A summer reading program at a small library, paper first

Peabody guide · updated 2026-10-31

How to run a summer reading program at a small library or school with no software to buy: the challenge, a take-home pack, a desk tally and a report for your board.

A summer reading program needs four things: a finish line a child can see, a way to count books for the readers who want a screen and the readers who want paper, a count at the desk for your board, and a fair way to hand out the prizes at the end. Most of the software sold to libraries does all four, and is priced by a quote that a small branch or a school library often can't justify. This guide runs the same program on paper first, with free tools from Peabody's summer kit for the parts that are easier on a screen. Like the rest of Peabody, it is free through the end of 2026, and nothing in it collects a reader's name, card number or details.

Why paper first

Paper is not the fallback. In the threads librarians write about switching to an app, the same things come up: a quarter or more of families still bring paper logs, staff end up typing the paper logs in by hand, and some families sign up less when the program moves to a screen. A program that starts from paper and adds a screen for the families who want one keeps everyone, and the staff do no data entry at all.

So every part below has a paper version, and the screen versions keep nothing about the reader anywhere but the reader's own device.

Step 1: Set the finish line

Count books, not minutes. A book is something a child can see on a shelf; a minute is something a grown-up has to vouch for, and counting minutes favours the readers who already read the most. Set the finish line by age so a five-year-old and a twelve-year-old both have a reachable goal.

- Age: Under 5 · About: read to them · A thirteen-week summer: 20 books read aloud (favourites read again count)
- Age: 5 to 7 · About: kindergarten to 2nd grade · A thirteen-week summer: 20 books, read-alouds count
- Age: 8 to 10 · About: 3rd to 5th grade · A thirteen-week summer: 12 books
- Age: 11 and up · About: 6th grade and up · A thirteen-week summer: 8 longer books

Those are the numbers in Peabody's own summer challenge for 2027, which runs from 1 June to 31 August. If your summer has different dates or you want different numbers, make

your own: pick the dates and the finish lines and you get a link and a poster with a QR code for the desk.

Step 2: Hand out the take-home pack

Print the summer kit's pack and copy it for the desk. Four sheets:

- A letter to families, with blank lines for your library's name, your dates and your finish lines, and a QR code for the families who want the screen version.
- The summer reading log, a week to a row for thirteen weeks. There is no nightly signature line on purpose: a grown-up can initial the week, or not at all.
- The library passport, twelve boxes to stamp, one a week. It is the part younger readers ask about most, and it brings families back through the door.
- A shelf of twenty spines to colour, one for every book.

A family can do the whole program on these four sheets and never touch a screen.

Step 3: Offer the screen, for those who want it

Put the poster up at the desk. A reader scans the code, picks an animal face (never a name: brothers and sisters each pick their own on one device) and taps to log each book, one of Peabody's free stories from the library or any book from home or your shelves. The shelf on the screen fills a spine a book, and the reader can print their chart at any time.

What they log stays on their own device. You don't get a list of readers, and you don't need one: they bring the certificate or the coloured chart to the desk at the end, exactly as the paper readers do.

Step 4: Count at the desk

The summer kit's desk tally runs on the desk's own computer or tablet. Each time a reader signs up, tap the button for their age; each time one finishes, tap the finish button for their age. That's the whole job. It shows today's, this week's and the summer's counts, and it never asks for a name.

At the end of the summer it prints the report for your board: a week to a row, sign-ups and finishes by age, and the share of readers who finished. It also saves as a spreadsheet if your board or your state library wants the numbers in a file. When the summer is over, clear it.

Step 5: Check the finish, then give the prize

Every certificate a reader prints from a Peabody challenge carries a finish code of eight letters and numbers. Staff type it into the check page linked from the summer kit, and it says whether the code is a real finish, of which challenge, on which day. It catches a typo and a code someone made up, with no list of readers behind it. A paper reader brings their coloured shelf, as always.

The prize itself is yours to choose. Peabody's view, for what it's worth, is that the certificate is the prize and a book to keep is the best extra one; food rewards and points stores teach a child that reading is the price of something else.

What to tell your board

- How many signed up, by age, and how many finished. The desk tally's report.
- What it cost. The paper and the toner.
- What was collected about children. Nothing: no names, no ages beyond the four bands, no card numbers, no accounts.

A week-by-week plan

- When: Early May · What: Set the finish line and the dates. Print the poster and a stack of packs. Tell the schools nearby.
- When: Last week of May · What: Put the poster at the desk and the packs beside it. Clear last summer's desk tally.
- When: June to August · What: Tap at the desk for every sign-up and every finish. Stamp passports.
- When: Each Friday · What: Glance at the week's counts. If finishes are low, a reminder in the newsletter helps.
- When: Early September · What: Print the report for the board. Save the spreadsheet. Clear the tally.

Questions librarians ask

Can we use this alongside the software our system already pays for?

Yes. The take-home pack and the desk tally work with any program: if your system's app counts the readers on screens, the desk tally can count only the paper readers, and you add the two.

What if two staff members use different computers?

Keep the tally on one device at the desk. If you need to move it, save it as a file on one computer and open it on the other; the file holds the counts and nothing else.

Can we change the finish lines halfway through?

You can, but it is kinder not to. A reader who was told twelve and is at ten will feel the goal move. If a group is finishing early, offer a second challenge, such as Book Bingo, rather than raising the line.

Does a finish code prove the child read the books?

No, and nothing does. It proves the certificate came from a real finish in the tracker, as a coloured chart proves someone coloured it. Both are honour systems, which is how summer reading has always worked.

Free at peabody.kids/guides/summer-reading-program-small-library