Summer Reading on a Shoestring
We are all feeling the effects of the economic times in which we are living – at home and at work. In the past you may have had funds to pay for professional entertainers as part of your Summer Reading Program. Those times are gone. That doesn’t mean you still can’t have great programs; with some thought and ingenuity it is possible. Use your in-house talent and expertise. If you do storytimes, tours, after school programs, you have the start for bigger programs. Here is how we took our favorite themes and turned them into event programs.

You know what book series are popular in your library – We have some suggestions for activities to turn those favorite series into fun Special Event programs!
Kids love games – keep them wanting to come back week after week by turning your library collection into a scavenger hunt, or putting out simple find-it or name-it games. We have some easy games that kids love!
Special Events programs based on favorite books and series will attract readers who are already fans and introduce new readers, and parents of future readers, to literary favorites. DO IT YOURSELF!
If you do storytimes, you already have the seeds for bigger Event programs: Flannel and Prop stories, Tell-and-Draw stories, Audience Participation stories, Songs.
If you have enthusiastic staff and volunteers, you have the talent to create fun new activities.
Here’s how we took our favorite themes from favorite books and turned them into EVENT programs.

Pick your Program Kit themes based on your intended audience. A Percy Jackson event will bring in older elementary and middle school students, of course, while a Dr. Seuss party will attract families with much younger children. You’ll still want to have activities for any age.
Setting up a Program Kit can be fun! Find a portable box, bin or bag. Collect costumes, posters, puppets and other props that could be used as program elements. Ask staff and family, especially anyone who loves thrift stores! Visit publisher or author Websites for ideas and reproducible activities. Make a list props or games for volunteers to make based on their talents: Tech-savvy people can design electronic games, sewers can sew simple balls or costumes, artists can create posters... Have a festive workday to get many people together to make the props and games. Provide treats and call it a creative party!

Picture books and even chapters in novels can be adapted to Audience Participation stories, or use old favorites like Too Much Noise. Even prereaders love to hold up cards or masks of characters as a story is read. Readers in the audience can use a copy of a short script with each part highlighted for Readers’ Theater. Loads of scripts are available online and in past Texas Reading Club manuals, or take a fun page or passage with several characters from a book, and create your own.
“Mad Lib”-style Fill-in-the-blank stories are not only silly fun, but they have the added bonus of reviewing the parts of speech with the kids. Choose an action-packed page or passage in a book, and write it out leaving blanks where the important words are. For the fill-in words, stick with verbs and nouns and adjectives, and if appropriate, body parts or animals are easy blanks for younger audience members to fill in. Without giving them any idea about the story, ask the audience to raise their hands with suggestions for the parts of speech needed to fill in the blanks. It is fastest to ask for all the nouns at once, then all the verbs, etc. When all spaces are filled in, read the story aloud. Print up copies of Create-Your-Own Story so kids can take it home to get help from family members. If you have access to large paper and a laminator, a giant version of the story can be used again and again with overhead markers. We have some you can look at.

Sock puppets are really good at telling knock-knock jokes or reading poems. Print out the jokes or poems, and invite reliable audience members (teachers, camp counselors, parents, teen volunteers) to read them for the audience.
If your audiences are not too large and you have the space and the helpers, games are a fun addition to a Special Event program.

Team Games such as Family Feud and Jeopardy Trivia created on PowerPoint can be presented in competitive mode, with prizes for winning teams, or in full audience participation mode, with applause for audience members who answer correctly. Some versions, like Picture Book Jeopardy, can be played even with prereaders! Here is family Feud...

And here is the home screen of Percy Jackson Jeopardy Trivia game
Create a word search on one of the many online Word-search makers with words from your book or theme. Blow up the word search and laminate it so kids can circle words with overhead markers. Provide paper copies for the kids to take home to finish.

Action games are fun for all ages because they can be played alone or against an opponent. This is a Captain Underpants Underwear-in-the-Toilet toss. The balls are inexpensive children’s underpants (new of course) stuffed with fiberfill and sewn shut, but a cheaper ball can be made from rolled or wadded up toilet paper covered in clear tape. One toilet came from a building surplus warehouse, and the toilet that glows in the dark was donated by a staff member!
Matching games can be made on almost any subject: Pictures of book covers in a series, pictures of characters from Dr. Seuss or Mo Willems, or just pictures of fancy underpants from clip art as in this Captain Underpants matching game. Print them or glue them to cardstock, and laminate them for long use.

Paper Underwear Fan Game is made from a shower curtain and cardstock fans taped to a craft stick. The kids decorate and cut out fancy paper underwear, and try to fan it out of the “ring” before their opponents do.

Plungers (new of course) make great Ring-Toss targets, and underwear waistband elastic (or purchased lengths of wide pajama elastic) can be stretched and shot, rubber-band style, at the plungers.
Bowling and Goofy Golf Games can be adapted to almost any theme. Bowling pins are milk bottles covered with pictures or characters. Tape down lane markings, and use any soft or inflatable ball that rolls. Bookends covered with character pictures with a hole cut out make a great Goofy Golf course. Purchase kiddie clubs from discount stores or make your own clubs from rolled up newspaper with a tape wad knob on one end.

A Fish Pond is a popular activity at any event, but you don't have haul around a large tub or pool. Reuse a large plastic snack container (ask teachers to save these!) as your “pond,” and fishing poles with magnets attached to the line. Kids can fish for stickers, tattoos, die cut shapes or bookmarks. A Basketball net over a door can be adapted to many themes by taping a different picture to the backboard. Use foam balls or rolled up tape balls.

We have found this Search Game to be the most popular game ever with preschoolers and early elementary students. They want to do this every week! Simply hide dozens of shapes around your program room, and let the kids find them. Put them in plain sight if you have mostly preschoolers, or tuck them under tables and trashcans if you have older kids. Kids can round up die-cut cows or buses to return to a “Corral” or “Bus Depot” (count them before hiding
them,) or they can keep the shapes or characters they find. (Best to have twice as many shapes as your have audience members.)
You can even mark one or two of the shapes with a special mark, such as a star, if you have prizes to give away to only a few lucky finders.

Put out tape and wood craft sticks so kids can turn their found shapes into stick puppets.

Publisher and author Websites offer many games, especially coloring sheets, word searches, crossword puzzles and other paper games. Look for the “Teacher” or “Grown-up” pages. These and other games are from www.pilkey.com.
Professor Poopypants Name-Change-O Chart from www.pilkey.com. Put out blank stickers so participants can write their silly new name and wear it proudly.

It's fun for the kids to leave a program with something they have made. With large crowds, keep it simple. Put out a sample, and the material, and see what the kids create!

Tape a character to a paper strip headband and you have a hat!
Tape a character to a wood craft stick and you have a puppet!
Recycle old cardboard for swords and shields.
Turn paper bags into Backpacks.
Turn cardboard tubes into binoculars or telescopes.
Glue characters to door hanger shapes, or make your own picture book starring your favorite characters.
Check those Websites for Art activities:
Pigeon activities from www.hyperionbooksforchildren.com
More at www.pigeonpresents.com

Make it easy for the next person who uses the kit:
Laminate signs.
Keep copy masters, signs, booklists, outline, instructions and craft samples in a folder or envelope.
Tape on or include a schedule of where the kit will be used next.

More popular Series - Reuse or recreate many elements for other programs:
Create a silly fractured fairytale for a Sisters Grimm program.
Hide cows to round up for a Hank the Cowdog program, and cats for a Skippyjon Jones party, and school bus shapes for a Magic School Bus program.
Make swords and shields for a Warriors program.
Make Skippyjon or Geronimo Stilton mouse ears or Fancy Nancy headbands from paper strips.
Draw your own Diary for a Wimpy Kid program.
Tape different character pictures to plastic bottles for bowling pins.
Tape different character pictures to bookends for golf holes.
Tape different character pictures to basketball backboard.
Hide different shapes for each program.
Use different die cuts or stickers in fish pond for each program.

Set it up and it runs itself. Once children discover the games they come back each week to see what the next one is. Only maintenance is keeping paper supply stocked and prizes, if you choose to have them.
Cheap prizes are everywhere! Recycled art can be made into bookmarks and buttons.
Cut up ALA Graphics and publisher catalogs, graphic novels falling apart, calendars, books jackets, wallpaper samples, Sunday comics, wrapping paper, and ribbon, lace or fabric trims.
Print your own stickers. Save promotional items, like activity
booklets and bookmarks, that come from movie studios or publishers. With a tiny budget, you can get loads of stickers, tattoos, necklaces, fancy pencils, etc. from Oriental Trading, SmileMakers and other online toy companies.

With Scavenger hunts, kids learn library skills on the sly while they practice reading and writing skills, and they discover new areas or collections in your library!

Easiest to set up, and easy for kids to play every week, and they don’t realize they are practicing their reading and learning library skills.

At the beginning of the summer, print up a sign introducing Flat Stan, and print a “congratulations” and “take one prize please” message to glue to a prize envelope. (We laminate our envelopes to survive heavy use.)

Each week tape a new clue to the sign leading the kids to some area of your collection or building (copy machine, information kiosk, water fountain.) Give a call number or directional clue. Stuff your envelope with inexpensive
flat prizes (die cut shapes, stickers, bookmarks, tattoos and pencils work well) and hide the envelope where the clue indicates. Check the prize envelope after busy times, and keep a supply of extra prizes. If your prizes are inexpensive, kids won’t take more than one, and they will play just for the fun of it.

Themed scavenger hunts are more involved, but they can make Spring Break or Children’s Book Week times a little more special while really reinforcing reading and writing skills. Start with your message: a word, phrase or sentence that tells where a prize is hiding or conveys other information.

Photocopy or die cut enough characters or shapes for each letter or word of your message. Write (or type and tape) each letter or word on a character or shape, along with the number that will correspond to the answer sheet. (Just to be safe, lay out your shapes in numerical order to make sure they spell out the message correctly.)

Tape the shapes up in plain sight, and a little higher than babies and toddlers can reach, around a designated part of your library (make a master answer sheet for yourself with the location of each shape!) Hide your prize envelope where the message indicates. Put up a sign with instructions near the answer sheets and pencils.

Be ready to give lots of clues, and if you tell them the locations by call numbers,
you can sneak in library skills. Keep some spare shapes on hand in case a few go missing.

We do allow teams to play, so a big brother or sister (or adult) can write down the words as prereaders find the shapes.

Same type of hunt – different theme! Basketballs photocopied to orange paper were easy to spot for a March Madness Spring Break Scavenger hunt, and the prizes were pencils printed with sports balls hidden in among the sports books.
This hunt can be used two ways – just like the theme hunt with Waldo as the theme and kids randomly search for Waldo. Or you can have participants use the “Guide” to search in specific places. This again sneaks in library skills and learning where specific locations are in the library. Put Waldos up in the order listed on the guide. This makes it easier to give hints if someone is missing a letter.


Plastic containers filled with sand or kitty litter. Put in different objects. These can be theme oriented if you like. Then hot glue or tape lid on tightly. Have a sheet with pictures or names of objects inside so the kids will know what they all they are looking for. Optional, you can have an answer sheet with number of lines as objects. They can check their sheet with the one you’ve provided.
Pictures of characters instead of actual stuffed toys can be displayed for a Guess the Character game. Adults and teens enjoy this as much as the kids. Keep or post an answer sheet with the names of the characters and their books /series and authors and call numbers.

Kids love anything mysterious, that has the potential of also being gross. They put their hands in the opening and guess what the object is by sense of touch. ‘Sticky hands” are always a favorite. Some find it irresistible to pull the items out of the box. These are perfect for Halloween time. There are different types of touch boxes. This box has one object in each of the four sections. Another type has only one opening but several objects inside. Have a list of objects displayed somewhere for the kids to confirm their guesses. It’s also a good idea to have hand sanitizer close by.