

Teachers appeal to the students' maturity and build trust. Inevitably, literary analysis may allow students to answer the ultimate questions of purpose and meaning: "Who am I" or "Who would I like to be?" This encourages them to seek their own truths and gives them the courage to build their own convictions. This requires meta-cognition—or the ability to think about the way we think in order to develop our own paths in an ever-changing world.

Students should know that while teachers plan carefully, reader response is unpredictable, and learning is sometimes messy. Furthermore, all teachers encourage students to come to them outside of class to discuss difficult reactions to the reading or to discussion. Often, these one-on-one conversations help to validate the student's reaction as well as to calm it. Teachers empathize with students, assuring them that it is natural to sometimes feel uncomfortable when learning.

Between reading, writing and speaking about a text, students are given multiple ways to engage with literature. Texts are also chosen to allow for variety and for differentiated teaching. Titles are chosen to be developmentally appropriate while also challenging. Teachers do not necessarily endorse any given text's ideas. In fact, the text might be chosen to invite students to critique the text's themes. When choosing a book with challenging subject matter, teachers ask, "Is this subject matter purposeful? Does it uniquely and powerfully help students learn analytical skills or distract them from it?" Therefore, texts are chosen so that their unique complexity helps students practice analytical skills.

Students may discover a connection to a text, a discussion, or an assignment long after class is over. They may revisit books that they found difficult or even disliked. This growth reflects the power of good literature because books plant seeds.