

Book Bento Boxes: Another Bodacious Book Report Format

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**“Any book worth reading
is worth sharing.”**

-Nicolas Princen

I can still recall my first encounter with a bento box. It was at an Asian fusion restaurant that had recently opened in the town where I live. One of my colleagues ordered a bento box lunch, and it piqued my curiosity, so I decided to get one as well. I loved everything about the bento—the delicious array of foods and their artistic presentation in an open-topped black lacquered box with bright red sections.

“Bento is a single-portion take-out or home-packed meal common in Japanese cuisine. A traditional bento holds rice or noodles, fish or meat, with pickled and cooked vegetables, in a box. Containers range from mass-produced disposables to hand-crafted lacquerware.”

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bento)



Recently, I learned that teachers are inviting students to create **Book Bentos**. This non-edible version of a traditional bento includes the text the student has read and 5-7 physical objects that relate to it. The objects are arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner, typically without overlap as if they are in separate compartments. The student also provides a written rationale for each item (e.g., why the object was selected, why it is important to the text). This rationale might include a relevant direct quotation from the text.

An interactive image of a book bento is at www.thinglink.com/scene/1124773740937216001. In the center of this bento is the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Around it are a couple sticks of gum, a pocket watch, a turtle, a white camelia, a pair of glasses, a piece of cake, and a bottle of Coca-Cola™ in a brown paper bag. Each item has a hot link to a pop-up written explanation, such as the one below for the coke bottle. (With [ThingLink](#), the hot spot could also be linked to an audio explanation recorded by the student.)

“Coca-Cola™ bottle (in bag): Shows that people should not judge a book by its cover. Dolphus Raymond did not want to be known as having a bad reputation so he pretended he was a drunk, when in reality he was drinking Coca-Cola. ‘I tried to give ‘em a reason, you see. It helps folks if they can latch onto a reason... folks can say Dolphus Raymond’s in the clutches of whiskey--that’s why he won’t change his ways... that’s why he lives the way he does.’ (Lee, p. 228)”

If your school does not subscribe to ThingLink, students can write their justifications on index cards or sticky notes and attach them to the physical items. You can find examples of beautiful book bentos at www.instagram.com/bookbento/?hl=en. A web search for “book bento images” will also yield examples.

I have long been a proponent of alternatives to the traditional book report format. “With its combination of personal expression, visual arts, technology, creativity, and hands-on

compilation of contents” (<https://jenniebales.wordpress.com/2018/09/24/book-bento-boxes/>), a book bento is an engaging way for students to share their insights about their personal reading. As one Instagram post proclaimed, a book bento is a “book recommendation with a side of stuff.”

If you’re not already including book bentos as an option for reading response, I hope you’ll look into implementing this strategy in the near future.

“Food may be fuel for our bodies, but reading—and the ideas, emotions, and insights we encounter in the process—is fuel for our hearts, souls, and minds.” -P. David Pearson

Image credit: <https://pixabay.com/photos/japan-meal-japanese-food-asian-1743370/>