

Tips for Classroom Work in the Ruff Reading School Program

The Ruff Reading program typically works to support students from Pre K to fifth grade, and sometimes up to eighth grade when students have special needs. Our school program is most successful when there is a partnership between the teacher and the H.A.B.I.T. Ruff Reading volunteer. H.A.B.I.T.'s half of the equation is to bring a nonjudgmental and unconditionally loving animal that will create a supportive environment for students. On the school side, the teacher will have the opportunity to direct the use of this tool to create the best outcome for her/his students' academic, social, or emotional development.

Some H.A.B.I.T. volunteers may have chosen four-legged, furry children over the human kind, so classroom experience may be limited or nonexistent. Some of our Ruff Reading volunteers will observe that there is a wide range of reading ability in one grade level, or there may be students from different grade levels having special needs and very limited reading ability. It takes a while to become comfortable in the classroom setting, and knowing how to support your student readers is largely dependent on direction that you should receive from your students' teacher. Aside from instructions that you seek from the teacher, here are some tips provided by experienced Ruff Reading volunteers and teachers, as well as a few from web information on encouraging elementary school readers.

Teacher Preparation for Visits

In order for Ruff Reading visits to be satisfying for all parties (H.A.B.I.T. volunteers, student, and teacher), the teacher must put some thought into creating an environment that supports the visitation activity. The teacher will structure the activity to suit his/her student's grade level, special needs, and classroom routines. Our hope is that the visitation activity will be unobtrusive and will flow into the day's activities seamlessly. The following are items that teachers may consider when preparing for Ruff Reading visits.

1. An area of the room should be designated for the visits which is out of traffic and won't disrupt the flow of other classroom activities. A rug or mat is helpful to create a comfortable space for the volunteer and pet. Certainly more can be done to create a hospitable space, but it's not required.
2. Ruff Reading visits work best as one on one or very small group experiences: no more than two or three. Considering classroom numbers, it may not be feasible for every student to visit every time; a rotation is a useful solution. If the rotation is written on the board or shared with the volunteer in advance, the teacher doesn't have to interrupt an activity to keep it flowing.
3. If reading will be the focus of the activity, it is helpful to have the students' reading material selected in advance. The teacher can create a limited selection for all the students to read from or have the student choose a book with which they are familiar that matches their current reading ability. The method of selection will depend on the teacher's goals for the visit.
4. It is very helpful for the teacher and volunteer to communicate before the first visit begins. Teacher and volunteer should share contact information to facilitate the team approach. Early conversations should address what the teacher hopes to accomplish with the Ruff Reading program, so the volunteer can focus the activities to support that goal.

5. The volunteer and pet should never be left alone with students, even for very short periods of time. This is an assumption of our liability agreement with The University of Tennessee.
6. Many teachers have found that Ruff Reading visits can be incorporated into the Literacy Block and Center Rotation in their classroom. That way the visit is a part of the curriculum rather than a separate activity. Students will understand the expectations for their Ruff Reading visit since it flows with the normal routine of the classroom.

Volunteers: First Visit

The first visit to the classroom with your pet is geared toward introduction and teaching the students how to interact with your pet; you will be accompanied by the H.A.B.I.T. monitor who will coordinate the first visit and walk you through the process. You will want to make sure you have the monitor and teacher's contact information (phone or e-mail) so you can ask questions and be able to reach her/him in case plans change.

1. Explain to the students how they may approach your pet. How and where is it okay to touch and pet your dog or cat?
2. Explain to the students how to speak to your pet. Is it okay for them to give commands? When is it appropriate (if ever)? What tone of voice and type of behavior is expected around your pet?



3. Before your first reading visit, you may want to contact the teacher to discuss her/his goals with the Ruff Reading program. Ruff Reading can address social, emotional, and academic goals. You will want to discuss the teacher's methods and expectations in these areas, as a team approach will be most beneficial for students. However, please remember that the teacher is responsible for setting goals.
4. The H.A.B.I.T. monitor will return to observe your second visit to the classroom for your support and to make sure that all parties are safe and satisfied with the visit. The monitor will observe every 4-6 weeks to make sure that the visits continue to follow H.A.B.I.T. guidelines and are satisfying for all parties.

Classroom Routines

When it's time to start your reading visits, there are some classroom routines which may create smoother visits for you, your pet, and your readers. These are not rules, but our experienced volunteers recommend these strategies to create an orderly and effective reading time.

1. Because we don't want to have a disruptive effect on the classroom, you may decide to wait at the door of the classroom for the teacher to acknowledge and invite you and your pet into the classroom. This may set the tone for an orderly beginning for your visit. Some teachers have found it helpful for the students to remain seated while you enter the room.
2. Some volunteers have found it helpful to have a greeting routine for the entire classroom. The volunteer and teacher may devise a way for each student to greet the pet whether or not the student will read that day. This is dependent on the teacher's goals for the program.
3. In most situations, there is a special area designated for the reading visits. Optimally, it should be out of high traffic areas in the classroom so that your pet will not be constantly distracted, and reading won't be disrupted.



4. In general, the classroom should be quiet to avoid distracting your pet. The other students may be busy at their desks or at learning centers around the room.
5. There should be some method to determine the order of the readers; the teacher may post on the board the names of students in the order that they will read. Or children may read in a numerical order; other teachers will break the classroom into groups and have small groups of students read together. Some teachers create a rotation for one small group of students to read each week, allowing for longer visits with your pet.
6. Some teachers prescribe that students read a certain number of pages or for a period of time, dependent on her/his goals for the program. It's also helpful to have a way for one student to alert another that it's their turn to read, without the teacher having to notify each reader.
7. If you have more than one reader at a time, they might take turns reading a page.

Reader Support

The purpose of the Ruff Reading program is to create a fun and affirming learning experience for the student participants. While keeping the teacher's goals in mind, our job is to share our pets to create an encouraging and judgment-free learning environment. To that end, we want to avoid frustrating or unpleasant reading experiences. While the Ruff Reading program is basically a student reading to a pet, the volunteer can assist the reader and positively reinforce their efforts. There are some simple things you can do to help your students enjoy the reading activity.

1. If a reader is struggling, offer help: give the word, or help the reader to sound it out. Help the reader understand how the letters and combinations make the sounds. Look for smaller words inside larger words; point out the beginning and ending sounds. Give simple, general rules, like an "e" on the end of a word usually creates a long vowel sound. Identify the root word and suffixes and prefixes that change the words.
2. If your reader has special needs and/or is really struggling, you can read the story to him/her, highlighting the words as you read them. There is value in helping the child to recognize the words as they are being read.
3. Use the pictures in the reading material to help the child use context to figure out a word.
4. Save some time for the student to interact with your pet. An activity like petting or brushing the pet is enjoyable. If it is appropriate for your pet, you and the teacher may devise an activity like a small game of "find it" that the students may enjoy as a group or individually.



5. The success or effort of some children can be reinforced with tangible objects like stickers or an ink stamp that remind them of their good experience with you and the pet. If you are interested in

something of this sort, be sure to discuss it with your teacher first. These types of reinforcements are not required, but you may enjoy giving a tangible reinforcement, with the teacher's guidance.

6. When it's time for the session to end, try to identify something concrete that the reader did that you liked: "I really liked the way you figured out the words by sounding them out," or "I really enjoyed how you read with feeling." Identifying something specific helps the student focus on what they did well.

The Ruff Reading program can instill confidence in our readers, which is one of the most important parts of the process. Students must feel that they can learn to read or improve their skills, even if it takes a while. Spending time with your pet will help readers feel more excited about working toward the goal. When students feel excited about coming to read with your pet, they will enjoy the process of learning to read more. If you positively reinforce their efforts, they are going to carry away good feelings about themselves, and the personal and educational benefits can spiral upwards from there. The more fun they have and the better they feel about themselves, the faster they'll learn.

Some Last Thoughts and General Pointers

While we can support learning activities in the classroom, our job as Ruff Reading volunteers is not "teaching." Our job on the team is supportive. We want the students to have pleasurable experiences learning with our pets; students may learn about handling emotions, humane treatment of pets, reading, or any variety of topics. Other volunteers have shared some valuable pointers.

1. Remember that you and your pet represent The University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine. When you are making a H.A.B.I.T. visit with your pet's H.A.B.I.T. scarf, you are the face of H.A.B.I.T. to the people, office staff, teachers, children, and parents which you meet. They will form an impression of our program which ultimately can impact the work of all our current and future volunteers.
2. When visiting a school, you must always sign in at the office or designated location of the H.A.B.I.T. Sign-In Book. When you and your pet are in the school office, it is important to be unobtrusive. There will likely be lots of other activity going on around you, and it's our goal to get in and out without creating disturbance. If the office staff seeks you out, you may include them in your visit.
3. We strive to schedule school visits so that H.A.B.I.T. pets will not meet; dogs that are great with people may not like other dogs as much. If you see another H.A.B.I.T. volunteer signing in at the school office, please hang back and wait for that volunteer to clear the area, out of sight, before you bring your pet in. We don't want our companion animals sorting out their differences inside the school.
4. Schools have the option of requiring permission slips from only the classroom you'll visit or from the entire enrollment of the school. If the school has chosen the classroom specific option, then children other than those in your classroom may not interact with your pet. Encourage the children you meet in the school hallways to wave, but not touch, your pet. If the school chooses the blanket permission option, any child in the school may interact with your pet with your permission. If there is a child who does not have permission, the adult in charge of the child (teacher or aide escorting groups in the hallway) should indicate which child should not have contact.

5. If you are asked to give an interview about your work with the H.A.B.I.T. program, please contact the H.A.B.I.T. office with that information before the interview is given. We will be happy to help you with basic facts about the program which may be useful when answering interviewer questions. These types of exposure are also good opportunities to recruit new volunteers; so we want to be sure accurate contact information is included in the coverage.
6. However much you may enjoy and want to visit schools, ultimately your pet must enjoy it, too. If you observe that your pet is fearful, you may see unexpected and undesirable behaviors. It won't be fun for anyone if your pet is scared or scares a student.
7. Even a great school dog or cat may become tired during a visit, due to stimulation from students or conditions in the classroom. An average visit may be an hour, though you may shorten the visit time based on observations of your pet. It's important that they look forward to visiting the school and have only positive associations with the visit.
8. In any visit situation, your dog should be maintained on a short leash so that you have control and wandering is not a temptation. Also, choke or pinch collars are not permitted on visits.
9. Please feel free to share any fun or encouraging stories with the H.A.B.I.T. office. H.A.B.I.T. coordinators use your stories to explain the great things that can happen in the Ruff Reading program.

Beyond these pointers, rely on your classroom teacher and H.A.B.I.T. school monitor to provide guidance and support for your H.A.B.I.T. visits. The teacher will help you focus your activities to meet the goals of the classroom, and the monitor will be there to give you guidance in all aspects of your visits. With these supportive elements in place, we hope that you will enjoy working with your pet in the Ruff Reading program. Thanks for sharing your pet and for all you do for our community!

