# Reading Allowed

## *Making Sure the First "R" Comes First*

by
**Steve Peha**

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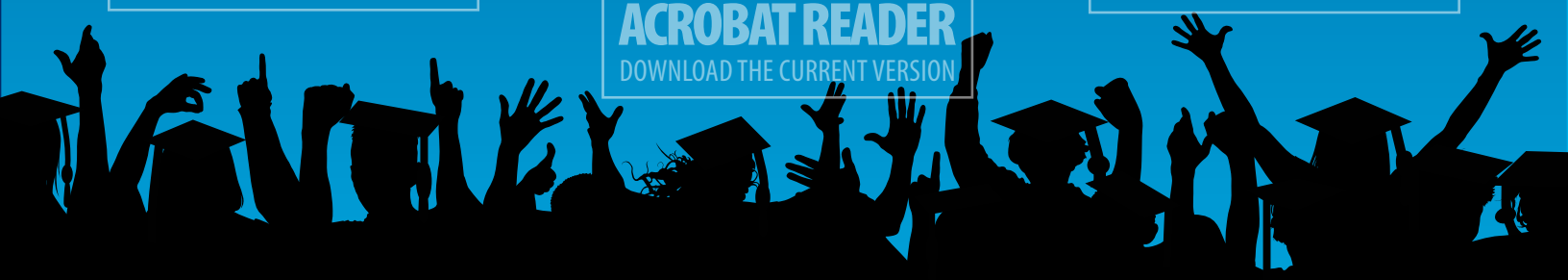

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# READING ALLOWED

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With...

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# INTRODUCTION

## Reading Allowed

*Making Sure the First "R" Comes First*

What gets tested, gets taught. That's one of the guiding principles of education reform. And it certainly appears to be working. But is it working the way we want it to with regard to reading?

In a recent *New York Times* article, *(Mission: Making a Love of Reading Happen, October 14, 2007),* a parent wrote of his surprise and sadness at learning that his middle school-aged children weren't reading in reading: "Not until back-to-school night did I realize what was actually going on. The 'reading' teacher had a stack of workbooks. They were going to be reading short essays and answering questions: a full year of test prep."

In many schools, stories like this aren't news, they're norms. A colleague of ours spent a year teaching fifth grade in a state well-known for its testing system. Her reading time was filled with mandated test prep passages and multiple choice practice tests. She wasn't able to have her kids read books until the last month of school when testing was over. Perhaps even worse was the fact that she'd just received an M.A. from an Ivy League

university where she studied under one of the nation's top literacy experts. Frustrated by the fact that she was unable to use the high-quality teaching she'd spent so much time and money to develop, she left the classroom as more than 50% of new teachers do.

Just for the record, let me say that I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with testing. And there's no doubt that the pressure of measurement is beginning to move some schools forward in positive ways. But some trends are not positive, and the most insidious of these is the alarming rise of teach-to-the-test curricula and yearlong test preparation. Reading tests are part of life and kids must be well prepared for them. But kids are best prepared for reading tests by being taught how to read. And they are best taught how to read with books they love, time to read them, and teachers who show them the power of being literate.

Like most educators, I feel the tension these days between teaching and testing. The promise of standards-based reform is that some day no such distinction will exist, teaching and testing will be perfectly aligned, and we'll go about our business without the confusion, guilt, and acrimony so many of us struggle with at present. But this Golden Age of Alignment seems a long way off, and with reading, in particular, it's hard to see how bubbling in answers on a test will ever align with enjoying a novel or a newspaper.

For now, then, we face the challenge of deciding for ourselves how reading testing fits into reading teaching. Too many

of us, it seems to me, choose extremes that leave us swinging back and forth like a pendulum. Sometimes we ignore the tests completely; at other times tests are all we think about. But the solution isn't either-or, it's and. To that end, here is my set of core principles for reading instruction designed to maximize students' love of reading and level of reading skill while at the same time ensuring test readiness and high scores.

**Make individual reading the focus of a student's experience.** Reading is an individual sport and readers like to play with their own equipment. The majority of time kids spend learning to read should be spent with their nose in a book they have chosen because they want to read it, not because it represents the kind of material that is likely to appear on a test. Kids must read voluminously and with such regularity that reading becomes the true habit that it is for literate adults. Shared texts have their place as mechanisms for introducing reading strategies and for building classroom community. But a child's career as a reader should not be dominated by a series of test prep passages, state-approved essays, or multi-week units on a single textbook chapter or whole-class novel.

**Guide kids in making good book choices.** If kids are going to read their own books, we have to let them make their own book choices. But if we give them free choice, they may avoid certain types of reading that we know are important. The solution is guided choice—giving kids advice, criteria, and appropriate options that lead them to consistently choose books they like, books they can read, and books that will help them become better readers.

**Focus on the development of fluency in high-interest texts to raise the reading levels of our lowest readers.** Test prepara-

tion is focused on reading skills. But if kids are so low they can't read the test, it's not likely those skills will be of use to them. For our lowest readers, we must focus on rapidly raising reading levels. The best way to do this is to get them into books they like and can read comfortably, to increase the amount of time they spend reading, and to concentrate skill instruction on reading fluency as we guide them in gradually raising the levels of the books they are choosing.

**Favor authentic texts relevant to kids lives over contrived texts relevant to testing.** One irony of our age is that while kids seem to be reading less, they have many more books to choose from. Over the last 20 years, the market for books targeted at kids has grown dramatically with significant improvements in quality as well as quantity. But our classroom libraries have not. Books are the most important materials we need to teach reading well; not textbooks, or anthologies, or basal readers, or state-approved test-prep packets, but good old-fashioned books.

**Apply the strategies of reading in Language Arts to the content of reading across the curriculum.** Content-area reading presents the greatest challenge to our kids—especially as they enter the secondary grades. Why not bring Language Arts strategies into content-area classrooms? This helps students by giving them extra support where they need it most. It also helps math, social studies, science, and other teachers who may not have an instructional background in reading.

**Teach reading skills in the context of reading, not testing.** Rather than segregating our skills focus to periods of test preparation, it's better to teach these skills throughout all the reading kids do—especially when those skills can be taught in the context of texts they have chosen themselves. When readers

have an emotional investment in their reading, they're more likely to appreciate learning new skills that will help them enjoy it more.

**Treat testing as a genre.** Test reading is different from normal reading. That's why we need to prepare kids for it. So let's treat it like the genre that it is. We teach genres all the time—mystery, biography, historical fiction, etc. Why not teach test reading the same way? Delivering a 3-to-4-week unit a month or so before kids take a test seems like an appropriate, and not excessive, thing to do. Spending 10% of a year on test preparation, with 90% spent teaching kids to read is a healthy balance that supports high reading achievement and high test scores.

Let's teach kids to be readers first and testers second. Readers define themselves by what they like to read and how they use reading to make their way in the world. Reading instruction, therefore, should be based on kids' reading preferences and the meaningful application of reading skills to the challenges of real life. One of those challenges is testing. But it's not the only challenge, nor is it the most important.

Helping kids become better readers has more to do with teaching than with testing. We should question putting more and more time into test preparation at the expense of practicing the skill we want to test. We should also question the materials we use to teach reading and make sure that books—*real* books—are by far the most prominent. But one thing we should never question is reading's status as the first "R" of education. No matter what we disagree on, we can all agree on that. And from that

agreement perhaps we can develop a philosophy of instruction that says, like a brightly painted-sign on the door of every classroom: "READING ALLOWED."

# My Personal Reading Curriculum

*Key Ideas That Ground Me in My Teaching*

Teachers are under great pressure to change their teaching these days. Because reading is the first "R" the change here has been particularly sweeping, so much so that it's easy for some of us to feel swept off our feet into styles of teaching we're not comfortable with.

Truth is, districts *can* tell teachers what and how to teach, and more are doing exactly that. So each of us needs a way of connecting with what's most important in our practice and infusing our core beliefs into whatever methods we are asked to use.

Over the years, I've come up with several ideas that I've tried to make a consistent part of my teaching.

**Teach kids how to make their own good choices.** The first choice in reading is what to read. Choice is the key to motivation, to ownership, and to the essential goal of making sure kids

are reading regularly at their independent reading level. Choice also makes reading with a class full of readers more interesting. When everyone is reading the same text, the same way, at the same time, individual readers lose the opportunity to make the individual discoveries that are so crucial to getting excited about reading and to becoming good at it. I want kids to have choices in their reading so they can learn to become choosy readers.

**Give kids real things to do.** If we want kids to develop real-world reading skills, they have to be engaged in real-world reading activities. I don't want them to write book reports, I want them to write book reviews just like the ones adults publish online and in newspapers and magazines. I also want kids to read in their interest areas. In order for kids to learn about informational texts, they have to read them for authentic purposes. Just like adults, I want kids to read not only for entertainment but also to solve real problems and to explore important issues in their lives.

**Offer practical, reusable strategies when kids get stuck.** I want the bulk of my instruction to focus on techniques that help readers solve the most common problems they encounter. To do that, I offer much of my instruction one-on-one through conferencing as kids are reading in authentic self-selected texts. I want to emphasize the process of reading so kids can master techniques that will serve them in any reading situation they encounter.

**Surround kids with models of quality.** I want to model good reading as often as I can. I want kids to hear me reading well and to follow my thinking as I share my thoughts out loud. I want to give them a language to describe good reading based on six qualities: speed, accuracy, phrasing, expression, understanding, and

thinking. And I want them to listen critically but constructively to each other as they read and express their understanding of the texts they encounter. Finally, I want them to read good books and other high quality texts of all kinds. I want them to develop a sense of what they consider to be good writing, and I want them to have their own lists of favorite books, authors, and genres.

**Help kids learn to evaluate themselves and set goals for their own improvement.** With each year that goes by, I become more convinced that self-assessment is the most valuable skill I can teach. Kids who can evaluate themselves and set goals for their own improvement are more engaged in their learning and more likely to make progress regardless of the instruction they receive. I want kids to have high expectations for their performance that go far beyond minimum state requirements. Most of all, I want them to work with me, not as students, but as partners in their own learning, taking responsibility for the kinds of readers they want to become.

**Treat kids as individuals striving to reach their full potential.** With so much emphasis on standardized tests, it's easy to get caught up in the notion that our goal is to help every student develop the same minimal level of skills. But rather than working for minimum competency, I want to work for maximum potential. I don't want the same learning goals for each student; I want individualized learning goals that support the notion of every child being the best he or she can be. Far from being standardized, I want my instruction to be as individualized and as differentiated as possible. Different readers need to read different texts, they need to learn different strategies, and they need to pursue different projects. The best way to make sure we leave

no child behind is to push all children ahead as far and as fast as they will go.

**Make the work meaningful and relevant to kids' lives.** Reading is, first and foremost, the act of getting meaning from text. In order for kids to learn to read, their texts must be meaningful to them. No teacher, or curriculum, or entity can know better than readers themselves what texts will be meaningful and relevant to their lives. The work kids do around reading must make sense to them as a natural extension of who they are and why they read. Why do we give book talks and write book reviews? Because we want other readers to learn about the books we've read. Why do we choose the books we choose? Because we like certain authors or because we want to learn about certain subjects. If we want kids to become lifelong readers, we have to start by making reading a part of their lives.

When I think about how to teach reading, these ideas form the foundation of my approach. I can't realize all of them in every teaching situation. Sometimes the environment in which I'm working is too restrictive. But when I keep these ideas in mind, and when I work consistently to bring my teaching in line with them to the greatest degree possible, I know I provide kids with a valuable reading experience.

With all the change going on around us, it's easy to lose our way. Before we know it, we're teaching things we don't believe in to kids who don't care. That's when our teaching suffers and our work becomes laborious. Reading is a deeply personal endeavor. If we teach it without a strong connection to our ex-

perience as readers or to our values as teachers of reading, our work lacks integrity. We may not be able to teach exactly the way we want to all the time. But when we ground our teaching of reading in our own personal curriculum, we create for our students an experience that has the power to inspire them as much as reading inspires us.

# The Readers I Want

*Charting the Path*
*From High Expectations to High Achievement*

When I first stared working with kids, I made the mistake of mentally separating them into two groups: the kids I enjoyed teaching and the kids I didn't. Not surprisingly, my behaviors toward each group only reinforced the stereotype I had created and made it harder for me to be effective with kids in either group. In general, I was too punitive toward the kids I didn't want to teach and too permissive toward the kids I did.

As embarrassing as it is to admit that I carried around such prejudice, I'm proud to say that I learned good lessons from it.

**Student behavior, and not ability, is what I react to most strongly.** I'm not uncomfortable teaching kids of widely varying abilities in the same class. But I am uncomfortable dealing with many different kinds of behavior, particularly those behaviors that make it hard for me to teach or for kids to learn. It's not whether kids can do the work that worries me, it's how they go

about doing—or not doing—it.

**All kids can master effective learning behaviors if I make an effort to teach them.** I don't have to treat kids like babies, but I do have to tell them what I expect and, when I want them to act in ways they may not be used to, I have to teach those behaviors as explicit lessons, just like I would teach any other new learning.

**The key for me in helping kids improve their behaviors is treating them like the people I want them to be.** Once I lay out my expectations, I have to start by assuming that kids will meet them. If they don't, my first job is helping them assess their actions and make better choices. This may involve reminders or more practice, but it should never involve punishment. My goal should always be to help them find their way back to the positive behaviors they already know.

Before I can make any of these high-minded ideas come to life, however, I have to know what I'm looking for. Specifically, I have to answer the question, "What kind of readers do I want?" It's tempting to think of things like, "I want readers who always do what I tell them," or "I want readers who pass all their tests," but expectations like these aren't realistic or useful.

To develop my description of the readers I want, I thought about the kids I really enjoyed teaching and asked myself why I liked working with them so much. I realized that these kids weren't always the highest readers in class or even the easiest kids to work with. What they all had, however, was a set of qualities that made them better learners and, therefore, more likely to

benefit from the teaching I was offering. In the end, I came up with a set of qualities that define the readers I want.

**Passionate.** I want all kids to love reading, of course. But this never seems to happen even in the best of circumstances. So I tell kids that if they can't be passionate *about* reading, they can be passionate *around* reading. For example, they can be passionate about a particular subject area and do a lot of reading about it. They can be passionate about writing or talking about what they read. I've also worked with many kids who started out several years below their grade level but who developed a passion for learning how to be better readers. They might not have always enjoyed the books they had to read. But they thoroughly enjoyed getting through them and on to more challenging texts as the year progressed.

**Curious.** In my experience, the most successful readers have always been the most curious readers. These readers are always asking questions, always trying to learn something new. They never seem fully satisfied that what an author says is what an author means; no text is safe from their prying minds. Curious readers tend to choose challenging and sometimes offbeat books. They read many different kinds of texts and seem to realize that the "rules of reading" apply equally to all of them. Curious readers are also curious critics. They write interesting book reviews and ask great questions during book talks. They often want to know what other readers are reading and what they think about it.

**Engaged.** Kids spend a lot of time reading in class. I also

want them to spend a lot of time reading at home. But I worry about this. It's so easy for a reader just to sit there with a book open and not really do much. It's also possible for readers to read words but to disengage their mind from thinking much about the text. I tell students that engaged readers do a lot of thinking while they read, and that I look for evidence of this thinking in their journals, in my conferences with them, and when they share. They know that being engaged does not mean just sitting there quietly turning pages.

**Productive.** I want kids to read a lot and I want them to get a lot of good reading done. To help them with this, we keep track of reading rates, pages read, and books read. We can also count the book talks they've given, the papers they've written about books, and times they've given formal readings or made other presentations. While I would never say that quantity is more important than quality in any learning endeavor, the amount of reading kids do makes a huge impact on how they improve. This is because fluency is a key factor in reading improvement.

**Practical.** I want kids to get something useful out of their reading. While I certainly believe in reading for enjoyment, I don't believe that's the only reason to read, or that I serve kids well by basing all of their reading on the idea that it will be fun for them. When kids read fiction, I want them to reflect sincerely on important life lessons. I also want them to do a lot of nonfiction reading, particularly as it might relate to interests students might have or topics they are studying in other subject areas. I see no reason why a student can't read up for a Social Studies report or a science test during Language Arts.

**Aware.** It's kids' awareness of their reading that I value most

of all. When kids realize they aren't understanding something and take action to improve their comprehension; when kids realize that a book is too easy or too hard for them; when kids see patterns across multiple texts; when kids can tell me how they've improved and what they need to work on next—these are the things that tell me they are learning to be better readers.

The qualities I've described here won't show up on a test or in any listing of reading standards. They're really just my values. But I find that when I'm clear about them, kids meet more standards and pass more tests.

I suspect that every teacher has a set of values like this around reading. They might not be the same values as mine, but I'm sure they exist. I also suspect that most teachers don't share their values explicitly with their students. These values come out, of course; no one can hide them completely. But they may not reach kids in as clear and simple a way as possible.

This is a loss.

Reading is such an important thing. In school, we think of it as "The First R," the most important subject, and the foundation of academic success. But if we don't share with our kids the kind of readers we want them to be, many may never figure it out. Instead, they are likely to think of themselves as "school" readers, people who only read when forced to do so in school, and then only for a grade or to stay out of trouble.

I think there's also another good reason for sharing our values around reading with our students: it helps us share a bit of ourselves at the same time. When I list my criteria for the

kind of readers I want my students to be, I'm telling them how I see myself as a reader when I'm reading as well as I can. This helps students see me as a model of what a good reader can be.

# A Typical Day in Reading

*If There is Such a Thing, This is It!*

I like to start reading class with reading. I want the kids to get their books and their journals out and begin reading quietly without anyone having to say anything at all. This is our entry procedure. It takes a few days for the kids to get the hang of it, but with a little practice, it comes together well.

Regardless of what I have planned, I appreciate a few minutes of peace and quiet to get myself together and to conference with a few kids to see what issues they're dealing with. As I visit with them at their desks, I think through what I'm about to teach and consider possible modifications based on the needs I observe and the general mood of the classroom.

When I'm ready to begin, I call the class to order. I ask kids to open their journals, note the date, and tell me where they are in their books. They write down a page number and give me a sentence that completes this prompt: "Right now, I'm at the part where...." Doing this on a regular basis helps kids maintain a running summary of what they're reading and cuts down on the amount of summarizing they feel they need to do in confer-

ences, book talks, reviews, and other journal entries.

Then I whip around the class and take status. Sometimes I ask kids what page they're on or to read that quick description of where they are. Sometimes I ask them how many pages they've read since our last session. Sometimes I ask them how many days they think they need to finish up. Status helps me keep kids on track. It also helps me identify kids I need to conference with.

Status is great for keeping kids motivated and increasing accountability. But what I like best about it is how it builds community. Everyone listens, wondering how far along their neighbors are, waiting to hear about some interesting thing that's just happened in someone's book, or an interesting topic someone is reading about.

Status should only take a couple of minutes but sometimes we get caught up in what people are reading. When it's fun like this, I'm guilty of letting it go too long. But within five minutes, we're usually ready to begin.

To organize a single class period, I follow a structure called *Talk-Model-Work-Share:*

**Talk.** I start by telling the kids what we're going to focus on and why I think it's important. The kids talk, too. Some of my best lessons are the ones I begin with open-ended questions. For these, the kids suggest answers and I write them on the board or on chart paper to post in the room.

**Model.** I almost always try to model what I'm talking about or ask a student to model if that's feasible. Modeling is the most important part of the lesson. That's when kids seem to get it.

Modeling may take five or even ten minutes if I feel we need several different models or if I'm having a hard time getting my point across.

**Work.** When I've presented the focus for the day, I release the kids to work time which in this case means reading. Before they start, I remind them of what I'm looking for, that I want to see something about it in their journals, hear about it during sharing, and that if we have a conference, I'll want them to demonstrate it for me.

During work time, I often take a little time to do my own reading, but no more than five minutes. The rest of the time I save for conferencing. Ideally, each conference will take just two to three minutes. To keep conferences short, I'll try to stay focused on our lesson topic or, at most, one other important thing. I want to get to as many kids as I can during the 20-30 minutes we'll have for work time.

While it's faster for me to meet with kids at their desks, sometimes I bring them to another area in the room that I call "my office." My office is usually just a small table with two chairs. If I can, I like to set this up in the middle of the room, but just about anywhere will do as long as it's far enough away from other desks so that private conferences are reasonably private. Conferencing in my office is better for me when I'm tired, and I tend to think it's better for kids, too because the kid getting the conference has more privacy, and we tend not to disturb other readers so easily.

**Share.** I like to save at least ten minutes at the end of class for sharing. Sharing takes many forms: a journal entry, a demonstration of our focus for the day, a reading of something someone found interesting, or anything else a reader feels is important.

I get to share from my reading, too. At first, I make an effort to structure sharing, telling kids exactly what I want to hear from them. But as soon as I've demonstrated several styles of sharing, I encourage them to choose what and how they want to share. Ideally, kids will volunteer to share but at the beginning, I have to do the volunteering by calling on kids who have the most confidence in their reading, or who I think are most likely to have something interesting to say.

Over the years, I've come to trust the *Talk-Model-Work-Share* structure as the best way to organize a class period in any subject, not just reading. Sometimes, when I have several things to cover, or one big thing I want to cover in several small parts, I'll repeat the cycle several times in a single class: talk briefly, model quickly, ask kids to try it on their own for a couple of minutes, and then check their work with a short sharing session. Moving quickly through each stage keeps the pace lively and the classroom interactive. And using multiple cycles in a single period helps me introduce more lesson material when that's appropriate.

Another advantage of using *Talk-Model-Work-Share* is that it helps me curb my worst habit: talking too much. Knowing, as I launch into another potential lecture, that I have to model something, let kids try it, and give them a few minutes to share, all before time runs out, keeps me from droning on for half the period as I used to do before I discovered this simple structure.

# The Six Qualities of Good Reading

*A Practical Way to Organize Reading Assessment and Instruction*

One reason reading is hard to learn is because it's hard to teach. Some people devote their entire lives to figuring out what reading is, what good readers do, and how to teach these things effectively to kids. But most of us don't have that kind of time. So I've come up with something simple that helps me get the job done well. It's a model of reading instruction and assessment based on six qualities of good reading that I can teach to every kid I work with.

The model is simple and compact, something I can easily memorize and keep in mind as I teach. I like it because it gives everyone—teachers, students, parents, and administrators—the same easy-to-understand explanation of how to help kids become better readers.

**Speed.** For each reader and each text, there's an optimal reading speed at which words and ideas are easiest to under-

stand—usually a little slower than the normal silent reading rate, and a little closer to the way we talk.

**Accuracy.** Good reading requires accurate and automatic decoding of words. Even though missing a word here and there isn't usually a problem, I don't want kids to form the habit of skipping too many unfamiliar words. I also want them to pronounce words clearly and completely. This is especially important for second-language learners and kids who grow up with strong regional dialects. I don't want these kids to lose the first way they've learned to speak, but I do want them to learn a second way based on the prevailing standards in our society.

**Phrasing.** Even if kids read with reasonable speed and accuracy, their understanding and enjoyment may suffer if they use a plodding word-by-word approach. By grouping words together into phrases according to their grammar, readers send their brains chunks of language that make sense as units and fit comfortably into working memory. Phrasing is also the key to fluency, which in turn improves comprehension.

**Expression.** Good readers don't read like robots. They change pitch, rhythm, volume, and timbre, often using punctuation, key words, and dialog to interpret a text according to its meaning. Like phrasing, expression also improves fluency and comprehension.

**Understanding.** When readers read at the right rate, with accuracy, phrasing, and appropriate expression, they put themselves in the best possible position to understand what they read because the part of the brain responsible for comprehension gets the best possible input to work with. This helps readers process the meanings of words in context while keeping track of events and ideas.

**Thinking.** Readers are thinking all the time. But there's a specific kind of thinking they do to process what they've read more fully. This is the kind of thinking that often results in their best insights. It's also the hardest thinking readers do about their reading: they make connections to their lives and to other things they've read; they make inferences that give them extra information; they make predictions; pose questions; form opinions; and develop interpretations. They also perform logical and evaluative tasks like determining the relative importance of different ideas, teasing out relationships between different parts of a text, and assessing the quality of the writing.

Good readers manage all six of these things in a coordinated effort to understand and enjoy what they read. They don't do all six of them all the time. But they can do each of them well when they need to, and that's what I want kids to learn. To help them develop this set of skills, I try to bring one or more of the six qualities into my lessons, conferences, and assessments.

For me, using a single, simple model for instruction and assessment is the key to helping kids understand what reading is and what good readers do. Most importantly, it helps readers assess themselves, enabling them to improve their reading ability on their own—which is how they do most of their reading. Self-assessment is the mark of an independent reader and, in my opinion, the most important single skill I can teach.

I use the Six Qualities model to organize my reading instruction because it helps me think clearly about what I do and why I do it. The model doesn't explain everything about read-

ing. But it gives me what I need to explain what reading is, what good readers do, and how to teach these things to kids so they'll know them, too.

# Speed

*It's not How Fast You Read;*
*It's How Well You Read*

The way most kids read, you'd think it was a race. Competitive by nature, kids are constantly comparing themselves to each other, and to us, in this regard. In the beginning, reading is slow and laborious. Who wouldn't want to read faster? But as our skills develop, and we begin to read more fluently, the desire to speed up seems only to increase. As a result, many kids—and many adults, too—read faster than they can accurately decode and comprehend.

The most common advice I give to readers is the simplest: *Slow down!* As simple as it is, it's hard advice to take. So I repeat it often and always in an encouraging tone. "Give that part another try and slow down a little," I often say. "Give your brain a chance to get the words. It's not how fast you read that matters; it's how well you read."

When I'm working one-on-one with readers, I almost always start by helping them find the right reading speed. And that speed is almost always slower than the speed at which they read normally. Not surprisingly, slowing down helps kids de-

code more accurately. It also improves fluency and comprehension. Slowing down is also the easiest way to help kids break two bad habits: the herky-jerky stopping and starting that comes from stumbling over words, and the tendency to glide past words—or even entire sentences—they may find challenging.

As I work with readers throughout the year, there are several things I want them to learn about speed.

**Read at your normal talking speed.** Reading is like a conversation: the text talks and we listen. Since the voice we hear is our own, it makes sense to read at our normal talking speed. Most people read faster than this. And there are many situations where that's appropriate. But to improve our reading, we want to practice at rates that support improving our accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. For most of us, this is the speed at which we speak.

**Reading too fast increases mistakes.** This should be obvious but it isn't. For many kids, reading feels slow because they don't like to read and because it takes them a long time to make their way down a page. In reality, most are reading too quickly, rushing through the easy words and crashing to a stop on the hard ones. The rushing causes them to make more mistakes, which causes them to have to stop more frequently, which causes their overall reading rate to decline. They notice they're not getting very far and want to speed up even more. When we combine this cycle with material that gets a little harder every year as kids get older, we sometimes discover kids in middle and high school whose reading abilities may have actually declined since

their elementary years. Slowing them down to a speed where they can read accurately and fluently is the best way to make sure this doesn't happen.

**Reading too slow makes ideas hard to follow.** While reading too quickly is the more serious problem, it's certainly possible to read too slowly. How slow is too slow? Take out your watch and try reading one word every second. You'll... notice... that... it... takes... so... long... to get to the end of a sentence that you may have forgotten the beginning. That's 60 words per minute, and that's way too slow. Now try reading two words per second (it's a little harder). That's 120 words per minute. It's still slower than you're used to, but at least it's possible to keep track of what you're reading. When we read aloud, or at our normal talking speed, most of us probably end up reading between 140 and 180 words per minute. Our comprehension holds up well even at rates as slow as 120 words per minute. But if we slip below 100 words per minute, our comprehension—as well as our attention—may begin to break down.

**Speed up within phrases; slow down between phrases.** When we're reading well, we break sentences into smaller groups of words called phrases. Within each phrase, we run our words together quickly. Between phrases, we take an extra bit of time, sometimes stretching out the end of a word, sometimes actually putting in a tiny slice of silence. This small separation helps us understand the phrase we've just read and gets us ready to read the next one. One of the easiest ways to improve our reading is to lengthen that space and stretch out the time between phrases. Doing this helps us speed up within phrases so we maintain an effective overall reading rate.

**Read faster when the text is easy, slower when the text is**

**hard.** While there's always an optimal reading rate for every reader and every text, we shouldn't read at the same rate all the time. When we encounter challenging text, slowing down may be the easiest and best thing to do. But when we hit an easy part, as we often do in fiction when we read large sections of dialog, it makes sense, and feels natural, to read a little faster.

**Slow and steady makes the grade.** If I want kids to become the best readers they can be, I have to help them practice their best reading. More often than not, this means reading a little slower than they're used to and keeping their rate fairly steady over long periods of time. This helps kids build stamina for the long reading sessions we'll have in class and the increased reading load they'll have to manage as they go farther in school.

Reading starts with speed. We don't understand anything until words begin rushing into our brain. And the speed of that stream determines the time we have to turn those words into meaningful ideas. If the stream isn't flowing just right, we may not read words accurately or understand them thoroughly even if we do.

Once we understand that the best speed for fluency and comprehension is similar to our normal talking speed, we simply ask ourselves, "Am I reading like I talk?" Reading silently, we know we can go a bit faster than this. If we catch ourselves going too fast, we slow down. Eventually, we develop a habit of reading at the most appropriate rate.

# Accuracy

*Don't Forget to Read the Words*

Kids often come away with strange interpretations of the things they read. They'll say something about a book and I'll think to myself, "Where in the world did they come up with that?" More often than not, they've picked up errant information by misreading something or not reading something at all. "Don't forget to read the words," I tell them. "That's the best part!"

Even good readers miss words once in a while. But the crucial phrase here is "once in a while," not frequently, and certainly not every sentence or even every paragraph as I worry some kids do. Also, when good readers stumble, they notice it. It's like a little alarm goes off in their heads that prompts them to correct themselves, or to check their understanding to see if they need to.

I never cease to be amazed at how many reading problems can be solved simply by reading the words on the page. This may seem obvious to us, but it's not to our kids, some of whom have spent years playing guessing games with reading. After a

while, it's as if they don't trust the words at all.

When readers skip words, substitute words, or pronounce words incorrectly, errant information enters their brains. Starting with bad information to begin with, their understanding degrades as errors pile on top of errors. At some point, it becomes almost impossible to integrate new information into their understanding of what has come before. This is often when kids stop reading.

The hard thing about helping kids with accuracy is that it's so hard for them to be accurate when they're still learning to read. Every learner makes mistakes—lots of them. And there's nothing worse than having someone over your shoulder correcting every error. So I give kids this advice: *slow down and reread.*

Slowing down gives kids more time to decode upcoming words. Rereading gives kids a chance to fix their mistakes. Practiced together, these two simple strategies help kids develop the habit of reading accurately. That's what accuracy in reading is—a habit. Nobody reads with perfect accuracy all the time. And no one needs to read with perfect accuracy to understand and enjoy what they read. But we should all try to develop the habit of reading as accurately as we can.

I don't ask kids to read every word accurately every time. But I do ask them to practice the behaviors good readers exhibit with regard to accuracy. Specifically, I ask them to follow these guidelines.

**Try to read every word.** "Try" is the operative word here.

Strictly speaking, it isn't necessary to read every word, but one of the best ways to improve our reading is to try. This is how we add new words to our vocabulary, learn things about spelling, and stretch our decoding skills. Many kids get in the habit of letting hard words go. As texts get harder with each year that goes by, skipping and substituting increase, and readers become less accurate. None of these things is a problem on the first pass through a text. But if kids don't make a second pass, they might miss something important. I want kids to self-correct as much as possible and then reread as often as they can to improve their fluency and comprehension.

**Pronounce words clearly and completely.** I hesitate to say "correctly" here because there are so many ways to pronounce words. But I do want kids to pronounce words clearly and completely. Some kids slip and slide around words pushing sounds together or leaving sounds out in ways that compromise their comprehension. Ends of words are often the toughest; some kids, especially second language learners, regularly leave them off. English is a highly inflected language. These inflections often come at the ends of words like the plural marker "s" in "inflections," "ends," and "words," and the past tense marker "ed." When readers drop markers, they often drop meaning. So I tell kids to *read to the ends of the words* and to *read the words the way they are written.*

**Practice unfamiliar words.** How many times have we heard kids stumble on the name of a character over and over again? Each time it happens, they may lose fluency and possibly a little understanding, too. Even the most accomplished readers encounter place names, people, and subject-specific terms they've never seen before and don't know how to read. When kids en-

counter difficult words, I want them to take a few seconds and work them out. Then I want them to reread from the beginning of the sentence or paragraph in which those words occur so they can improve their accuracy in context.

**Break hard words into easy pieces.** The best way to read a new word is to sound it out. And the best way to sound it out is to break it into pieces you already know how to read. I have a wide range of lessons I teach on sounding out words but none is as important as merely reminding kids to break big words into smaller pieces. For example, look at the word "smaller." It has the word "all" inside of it, the blend "sm" at the front, and the familiar "er" suffix at the end. Teaching kids to look *into* words for small pieces they can read easily is the single most important sounding out strategy I teach.

**Correct words you miss if they're important.** I love it when I hear kids self-correcting. Self-correction tells me that kids care about reading well, that they are willing to work hard to understand what they read, and that they are monitoring their reading closely. Not every word has to be corrected; that's ridiculous. But we have to fix the important ones. How do we know if a word is important? We ask ourselves questions: Is it a big word? Does it appear often in the text? Does the text make sense without it? Can we make a good guess about what it means? Getting kids focused on logical questions makes them better readers whether they figure out the word or not.

**If you stumble on a word, go back to the beginning of the sentence.** Most kids don't miss most words. But they sure do stumble a lot. These small decoding errors aren't problems if they only occur occasionally. But when they occur once every sentence or two, or several times in a paragraph, they disrupt

fluency and compromise comprehension. In most cases, kids can easily read the problem words. They're usually just reading too fast, or too erratically, when they reach them. If they go back to the beginning of the sentence and read again, they often read flawlessly.

Reading is not an exact science; accurate decoding doesn't guarantee accurate understanding. But it sure helps. I don't want reading to become a game of "gotcha" or an exercise in correction. Nor do I want to push kids past the point of frustration or fatigue. At the same time, I want them to know that accuracy matters, that writers write for a reason, and that figuring that reason out begins with reading the words as accurately as we can.

Accuracy in reading is both a rule and a tool, a process and a product. I want kids to come to their reading with the expectation of enjoying it and making sense of it—two things that depend on reading it accurately. When kids aren't reading accurately, I want a little alarm to go off that says, "Did I miss something? Was it something important? Should I read it again? Do I need to slow down?" Assessing their accuracy while they read helps them monitor their understanding and understand more as a result.

# Phrasing

*Reading's Best Kept Secret*

Phrasing is the best kept secret in all of reading.

In the workshops on reading that I've attended over the years, no one has ever talked about it. In the dozens of books I've read on reading, it's hardly mentioned at all. Yet in my teaching of reading, I've found it to be one of the most valuable things I give to young readers.

Phrasing is the process of breaking sentences into smaller groups of words that go together according to their grammar. For example:

Phrasing is the process
of breaking sentences
into smaller groups of words
that go together
according to their grammar.

Most of us do this naturally when we read. We do it when we talk, too. Why? Because the phrase is the easiest unit of lan-

guage for our brains to understand. Single words often don't make sense without the context of other words around them. For example, all by itself, the word "process" could be a noun, a verb, or an adjective. On the other hand, entire sentences are often too long.

Phrasing is the source of that smooth and satisfying flow we call fluency in reading. If you listen to yourself read out loud, you'll notice that you naturally break your sentences into small but meaningful pieces. Between each piece, or phrase, you put just the tiniest bit of space, or maybe you stretch out the final sound of the final word a little bit longer. Like notes to a song on a musical staff, you group words together and give your reading a satisfying and sensible flow.

What seems to come naturally to many teachers, however, never materializes for some kids. Without the ability to phrase, their fluency is stunted. This makes reading difficult because fluency is a key component of automatic decoding, a direct precursor of comprehension, and a great source of the enjoyment that comes from working with words.

To help kids improve their fluency by working on phrasing, I teach them the following:

**Phrasing is normal and natural.** Most kids phrase naturally when they speak. They also phrase naturally when they sing songs, read poems, or when they recite things like *The Pledge of Allegiance* ("I pledge allegiance" / "to the flag" / "of the United States of America" / "and to the Republic" / etc.). I help kids become aware of this natural ability and then I ask them to read

the way they speak in these contexts.

**Phrasing breaks sentences into "right-size" parts.** We don't want to read word-by-word, but most of the time we can't read a whole sentence in one bite either. Phrasing breaks up sentences into pieces that are just the right size for us to read easily and understand. Phrasing is not something unusual that we do only for certain sentences. It's something we do all the time in every sentence.

**Phrases follow predictable patterns.** To learn to phrase well, we have to know where phrases begin and end. Phrases typically begin with small "function" words like prepositions, articles, pronouns, and conjunctions. They typically end with larger "content" words that have specific meaning in the sentence. Phrases are also marked by internal punctuation like commas, colons, semicolons, dashes, and parentheses, as well as periods, question marks, and exclamation marks. Most phrases are two to six words long.

**Phrasing helps you understand hard words.** Words are easier to understand in context than they are on their own. And the best context is the phrase and sentence they're in. When kids hit a word they don't know, I ask them to read it with the phrase it's in. Then I ask them to break the rest of the sentence into phrases. Then they can make an inference about what the word means, substitute it back into the phrase, and put the phrase back into the sentence. Phrasing and rereading improve kids' awareness of the context clues they need to learn new words.

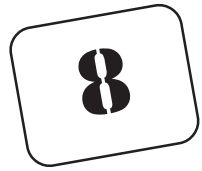
**Phrasing helps you understand long sentences.** The best way to make sense of a long sentence is to build up your understanding one phrase at a time. Often we understand all the words

but still don't quite get the meaning. By isolating phrases, we understand them better one by one and as a group.

**Phrasing helps you read smoothly.** When we read with good phrasing, our voice smooths out. We tend to read the little words that begin phrases more quickly and with less emphasis than the bigger words that finish phrases. This gives us the natural iambic rhythm of English where the stress patterns of the syllables go like this: unstressed-stressed, unstressed-stressed, etc.

At first, phrasing may seem like a subtle thing that's hard to get a handle on. To improve your awareness, listen to yourself phrase when you read. Slow your reading down just a bit and listen to how you put small groups of words together.

Everyone is aware of the importance of fluency. Even if we don't know the theory behind it, we understand the practical implications: kids who don't read fluently, don't read well. Listening to kids read, it's easy to tell if they're reading is fluent. If it's not, phrasing is the place to start.



# Expression

*Once More with Feeling*

Like most little kids, my nephew Taylor loves being read to. But after five times through *Curious George Rides a Bike,* I'm tired of it, even if he isn't. So as we go for number six, I'm a little off my game. My voice is flat, my energy's low, I lack all semblance of what's-gonna-happen-next enthusiasm. And Taylor can tell. "No. Read it the right way, Uncle Steve," he insists. At the age of four, Taylor is already an expert at reading assessment. He knows that the right way to read is with expression.

Our students know this, too. They just don't know they know it. They hear us read with expression all the time, and they know at least intuitively that how we read is a little different than how they read. But they can't figure out exactly what that difference is. And that's why it's important to teach expression.

Expression is something all teachers can do. But it's not something we often talk about. Most of us don't think consciously

about expressing a text; it just happens. So when I talk about it with kids, I start by sharing the following ideas.

**Make it sound like someone's reading to you.** For kids who've been read to at home, this is a natural cue to imitate other good readers. For kids who haven't been read to at home, I point out that they've been read to at school by teachers, librarians, and other adults. Later on, I'll model reading expressively and ask the kids to describe the things I'm doing with my voice. This will give us a set of classroom criteria for expression.

**Read with feeling.** Kids are full of feelings. But their reading is often empty. Sometimes, just telling them to read with feeling improves their expression. I can also model for kids by reading the same passage in a flat voice and then again in an expressive voice. The kids can hear the difference easily and they always say the expressive voice is better.

**Make your voice match the meaning.** The first attempts kids make at putting emotion into their reading are often comical. They've got feelings, that's for sure. Just not the same ones that show up in the text. Many kids will read in an excited voice even if the passage isn't exciting. It'll be a while before they can make their voices match the meaning. This is where I show kids the connection between expression and comprehension. *To express a text well,* I tell them, *you have to understand it well.*

**Follow the punctuation.** I start by focusing on periods, commas, and quotation marks. Through choral reading, we practice taking a small pause at a comma and a full stop at a period. I also point out that our voices should dip down a bit at the end of a sentence (or up if we find a question mark). For dialog, I teach them a strategy I call "Character high, narrator low." This describes how we change the pitch of our voices to distinguish

between character and narrator.

**Emphasize important moments.** This is hard but fun. In really good expressive reading, readers put extra "stuff" on certain words, phrases, and sentences. Sometimes this emphasis just involves holding a word out a little longer or saying it a little louder. At other times, especially in dialog, our expression takes on a more theatrical quality. This is where kids put the polish on their reading, and where we often discover our most inspiring results.

**Expression works even when you read silently.** I can only teach expression by reading aloud to the kids. But I need them to know that expressive reading works for silent reading, too. Unless we're using speed reading techniques, we all subvocalize when we read. With a little practice, we can become more aware of what that voice sounds like even to the point of recognizing when we're using expression during silent reading. If I want kids to become expressive readers, I'll have to make sure they practice. And much of that practice will come when they read to themselves.

Expression makes reading more fun. But it also makes reading more understandable. Think about watching an actor in a play, TV show, or movie. As members of the audience, we have just one chance to hear and comprehend each line that is spoken. So actors want to deliver their lines in the best way possible. Matching their emotions to the meaning of the words gives us extra information that reinforces what they want us to understand.

The same thing happens when we read with expression. By engaging our emotions as we read, we improve our understanding in two ways. When our feelings match the meaning exactly, our comprehension is reinforced, and even our memory is improved. When our emotions and our words get out of sync, the awkwardness we feel let's us know we're not getting something, and that a quick rereading is in order.

By teaching expression explicitly through simple language and easy exercises kids can understand, we can bring this important part of reading into our classrooms—and into the reading lives of our kids. Expression is an essential element of reading. It enhances fluency, improves comprehension, and increases kids' enjoyment of reading. It's something every reader appreciates. After all, even a four year-old can tell when his uncle isn't doing it right.

# Understanding

*Knowing What We Read,*
*and Knowing What to Do When We Don't*

As literate adults who've been reading for decades, most of us have a well-tuned sense of what we understand and what we don't. As we glide along line after line, we know intuitively if what we read makes sense to us, or if certain words or ideas are confusing. And we usually know what to do when we're confused.

But many kids don't.

A big difference between mature readers and those just starting out is their ability to monitor their understanding. Most of us get a feeling, like an alarm going off, when we don't understand something we've read. We can usually tell what we're missing, too, and what we need to do to find it.

This is what kids need. While it's important for us to use assessment tools to test their understanding *after* reading, the best thing we can do is give them tools of their own to test their understanding *during* reading. The ability to monitor their understanding, and repair it when it breaks down, is one of the most important skills readers can develop.

To help kids get the hang of it, I offer the following advice.

**Know what the words mean.** Words are slippery things and many kids let them slip right by. Many young readers have simply not had time in their brief lives to build up large vocabularies. They also haven't had time to develop the expectation, as mature readers do, that they will be able to understand almost all the words they read. So I need to help them increase their vocabulary and develop that expectation at the same time. Fortunately, these two goals support each other when kids encounter words they don't know and then try to figure them out. To help this process along, in conferences or in sharing, I often ask, "What does that word mean here?" If the student knows the word, great. If not, we walk through a process I call Question-Infer-Clarify: we question whether we know the word or any part of it, we infer a possible meaning, then we attempt to clarify the meaning of the sentence as a whole by replacing the unknown word with the inference and rereading the sentence.

**Know where you are.** At any moment, mature readers can pick their heads up from the page and tell you, "I'm at the part where...", or "The writer is talking about...," or "Right now...", or something else that clearly indicates a basic level of understanding at a particular point in time. But you'd be surprised how many kids can't do this, especially when they read non-fiction. Being able to say, "I'm at the part where the writer is talking about why sharks attack people," is like a shorthand retell or capsule summary that tells me how a reader is tracking the most basic elements of a text. It's also a great way to start a journal

entry and the perfect introduction to a more detailed discussion during sharing or conferencing.

**Keep up with characters and events.** In narrative writing, our understanding hangs on a sequence of events and a cast of characters. In addition to knowing what's happening now, readers have to remember what has happened before and be able to describe a chain of cause and effect relationships. To get kids thinking about this, I ask them questions like "How did that happen?" or "Why did he/she do that?" To help them explore characters, I teach lessons on character traits. But in conference, I tend to engage kids with open-ended questions like, "What can you tell me about that character?" or "What's important to know about that character?" To help kids develop their responses, I share my own thoughts about characters and model in-depth character-focused discussions. Based on the responses I model, we make a classroom list of all the things we can say about characters cross-referenced against our lessons on character traits.

**Follow the writer's topics and ideas.** In narrative texts, readers tend to follow characters and events. In non-narrative texts, they tend to follow topics and ideas. A topic is the subject of a section of a piece. An idea is what the writer has to say about it. If a section of a book is called "When Sharks Attack People," that's a topic. If the writer says, "Sharks only attack when they feel threatened," that's an idea. When kids read non-narrative texts, I want them to understand not only the writer's ideas but how those ideas build upon and relate to each other. I'll often have kids identify two or more ideas about a topic and explain to me how those ideas go together, and if there might be a larger main idea that incorporates them all. I also want kids to sort out

important ideas from less important ones.

**Reread if something doesn't make sense.** Rereading is the single most useful strategy for improving a reader's understanding. But it's hard to get kids to do. I have to model it regularly, use it in mini-lessons, and request it constantly in conferences. One of the most frequent things I say to kids is, "Let's go back and reread that, and see if we can figure it out." To get kids to reread, I have to make it a top priority. Sometimes I'll just ask kids to do it directly like this: "Today during reading time, please reread something from a previous day and note in your journal something new you discovered about it."

**Review if you're lost.** If kids get into a book and can't seem to keep up, it could be that they've forgotten much of what has come before. Maybe they haven't read for a few days or maybe the book is just too hard. Instead of giving up, or continuing to read on in confusion, I'll ask them to do a quick review. Reading the beginning of each chapter is good for fiction. Skimming the headings usually works for magazines and other non-fiction texts. Reviewing is also a necessary strategy for making sense of textbooks and when memorizing information for other classes.

There are so many ways to help kids understand more of what they read. But what I like best about this small set of suggestions is that it focuses on simple things any reader can do in any kind of text. Too many kids, it seems, have no ability at all to monitor their own understanding, and no repertoire of strategies to apply when their understanding breaks down. While it's important, of course, to teach strategies that cover before-, dur-

ing-, and after-reading situations, strategies kids can use during reading are bound to be the most valuable and to have the most positive influence on overall reading improvement.

# Thinking

*This is Your Brain on Text. Any Questions?*

*What are you thinking?*

My favorite reading conference question absolutely baffles kids. "What do you mean 'What am I thinking?'" they say. "I'm reading a book!" Yes, that's true. But what I want to know is what they're thinking *about* what they're reading. And no, I don't want them to read it to me or give me a summary. I want them to read their own minds and tell me what's rattling around in there.

At first, kids don't think they're thinking about anything other than the words. Then, as I ask the question again and again, and do some modeling from my own reading, they begin to realize that there are other thoughts on their mind, thoughts that go beyond, "What time is it?", "Can I get a drink of water?", and "Can I stop reading now?"

These are the thoughts I want.

Readers are always thinking, of course. But the kind of thinking I'm talking about is the kind readers do after they've read something, the kind of thinking that goes beyond the text

to enhance the reader's experience of it. These are the questions, inferences, connections, and predictions; the feelings, opinions, insights, and evaluations; everything about the text except what the text is about.

Some kids will say they just read, that they don't think about it. But I know that's not true. They're just not aware of their thinking. So I try to help them increase their awareness with a few suggestions.

**Focus on what's important; look for big ideas.** Some parts of a text are more important than others. This is where I want kids to spend their time. I ask kids to think about this from three perspectives: What does the writer think is most important? What do you think is most important? What will other readers think is most important? In the intersection of the answers to these questions is where we often find the biggest of big ideas.

**Ask questions; try to answer them.** Questioning is one of the most useful strategies readers can employ to expand their knowledge of a text. It's also one of the easiest things to teach. My first lesson on questioning is to put up a challenging paragraph and then have the kids ask as many questions as they can about it. I write these on the left side and then I ask them to come up with answers on the right side. What's fascinating is that without actually knowing the answers, kids come pretty close to getting many of them right based solely on the inferences generated by the questions they posed. Even wrong answers are often helpful.

**Make connections; find patterns.** While text-to-self and

text-to-life connections can be useful, it's text-to-text connections that I'm most interested in. Connections between different parts of the same text help kids find the patterns that lead to a better understanding of themes and big ideas. Connections to other texts tell me about how kids retain what they read and how their past reading repertoire informs their understanding of new texts.

**Make inferences; hunt for clues.** Inference is so powerful, and so important if we want kids to get the most out of their reading. Because inference is so hard for some readers, I start with something I know they can do: infer the feelings of a character. I teach it using what I think of as a "show and tell" approach: a writer shows us something (like a character in a situation), in order to tell us something else (like how the character feels). For example, a writer might show us a character sulking at home to tell us she's lonely, or a writer might tell us that "Maria slammed the bedroom door," to show us she's angry. Writers usually give us only part of the story. Once I get kids looking for the other part, they start finding inferences everywhere.

**Make interpretations; learn something new.** A text is like a puzzle. We read little bits at a time and work to put them together into something that forms a whole. I love it, of course, when kids can summarize what they've read but that's just listing all the pieces in order. I get more excited when readers assemble their understanding in unusual and interesting ways, when they develop insights, or when they synthesize new meaning. In a novel, we might think of this as the art of interpretation. In a textbook, we might think of it simply as learning something new. Either way, what I'm looking for here is the end result of the reader's efforts along with an explanation of how that result

was achieved.

**Look for quality; find your favorites.** Everybody knows what they like. But it takes practice to explain why they like it. I want kids to develop a sense of their favorite authors, genres, and subjects. I also want them to appreciate good writing and to be able to apply techniques professional writers use in their own work.

We all know that reading is more than just decoding words. But how much more? And where does that "more" come from? Helping kids develop an awareness of the thinking they do when they read puts them on the path to answering these questions. Ultimately, it's thinking, and not reading, that matters most. Words are just fuel, and reading is just a process that takes this fuel to the brain where the real work of thinking begins. Our job is to get kids fired up about it.

# Teaching the Six Qualities to Kids

*Developing Classroom Criteria That Defines Good Reading*

I introduce the six qualities of good reading with a question: "How do we know we're reading well?" Most classes have an answer or two:

"We can read all the words."
"We understand it."
"It's not hard."
"We just know!"
Etc.

But these answers aren't very useful when it comes to creating a class standard for good reading.

As with any exercise involving criteria, I explain that we're going to come up with a small set of ideas that will help us keep track of how we're doing and tell us how to get better. I also tell kids that we'll be using this same set of criteria for everything we read all year long.

For each of the six qualities, I explain briefly what it is and try to come up with a tiny piece of kid-friendly language that's easy to understand and remember. While specific descriptors might vary slightly from class to class according to the age and ability level of the students, most of the time, the list looks something like this.

**Speed.** Not too fast or too slow; normal talking speed.

**Accuracy.** Read all the words; pronounce them clearly and completely.

**Phrasing.** Smooth and steady; break sentences into small groups of words that make sense.

**Expression.** Read with feeling; change your voice to go with what the words mean.

**Understanding.** Know what the words mean; be able to tell what's happening; be able to explain the writer's ideas.

**Thinking.** Make connections, predictions, inferences; ask questions, visualize; know what's important and what's not; have feelings and opinions; find parts where I like the writing; trace all responses back to the text.

The language for each quality gets a little more complicated as we move down the list. Speed and accuracy are relatively easy to understand and assess; understanding and thinking are more complex.

This is our first rubric for good reading and it only takes about fifteen minutes to create. In a few weeks, we'll break out

each of the six items and create a more detailed assessment tool, something I can use for conferences and that the kids can use for more formal self-assessment and goal setting. But at the beginning, this simple rubric works well.

By working with students to create criteria for our reading, we develop shared values about what matters most and we begin to define a shared vision of what we will achieve together in the coming weeks and months. This builds community and reduces any anxiety kids might have about my expectations for their performance. Now we're on the same side. I'm not so much a reading teacher running them through their tasks. I'm more of a reading coach helping them be the best they can be.

# How Readers Choose Books

*Helping Kids Become Purposeful Readers*

"What made you pick that one?"

I could walk up to any adult holding any book, ask that question, and as long as I didn't get punched in the nose, probably get a good answer:

"I'm a big fan of [insert name of genre]."
"I've read all of [insert name of author]'s books."
"I'm fascinated by [insert type of subject matter]."
"My [insert trusted person] recommended it."
"It won the [insert name of prestigious award]."
"I saw the author interviewed on [insert name of talk show]."
"I read a review about it."
"I read a few pages and got hooked."
"I love the quality of the writing."
"It's an Oprah's Book Club selection."
Etc.

But if I ask the same question in class the first time we pick

books, I'll probably get answers like these:

"It was short."
"It was easy."
"I liked the cover."
"I don't know."
Etc.

The problem with these answers is not that they're terse, it's that they tell me very little about the book or the reader. Even worse, sometimes I worry that answers like these are telling me that the books don't matter and the readers don't care.

Even when I'm teaching advanced kids, I still like to teach lessons on how readers choose books. This is what I tell them.

**Choosing books takes time and effort.** It's not unusual for me to spend 20 minutes or more wandering a bookstore looking for a book. And while I don't always have that long for kids to spend in class, I want them to know that it may take several attempts before they find something that suits them well.

**Some choosing strategies are better than others.** Judging a book by its cover is a legitimate strategy. So is using a book's length. But approaches like these aren't very reliable. On the other hand, looking for an author you like, a genre you like, a subject you're interested in, an award winner, or the recommendation of a friend is much more likely to yield a successful selection.

**The best choices align with the reader's purpose.** Many

readers make choices to fulfill a specific purpose. Sometimes they want to learn about a certain subject. Sometimes they want to explore a certain genre or read the work of a certain author. This is their reason for reading. Choices that are consistent with a reader's purpose usually work out better than choices that aren't. Purpose also provides the best rationale for sticking with a book or deciding to abandon it.

**The best choices stimulate background knowledge.** If we're choosing well, the process of choosing can stimulate our background knowledge and help us understand what we're about to read. For example, when I select a book to read about American history, I have to bring what I know about the subject to the process of selecting. Even when I select a novel, I bring background knowledge related to character, setting, conflict, genre, etc. I do this to understand the books I'm considering, but also to make sure I don't pick something that contains information I've already read.

**The best choices lead to even better choices.** Even good choices don't work out perfectly every time. We may choose a book for all the right reasons only to abandon it after ten or twenty pages. But having put forth a good effort initially, we can set off for the next choice with even more information about what we want and what we don't.

**How we choose tells us about ourselves as readers.** Our process of choosing reveals our reading habits. If we choose a book because of its author, we've probably read other books by that author before. If we choose a book because it won an award, we reveal that we've probably read other award winners, or that we favor books with prestigious reputations. If we choose a book because a friend recommended it, we show how much we value

the opinions of other readers, and how much we value our friends. Every choice we make tells us something about who we are as readers. If we choose books we don't like, or insist on making no choice at all, this says something about us, too.

This information tells kids about the importance of choosing, but it doesn't explicitly define the best ways to choose. To do that, I work with the kids to develop a list of the strategies readers use to choose books. We usually come up with things like this:

I like the genre.
I like the author.
I'm interested in the subject.
Someone recommended it to me.
The blurb sounded good.
I read the first page and liked it.
Other kids in class have read it.
I read a review about it.
There's something I want to learn.
It looks similar to another book I liked.
I like the quality of the writing.
It won an award.
I liked the movie.
Etc.

Once we have a big list up on the board or on a poster on the wall, I send the kids off to make their selections with the

instruction that I want them to use one or more of these strategies to pick their next book.

When everyone has made a choice, I ask each reader to make an entry in their journal by completing the following sentences:

> The book I chose was...
> It's about...
> I chose it because...

A typical student's entry might look like this:

> The book I chose was *Holes.* It's about these kids who have to go to camp because they get in trouble. I chose it because some of my friends read it last year and I know there was a good movie of it.

Ideally, everyone's choice will align with one or more of the strategies we've already come up with. Sometimes kids come up with additional good strategies for selecting texts. But when a kid has used a strategy that we've all agreed is not so good, I make a note to conference with the student as soon as I can. Most of the time, however, I don't even have to. When kids are aware of their process for choosing a text, they can often tell on their own whether they've used a good strategy to make a good choice. And then, if they haven't, head back to make another one.

Kids are going to be making many text choices throughout the year. They don't have to be good at it right from the start. But I want them to get better each time they try. Helping them develop more awareness of their purposes for reading will make them more purposeful readers. And that will help them get more out of reading each time they sit down with a book.


# In Search of a "Just Right" Book

*Getting Kids Started Picking Books They Can Read and Enjoy*

One of the biggest challenges in teaching reading is making sure kids choose books they like at their independent reading level. If the texts they choose are consistently too easy, they don't improve as much as they might over time. If the texts they choose are too hard, reading is too hard; kids become frustrated and tire easily. Worse yet, they develop bad habits that arise as coping mechanisms for tackling texts that are too hard. In general, letting kids read easy books on a regular basis is better than letting them read hard ones. But the best thing to do is to teach kids how to find books that are just right.

The easiest way to do this, of course, is to pick the books for them. But that's far from ideal. Even if we could find "just right" books for each student, it's not healthy for the kids if we do all the picking. Why? Because our highest goal is helping kids become independent readers, and when kids are reading independently in the world, they don't have teachers around to do the picking for them.

There are many ways to define "just right." But what I tell kids is this: "Find a book you like and can read well."

Finding a book kids like isn't as much of a problem as finding a book they can read well. Most kids will pick books that are too hard, a few will pick books that are too easy, and almost everyone will need several tries to get it right. As for me, I'll need a lot of patience as I take kids through this process at the beginning of the year.

The concept of a "just right" book is as foreign to kids as it is second nature to adults. Almost all of the reading adults do is either easy or "just right." Rarely do we pick something that is too hard. If we do, we usually put it down. This is the opposite of kids' behavior, most of whom tend to pick books that are too hard, and are reluctant to put them back. So before we start picking, I like to take some time to talk about what a "just right" book is.

The first thing I do is model. I find something easy and read it as well as I can with excellent fluency and expression. Then I pick something hard, often something scientific or legal from the Internet, sometimes a little Shakespeare. The kids hear me stumbling over unfamiliar words and I admit that I don't fully understand what I'm reading. Then I find something "just right", often a news magazine or something from a novel. I read comfortably but not perfectly. I let the kids quiz me about what's going on so they can see that I'm understanding what I read. I may also offer an evaluative comment, inference, or other insight so kids can see that I can think beyond literal details. Final-

ly, I note that there might be some challenges for me here and there, but that I think the text will feel comfortable most of the time as I read it.

Then we'll look at other short text samples together, some easy, some hard, and some, I hope, that are just right. I'll read a little, we'll read some together, and maybe even one or two kids will volunteer to read on their own.

What I'm looking for in this lesson is some language we can develop to talk about what a "just right" book looks like, sounds like, and feels like.

**Looks like.** Kids are sensitive to two visual cues: the length of the book and the amount of text on the page. By reading just a little, kids can also consider two other visual criteria: the lengths of words and the lengths of sentences. Some kids can identify a book at their reading level on visual characteristics alone. I'll tell kids: *In general, a "just right" book is one that looks similar to other books you've read and enjoyed.*

**Sounds like.** Because I start the year teaching kids about speed, accuracy, phrasing, and expression, they know early on what good reading sounds like. For a text to be "just right," I tell them they have to be able to read it well. Not perfectly. Not without mistakes. But with enough competence to sustain fluent reading at a reasonable rate. I tell kids: *In general, a "just right" book sounds good when you read it out loud.*

**Feels like.** A "just right" book should feel comfortable. You shouldn't feel like you're struggling to keep up. You shouldn't feel confused most of the time. Reading a "just right" book is a

pleasant experience. Much of your attention should be available so you have some time to think about what you're reading as the words go by. I tell kids: *In general, a "just right" book feels comfortable to read and easy to keep up with.*

At first, finding a "just right" book is trial and error. Some kids will completely ignore my lesson. They'll literally judge a book by its cover, bring it back to their desk, and sit there thumbing through it whether they can actually read it or not. These are the kids I send back right away as soon as we have our first conference. If more than a few behave this way, I'll give a lesson on how readers choose books. I don't mind at all if kids let a cover catch their eye; that makes a lot of sense. But before they sit down to read, I like to see them opening it up and reading a few lines.

I know from experience that few kids find "just right" books their first time out. So I focus on reading level during my initial conferences. No matter how the conference goes, I end with, "Do you think you've got a 'just right' book?" If they don't, they get to pick something else. But I have them hold onto their current book for comparison, and bring it back to their desk with their new selection, so I can see during our next conference if the student can tell the difference in level between one book and another.

The process of identifying books that are easy, hard, and "just right" is challenging, especially for kids who've never done it before. But it's also incredibly valuable. This may be the first time they have ever taken ownership of their reading. Indepen-

dent readers are independent choosers. To become better readers, they have to learn to make better choices. For me, this simple exercise of choosing, whether it goes well or not, is possibly the best assessment I can make of reading maturity at the beginning of the year. Kids who can choose books well are usually much farther along in their development than kids who can't. So even if it takes a few weeks, and a few books, to teach every kid how to choose effectively, I know this is time well spent.


# Guided Choice

*A Responsible Approach*
*to Letting Kids Pick Their Own Books*

When I tell people I let kids pick their own books for reading, I get a variety of reactions, almost none of them positive. The assumption is that I let kids read anything they want, and that I am, therefore, an irresponsible person who doesn't care what kids read, who doesn't teach the classics, who doesn't care about Cultural Literacy, who gets in trouble with parents and school boards, and who may be single-handedly responsible for Global Warming and the decline of Western Civilization. Despite the fact that adults choose their own books, few people I know think kids should be able to do this, even under adult supervision.

Actually, I don't think of myself as a heretic or even a rabble rouser. I think of myself as someone who is taking on the responsibility of teaching kids how to make good reading choices—and giving them the opportunity to make those choices as the best way of learning how to do it well.

The truth is, free choice isn't really free. I'm always guiding students in some way. While kids get to make their own selec-

tions, I'm always monitoring those selections, and intervening in specific ways, according to my instructional goals and my sense of what is appropriate.

While I believe in giving kids choices, I don't believe in free choice when it comes to kids' reading; I believe in guided choice. I know that life is all about choices. And I want kids to learn how to make good ones. But they're just kids. And that means they don't always make the choices that might be best for them and those around them. This is where guidance comes in.

When it comes to helping kids make good book choices, my approach to guided choice is based on the following principles:

**Define a range of responsible options.** I don't intentionally bring bad books into the classroom so right from the start kids' choices are constructively constrained. I don't expect them to have an abundance of truly awful options in the school library either. When I get to know a student's reading level, most of the books that student chooses will fall within a narrow range just above and below it. And when I'm doing author or genre studies, or we're studying a specific discipline, these parameters will further narrow the range of responsible options available.

**Align choice with purpose.** I want kids to have a reason for reading, a reason that goes beyond just doing it because I told them to. At the very least, I want the reason to have something to do with expressing an interest, solving a problem, answering a question, reaching a goal, or just becoming a better reader. And I want kids' choices to reflect this. This comes into play all

the time when we choose texts for the purpose of studying a particular subject. But even in kids' regular reading, they can bring a sense of purpose to improving a particular reading skill, and then use that sense to make sure they have a book that will help them improve it.

**Never let kids make a choice I wouldn't make for them.** Even with excellent instruction and constant supervision, kids make bad choices once in a while. Sometimes these choices are easily negotiated. But sometimes they're not. This is where I have to step in to tell a student he can't read five *Goosebumps* books in a row or that the latest *Harry Potter* book is so long and so far above his reading level that it will take him the entire year to finish it. Or, perhaps even more confrontational, that the book he has chosen is not one I would suspect his parents would want him to read. Every choice a student makes, even if it is not my choice, is my responsibility. I want kids reading books they like, books they can read, books that will make them better readers, and books that are appropriate for school.

**Choices must occur within a specific timeframe.** Time is our most precious resource at school. So even though I might take an hour to make a selection while strolling through my favorite bookstore, I'm more likely to give kids just a few minutes. As kids get into the habit of choosing books and then evaluating them at their desks, I might say, "By the end of the period tomorrow, everyone will have decided on a book they're going to read." Just as I should define a specific range of choices for kids, I should also define a range of time for making a choice.

**Choices must meet community standards.** We are a community of readers in the classroom. We will also be sharing our books. This means that each reader's choice has to take into

account the prevailing attitudes of others in our school and in our community. I often advise kids to pick books based on the idea that their parents and the principal might be in the room to hear them read and discuss it. They are part of our community, too, and they deserve our respect. Occasionally, kids pick inappropriate titles. But a brief, private discussion usually settles the matter. If it doesn't, I tell kids that as their teacher, I have to err on the side of caution when I'm not sure how others may react.

**If students can't choose for themselves, I choose for them.** Some kids aren't good at choosing, especially at the beginning of the year. A few others prefer not to choose at all. In either case, the responsibility falls to me to make the best choices for them that I can. While I'm fairly good at matching readers and books, kids quickly realize that I'm not as good as they are when it comes to finding a "just right" book they'll really enjoy. This realization gives them even more incentive to engage in the choosing process I'm trying to teach them.

Teaching kids how to choose their own books is a good thing to do. In fact, it's a necessary thing, both for them and for those of us who try to teach them. If I showed you a list of the last 20 books I've picked for my own reading, including the ones I didn't like and chose to abandon, you'd know a lot about me as a reader—including my reading level, my interests, and what books I might want to read next. But if you chose those 20 books for me, you might not learn any of these things. Choosing is not just a skill for students, it's an assessment tool for teachers.

To improve the quality of that assessment, I like kids to

keep track of the books they choose. In their reading logs, I ask them to note any book they've picked, the reason they picked it, whether it was easy, hard, or "just right," and, if appropriate, where they abandoned it and why. By keeping this list, students develop a sense of whether or not they're getting better at making good book choices. When they have trouble finding a new book, they can look at the log for patterns and clues. For my part, I can also spot important trends that might indicate that a reader is getting stuck with a particular type of book or at a particular reading level.

Life is all about making choices. But to learn this valuable skill, kids have to have a chance to make some choices on their own. Choosing books seems to me a great place to start. Who we are as readers is defined by what we read. And readers who choose on their own seem to take more ownership of their reading. Using the principles of guided choice, I can offer kids the sense of independence that motivates them to give their best effort. I can also ensure that the choices they make are healthy ones that further their reading development.

# Redefining "Just Right"

*Using the Six Qualities of Good Reading to Make Better Reading Choices*

To help kids find "just right" books, I start by telling them to find a book they like and can read well. But I don't stop there. Having defined good reading as reading with the six qualities, the kids and I can use this as a more detailed way of determining whether a particular book is easy, hard, or "just right."

I've always had trouble using grade level or other numeric designations to predict whether a particular book will work for a particular reader. This data is a reasonable guideline but I've always felt more comfortable looking at the book myself during a conference and listening to kids read.

One of the things I like most about using the six qualities is that the model is simple enough for kids to use as a tool for self-assessment. With a little practice, and some coaching from me in conferences, kids can use the qualities to monitor their own reading. This comes in handy when they have to figure out whether a book is at the right reading level.

Having already talked about what a "just right" book looks like, feels like, and sounds like, I tell kids we're going to go into more detail using the six qualities of good reading and use that as our guide.

**Speed.** Reading too slow is an easy way to identify a book that's too hard. Reading too fast may be an indication that the book is too easy. But before they make these determinations, I'll want kids to read with phrasing and expression, which slows them down a bit. If the book is just a bit too easy, that's fine by me. I'd much rather have kids reading below their level than above it. Ideally, when they read aloud to me, I want to hear kids moving along at a comfortable conversational pace without frequent stops and starts. Names of people, places, and things that are not part of the reader's normal vocabulary may slow them down a bit, but since these elements are often used repeatedly in a text, they won't slow kids down for long. *In general, a "just right" text is one in which the reader can maintain a comfortable reading speed almost all the time.*

**Accuracy.** If a kid can read without errors or even a tiny hiccup here and there, the text may be too easy; stumbling over words every sentence or two suggests that the text is too hard. Occasional decoding and pronunciation problems are fine. But what do we mean by "occasional?" Two or three per page (or about one every 100-150 words in a typical novel) is tolerable as long as kids can and will correct themselves. If they miss more words than that, or if they come upon many words they can't correct, the book is probably too hard. *In general, a "just right" text is one in which the reader can read almost all the words and correct their own mistakes.*

More often than not, kids pick texts that are a little too

hard for them. In some classrooms, I've found every kid reading above their independent reading level. If I'm going to make mistakes with reading levels, I want to err the other way and have kids reading books that are just below their level. At least they won't be developing bad habits this way. But since I know that kids are inclined to pick books that are too hard, I make sure to get around to every kid for a quick "level check," and to send those kids who've chosen books that are too difficult back to try again.

Using speed and accuracy alone, I can make a good guess about the fit between a reader and a text. But using phrasing and expression helps me, and the student, make an even better determination:

**Phrasing.** Some kids can decode fairly accurately, and even achieve reasonable speed, but their reading still doesn't sound quite right. This makes reading level judgments harder. But by paying attention to a reader's phrasing, I can get the additional information I need. If a kid can phrase a text naturally without practice, it might be too easy. At the other extreme, if a kid can't phrase a long sentence, even with repeated practice, it's probably too hard. If the text is "just right," students can usually get their phrasing down much of the time, and can fix any sentence with a little practice, especially after hearing me read a few lines and mimicking what I do. *In general, a "just right" text is one in which a reader can read with phrasing most of the time and correct phrasing problems easily when they occur.*

**Expression.** I don't need to hear the full-throated expres-

sion of an actor on a stage but I do like to hear basic elements of expressive reading. Can the reader pause appropriately at periods and commas? Does the reader's voice drop down a bit when sentences end with periods, or go up a bit when sentences end with question marks? Does the reader raise the pitch of her voice slightly higher for dialog to contrast the words of the speaker with the words of the narrator? If kids can do these things, even slightly, the text is probably within their range. *In general, a "just right" text is one in which the reader can read with a small amount of expression related to ending punctuation, commas, and dialog.*

Using speed, accuracy, phrasing, and expression, I can judge the reading levels of most kids. But sometimes there are other kids whose book choices require more careful assessment. Some kids, especially older ones we often classify as reluctant readers, have spent a lot of time in school trying to look like they're reading when they probably aren't. For kids who don't read well, or who don't like to read, "fake reading" is an essential survival skill that keeps them from getting into trouble. I certainly don't want to punish these kids, or make them feel bad in any way, so I'll need to take some time to learn more about their abilities, and their feelings about reading, before I know exactly what to do. I'll let them know that my goal for them of finding a "just right" book isn't going to change, and that I know it might take a little while for that to happen. I will also make sure they know that not reading during reading time is not an option and that I'll be coming by to hear them read on a regular basis. In the mean-

time, I'll encourage them to pick easier books so I can assess their reading ability in an authentic way.

**Understanding.** Some kids can decode fairly accurately and even achieve reasonable fluency, yet have little understanding of what they read, even on a literal level. In this situation, the trick is for both reader and teacher to be able to talk about this without embarrassment. I do this by asking kids to tell me what's happening in their book where they are at the moment. Meanwhile, I look over their shoulder so I can read the book, too. As our discussion proceeds, I ask more and more detailed questions about things I notice in the text. I focus on literal comprehension. If a student can answer all the questions, I know they're at least understanding things on a basic level. But if they give several wrong answers or, more commonly, if they shrug and say "I don't know" a little too often, we can begin a discussion about whether or not they're really reading and what we can do, by way of finding other books, to improve the situation. *In general, a "just right" text is one in which the reader has an easy grasp of events and ideas on a literal level.*

**Thinking.** Most readers who understand a text on a literal level will be able to do some thinking about it after the fact. To assess this quickly in a reading level conference, I'll try to get the reader to make inferences, predictions, connections, and other responses associated with higher-level thinking. I also like to have kids pose a question or two. This isn't always natural for them, so I often prompt them by saying, "What do you wonder about?" and then I point them to a specific character or occur-

rence to focus their effort. *In general, a "just right" text is one in which a reader can respond with a valid inference, a reasonable prediction, a connection, a question, or other evidence of higher-level thinking.*

My intention here is not to tell kids which books they can read and which ones they can't, though at first, this is often what I have to do. It's to teach kids a process for making choices that will help them become better readers. The first time we pick books, I give them more latitude. I know most of them will pick books that are too hard. But I want them to experience what that's like the first few times we conference. As we head into our second book, I'll be more insistent. My goal is that every reader will be able to reliably choose a "just right" text during the first month we work together, and that as we head into the second month, kids will be able to use the six qualities to distinguish easy, hard, and "just right" texts almost as accurately as I can.


# When "Just Right" Isn't

*What I Do When Kids Have Trouble Picking "Just Right" Books*

Getting kids into books at their independent reading level is always challenging. Even when I'm working with high schoolers who've been reading for more than a decade, many don't seem to have developed a sense of what they can read and what they can't. To make matters worse, many will say they don't like to read or that they can never find a good book. My goal is for kids to be able to do what any literate adult can do: find a book they enjoy and can read. Simple as this goal is, it often eludes me.

Because I believe that text selection is the foundation of being a reader, I work hard at turning kids into first rate selectors. But the first time we look for "just right" books, most kids get it wrong. I used to get upset, give up, and let the kids read whatever they wanted. Then it dawned on me that getting kids to pick "just right" books was just like getting them to do anything else in the classroom. They needed to work at it and I needed to develop strategies for helping them when things went wrong.

Knowing that most kids don't pick "just right" books their first time out (or even their second or third), I've developed a set of strategies I now use to help them improve their decision making:

**If the book is too hard.** If kids pick books that are too hard—and this is the case more often than not—I ask them to find something a little easier. But before I send them off to search again, we talk a bit about why the book is too hard and what they're going to look for in an easier book. Maybe the words are too hard, the sentences are too long, or there's too much text on a page. Maybe it's all three. Or maybe the book is just too long. Occasionally, it's a lack of prior knowledge about the subject matter (especially if it's non-fiction), or a lack of familiarity with the author's use of language (especially if it's a classic). When kids go back to select a new book, I tell them to keep their current book with them so we can compare the two after they make their selection. This improves their ability to return with an easier text.

**If the book is too easy.** First, I try to figure out why a student has chosen an easy book. Maybe he doesn't know what "easy" is. Maybe he wants to read a book he's read before. Or maybe he just doesn't want to work that hard. If I think a student is picking something easy on purpose, I find out why and do my best to deal with that reason directly. Some kids are afraid they'll be tested on a book. I tell them I don't test kids on books. Some kids are afraid of having to read at home for homework. I tell them that no matter what books they pick, they will always

have to read at home for homework. And then I send them off to get a harder book, keeping the easier book with them for comparison. If they don't seem to recognize that a book is too easy for them, and they're not just trying to avoid being challenged, I let them keep the easier book and read it all the way through. In exchange, I can get them to agree to try something harder next time. There's nothing wrong with reading an occasional easy book. They'll likely read it quickly so it won't be long before I have them in something more appropriate. Kids can't hurt themselves reading an easy book, and I can always push them harder in my conferencing to pay more attention to their phrasing and expression or to their reading response, rather than to what is happening literally in the story. There's nothing wrong with reading an easy book once in a while. Sometimes it's exactly what kids need to build confidence and to learn to trust the process of working with me. I won't let them read several easy books in a row. But one or two here and there is just fine.

**If the book is "just right."** At the beginning of the year, I'm usually shocked when kids find "just right" books on their own. When it happens, I make a big deal out of it. I usually have the kid come up to work with me in front of the class. I call this a "live" conference. The purpose of "live" conferencing is to demonstrate something. In this case, I end up with a perfect lesson on picking a "just right" book. We talk about how the student found the book, how she knew it was "just right," what a "just right" book feels like as she reads it, and so on. I get excited when this happens because it makes my teaching so much easier. In a few weeks, every kid will know how to pick a "just right" book and it won't be such a big deal. But at the beginning of the year, I make a big deal out of it.

**If the book is just a little too hard.** Often I find kids who've picked books that are just a little too hard. I call these "challenge" books. A "challenge" book is one that a kid can actually read but that requires extra concentration, a slower reading speed, frequent rereading, and often a new strategy or two. When I find a kid with a "challenge" book, I cut a deal: I'll let you read it if you promise to work on certain strategies. Then we talk about what those strategies are. Most kids just want to read the book and will agree to anything I ask them. So we write down the strategies they're going to work on in their journal. Then, when I come back for a conference, I ask them to demonstrate those strategies. If they aren't using them, they have to get an easier book. If they are, they can continue. Most of the time, they aren't using the strategies. But if I come back to them often enough, they'll start. By the time they finish the book, they will have either realized it was too hard or they'll have learned a new strategy or two. Either outcome is a win as far as I'm concerned.

I'd love to have every kid in a "challenge" book all the time. But that's not healthy. The best thing over the long run is to have a "challenge" book every three or four books during the year, with "just right" books in between, and the occasional easy book in the mix when kids need a break.

**If a kid won't give a book up.** I run into many kids who don't want to pick a different book. I have two ways of handling this. The first is to make them follow my directions. I'm the teacher. I can ask them to do anything reasonable. So sometimes I force the issue. But this is my least favorite option. What I much prefer is letting them keep the book they've chosen as their "choice" book while asking them to find another that meets my criteria. During reading time, they have to read the book I

want them to read. But at any other time, they can read their "choice" book. This is a workable compromise that gives them what they want and gets me what I want. It also gives them extra reading to do which isn't a bad idea either. Most importantly, it shows them that I value their reading choices, even if they don't agree with mine. At the same time, they know that I'm serious about making sure they read books that will help them become better readers.

**If I don't know.** Sometimes neither I nor the reader knows for sure if the book is right. If the kid really likes the book, I let her continue reading it. But I check back frequently over the next few days. I also ask the student to make a note in her journal each day about the level of the reading, any hard words or passages, and other things she might have noticed relating to decoding, fluency, or comprehension issues. Finally, we agree to check in after a certain number of pages to see how much she really likes the book and how well she is able to read it.

**If the kid won't pick a book at all.** The only thing some kids hate worse than reading is being bored. And there's nothing more boring than not having a book to read during reading time. Some kids won't make a choice. Others will simply choose a book at random and sit there doing nothing. These are not reading issues; these are participation issues. And that's how I deal with them.

With some kids, I have to review participation requirements regularly. I try not to threaten or punish. I just help the student make the connection between lack of participation and logical consequences like poor grades, boredom, and having to do even more work at a later date to catch up. While I don't like to see kids willingly giving up learning opportunities, I don't like to

argue or badger kids either. Instead I use an approach I call "persistent invitation." This simply requires me to invite kids who aren't participating to join the rest of the class as often as possible. The only other alternative is to sit doing nothing (very hard), sit in the back of the room or just outside the door (boring and mildly embarrassing), sit in a partner teacher's room (also boring and possibly more embarrassing), or sit in an administrator's office (potentially troublesome and a worst case scenario both I and the student will work hard to avoid).

I tell them that I recognize that any of these choices is up to them. But that I'd rather they made the choice to participate, and that I will help them to the best of my ability. Most kids come around in a few days, primarily out of boredom and the frustration that they're not getting me upset, or derailing the class, or getting any of the usual attention they get when they don't follow the teacher's instructions.

Even if I do everything I've outlined here, I'm still going to be challenged to get every kid reading a "just right" book right away. But the effort is worth it because getting kids into books they like and can read well is the key to maximizing their growth. I'm also unwilling to put up with the alternative of kids spending day after day reading books they don't like or can't handle. In this scenario, kids either become bored, poor readers, or both.

I know I have to be patient the first few times kids pick books. At the same time, I have to be vigilant about the things that matter to me. I know that most kids won't pick perfectly their first time out. I know that my initial conferences with each

reader will be "just right" book conferences. I know that it may take two or three weeks before every kid has a "just right" book. But I think that's time well spent. At the beginning of the year, I put a lot of effort into helping kids learn how to make good book choices. For me, this is the foundation of reading success. After all, how much would you and I read if we didn't read books we liked at levels we were comfortable with?

# How Much Should Kids Read?

*High Expectations That Turn Kids Into Lifelong Readers*

When people ask me, "How much should kids read?", I'm tempted to say things like "a lot," or "as much as they can," or "until their eyeballs fall out!" I don't say these things, but I'm tempted. It's not that I want to be flip; it's just that I think we're all dancing around the wrong question. Instead of asking "How much should kids read?", I think we should be asking, "What kind of readers do we want kids to be?"

Reading is pretty darned important. They don't call it the first "R" for nothing. Most of school after 3rd grade hinges on a kid's ability to read independently. So does most of life after 16.

The answer to the question of how much kids should read is probably something like, "As much as it takes to make them great readers." But that's not the answer people are looking for either.



So here are some numbers.

**Primary students.** When I work with primary age students in grades K-2, kids will typically read 50-100 books a year, though I suspect they read far more than that because their books are so short and we just can't keep track of them all.

**Intermediate students.** When I work with intermediate students in grades 3-5, kids will typically read 35-50 books a year. Fifth graders reading above their grade level might find their way into some very long books, especially if they like the fantasy titles that often hook tweens and teens, so their totals might be a little lower. Most fluent third graders can knock out an easy chapter book in less than a week, so 50 books for the school year is not out of reach by any means.

**Middle school students.** When I work with middle school students, I expect kids to read 25-30 books a year with avid readers hitting 35 or even 40. Again, since lengths of books vary dramatically at this level, some kids might only read 20 books, or about one every two weeks. Another issue has to do with kids who are reading many years below grade level. It's not uncommon to find middle schoolers with 2nd and 3rd grade reading abilities. Obviously, they have to read easier, shorter books to start, and this will increase their total for the year.

**High school students.** When I work with high school students, I want each student to get through at least 20 books a year, notwithstanding everything I've said before about reading levels, lengths of books, and other factors that might affect the final count a few books one way or another.



You can see that what I think about are minimums and

ranges. I also think about practical factors like lengths of books and reading levels that will vary from student to student. My goal is to have kids read many books. But it's not to have every kid read the same books or the same number of books.

"Can I just convert everything to pages so I don't have to worry about how long the books are?" Some people do this. But I don't recommend it. For me, it's not the page count that matters but how often a reader goes through the entire reading process from choosing a book to turning the final page. There are things I can teach students each time they go through the process, things I can't teach them just because they read a certain number of pages. Still, there are situations where using page counts makes sense. As long as kids are reading, it probably doesn't make much difference. The quality of a kids' reading is more important than the quantity.

What I want most of all for kids has nothing to do with how many books or pages they read, or how hard their books are, or what their Lexile score is, or how many Accelerated Reader points they earn. What I want most for kids is to give them the experience of being serious readers.

What's a serious reader? Here are some of the things I look for:

**Serious readers are always reading something.** As soon as they finish one book, they pick another. Really serious readers often have more than one book going at a time. I tell kids that anyone should be able to come up to them at any time and ask, "What are you reading?", and they should always have an

answer.

**Serious readers have strong reading preferences.** I want kids to develop strong attachments to certain authors, genres, and subjects. When I ask them at the end of the year which book was their absolute favorite, I want them to have a little trouble answering because they have so many favorite books to choose from. I want them to be able to answer the question, "What kind of reader are you?" with confidence and a long list of titles that show me what they mean.

**Serious readers choose books carefully.** I want kids to choose books they like, books they can read, and books that will help them become better readers. I want them to read reviews, listen to their friends' recommendations during book talks, and consider very seriously the recommendations they get from me, the school librarian, and their parents. I want them to take risks with their choosing. But I also want them to be able to abandon books that aren't working out. I want them to realize that choosing a book is a commitment of time, energy, and, if they're paying for their books, money.

**Serious readers read regularly.** If you want to get really good at something, you have to do it every day. I know that's not going to happen, but that's where I start. As a practical matter, I ask for 4-8 hours of reading a week. They'll get a bit of that time in class but most will come as homework. Is it too much to expect 30 minutes of reading, five days a week at home? How about an hour on Sunday? I don't think so.

**Serious readers have a lot to say about what they read.** I like spirited book talk. I want kids to write about their books, too. As I often tell them, "I'm more interested in what you think about your book than I am in the book itself." I want kids shar-

ing every day, giving regular book talks, writing reviews, and expressing a general excitement about reading that looks and sounds like the most active adult book group you can imagine.

**Serious readers like to hang out with other serious readers.** I want kids to bond over books. I want them to form a community of readers. I want them to challenge each other, to root each other on. If someone falls behind on their reading, it's everyone's responsibility (mine included) to help them get caught up.

I want kids to take reading seriously. I lay the foundation for this by requiring them to do the kind of reading serious readers do. This is not as onerous as it sounds. Remember, they get to choose their own books. And the main rules for choosing are to pick books they like, books they can read, and books that will help them become better readers. Using a guided choice approach, I direct them to certain types of texts at certain points in their development. But they have wide latitude in the choices they make. I also advise them on their workload. For example, if they're behind a book or two, *The Red Pony* might be a better choice than *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* or *The Fellowship of the Ring*. We'll also make project calendars so we can keep track of due dates, progress, and changes to our schedule that might arise from time to time.

If this still seems like too much to ask of kids, take a look back at my list of "serious reader" criteria. You'll notice that many of these things are true for many teachers. Education is full of serious readers. So it would seem less than honest not to share

that value with kids.

But what about reluctant readers? They probably need to read twice as much! But I'll wait until they're over their reluctance before upping the ante. The truth of life in the Information Age, however, is that even people who don't like to read still consume large amounts of text on a regular basis through newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and many other sources. They may not be working through the latest best seller, but reading is part of their regular routine. For most people, in fact, reading is just a habit. And that's what I want it to be for kids.

Habits are funny things. They're easy to pick up and hard to put down—just like a good book. I want kids to pick up the habit of reading. When they break for the holidays, I want them to read a book or two. I want them to read several over the summer. My hope, of course, is that their experience with reading in school leads them down the path of being lifelong readers. Asking them to read consistently throughout the year allows them to get a feel for what this is like.

So, after all that, how much should kids read? I think the best answer is, "Enough to keep them reading all year long—and for the rest of their lives."

# Word Solving

*Helping Kids Decode Unfamiliar Words*

When readers are just starting out, they spend a lot of time and effort trying to decode words. This is not an easy task. Turning symbols into sounds and sounds into words involves a lot of guess work. Sometimes, after all that trial and error, readers are left only with errors that try their patience.

Whether the reader is a 5-year-old struggling with his first picture book or a 15-year-old struggling with his second language, I have to provide the same kind of help. I have to show kids logical ways of breaking unfamiliar words into decodable parts they can quickly reassemble into something that makes sense.

As accomplished readers, we swallow words whole. Beginning readers try to do this, too. But many of the words they encounter are unfamiliar to them. When this happens, reading whole words doesn't work too well. Unfortunately, neither does a random approach to sounding words out. Kids make guesses often based on just one or two letters. In many cases, they may let hard words go entirely, skipping anything they can't easily

figure out.

I don't want kids spending long periods of time on a single word. But I also don't want them taking wild guesses or skipping words altogether. Ideally, I'd like kids to make a reasonable attempt to decode all unknown words they encounter through the systematic application of a few simple strategies.

There are many ways to decode unknown words but I want kids to use only a few so they don't take too much time away from the process of fluent reading. They can use these strategies in any order. Ideally, they'll move from strategy to strategy very quickly as they puzzle out different parts of a word using different techniques.

**Use the first sound.** This strategy helps readers make good guesses as long the word they are working with is short. Many single syllable words can be successfully decoded in context using only the first sound. For example, take this sentence: "The boy and his dog ran down the b____." Reasonable candidates for the last word might be "block" or "beach." The context supplied by the setting of the story will guide the reader in making the best choice.

**Break off a beginning or an end.** Many words start with common prefixes and end with common suffixes. If I teach these in simple spelling and vocabulary lessons, kids will be able to recognize them more easily when they read. Beginnings like "in" or "un" or "re" are easy to figure out. So are endings like "ing" or "er" or "tion." When readers figure out a meaningful part of a word, the rest of it often pops into their head.

**Look for a word within the word.** It's truly amazing how many words contain other words. For example, the word "within" is made up of "with" and "in." The word "amazing" contains the words "am," "a," and "zing". Using words within words often leads to quick solutions.

**Work on the easy parts.** Some parts of words are easier to figure out than others. So why not start there? Take a word like "university," for example. It's easy to pick out three-letter chunks that might help us: "niv," "ver," "sit." Any of these might get us moving in the right direction.

**Use vowel and consonant patterns.** The reason some parts of words are easier to figure out than others is because they follow common vowel-consonant patterns. Take the "cvc" pattern, for example. That's "consonant-vowel-consonant." We see it in words like "let," "cat," "hop," and "cut." The great thing about this pattern is that the vowel is almost always short. Another common pattern is "cvvc" or "consonant-vowel-vowel-consonant" which tends to produce long vowel sounds determined by the first vowel as in "team" and "fried." The last pattern I teach is "vce" or "vowel-consonant-e" which we see in words like "date" and "life." Vowel sounds are the tricky parts of most words and knowing these patterns helps readers begin to sort them out.

**Say the sounds in order.** If readers have used the previous strategies to pick out parts of words, they can often finish up their decoding by saying the sounds they hear from left to right in the order in which they occur. Often this produces slightly incorrect pronunciations but this isn't necessarily a bad thing. A slightly inaccurate pronunciation can quickly be turned into a correct guess when the reader puts the word back into the context of the sentence and their memory for the correct sounds is

jogged.

Using just this small set of strategies, it's possible for readers to figure out even very complex words. But the process won't work well if they don't check their efforts against the sentence in which the challenging word occurs. To make sure kids do this, I teach them a three-step process as follows:

**1. Reread the sentence with the new word.** Whenever readers stop on a hard word, I want them to go back to the capital letter and begin again so they can hear the word in context. That's the only way to know if their guess is correct.

**2. Think about what makes sense.** If the newly decoded word makes sense in the sentence, it's probably right. If the word doesn't make sense, it's probably wrong, and the reader needs to think about trying another decoding strategy.

**3. Check the letters in your guess.** Often, readers will make their guess based on only a few letters in the word. When they reread the sentence, they may discover that the new word isn't accurate. But it's often close. The only way to tell how close is to compare the sound of the word they've chosen against the actual letters in the word they're trying to decode. While it's hard to get kids to do this, it's one of the best ways for them to improve their phonemic awareness because it requires them to compare a sequence of sounds in their head with a sequence of letters on the page.

There's always a tension, it seems, between wanting kids to read fluently and wanting them to improve their decoding skills and learn new words. We don't want them to skip all the hard words to maintain a reasonable reading rate. But we don't want them to stop reading every time they stumble on something new.

Too often, I think, when faced with these quandaries, we opt for compromise. Maybe if they just stopped for a second or two, or if they let only some of the hard words go by. But compromise in this case seems to produce kids who aren't good at either maintaining their fluency or decoding new words. And what we really need is for kids to be good at both.

To solve this problem, I use a structured approach to repeated reading. I explain to the kids that good reading involves doing three things all at the same but that when we're learning, we sometimes have to practice them one at a time.

**1. Reading to decode.** Sometimes the focus of our attention is on letters and sounds as we figure out a new word. We usually have to stop, or at least slow down, in our reading to do this.

**2. Reading to understand.** Once we've figured out a new word, we often have to go back to the beginning of the sentence where we found it and read again. If all goes well, we'll read up to the new word, read the new word correctly, and continue to the end of the sentence without too much trouble. Then—and only then in many cases—will we have the information we need to understand the author's ideas.

**3. Reading to express.** Once we know what all the words are, we can read the sentence once to make sure we're saying the words in the best possible way. This may involve making changes in our voice that make our reading sound more like

someone talking.

Read once to decode, once to understand, and once to express. This three-pass approach ensures that kids take the time they need to learn new words in context while at the same time getting the comprehension and fluency practice they need to become better readers. Do kids read everything three times? No. But if I work closely with them, they do it enough so that the benefits of improved decoding, comprehension, and fluency accrue without turning reading into a tedious task.

This may seem like a lot of complicated information to teach kids who can barely read. It is. But it's still worth teaching because it's exactly the knowledge they need to get better. Fortunately, they don't have to learn it all at once, and even if they only use a little of it, it will help them improve their reading immensely.

Think about it this way: if we don't teach them this information, they'll be working randomly. As time goes by, they'll make up their own strategies, many of which will be inefficient or just plain wrong. After a year or two, every kid will have their own repertoire of strategies anyway. Why not make sure they have a small set of good strategies to begin with?

Getting kids to use these strategies begins with teaching them in short lessons. I tend to do this by putting up words on the board that I'm pretty sure the kids will have to struggle with and then walking them through a variety of approaches to figure the words out.

Most of this I accomplish through thinkalouds. For exam-

ple, let's say I'm working with kindergarteners and I put up the word "acrobat." I might solve that out loud as follows: "ac," "ro," "bat." I'll say those syllable chunks out loud and then I'll note the strategies I used like this:

ac = a part that's easy to figure out
ro = a part that's easy to figure out
bat = a word within a word

Or take a word like "hippopotamus":

hip = a word within a word
po = a part that's easy to figure out
pot = a word within a word
am = a word within a word
us = a word within a word

It's important to note two things. First, I may solve words differently than the kids do. This means there can be different solutions to the same word. As long as the kids can explain their logic, I'm happy to have them take another route. Second, breaking words up into smaller pieces tends to change the way those pieces are pronounced.

Specifically, parts of words that are not stressed in normal pronunciation will often become stressed when we break words down. This shift in accent is what often accounts for differences in the way words are pronounced. For example, in the word "hippopotamus", the "a" has a short "u" sound (the schwa sound)

because the stress pattern of the word goes like this: HIP-po-POT-a-mus. But when I isolate the letters "am" to decode the words, I'm likely to pronounce this like the word "am" which uses the short "a" sound. This is why the final strategy of running the sounds together quickly is often the best way to finish up. This tends to smooth out the individual syllables and restore the natural rhythm—and correct pronunciation—to the word.

Surprisingly, it doesn't take too many practice words with thinkalouds on my part and group attempts at word solving on the kids' part for everyone to begin getting the hang of it. However, practicing a few words on a few days doesn't get the job done. As soon as we go over a few strategies, I have to reinforce them in conferences. To do this, I'll work with kids one-on-one, waiting until they come across an unfamiliar word, and then coaching them through appropriate strategies while they puzzle it out. It's in the conferencing where the learning really occurs. The lesson is just a way of introducing the techniques I want them to practice.

It's absolutely vital that kids get lots of practice in their own self-selected books. This is the true test because it represents true reading. If the only time kids practice these skills is in workbooks or at the board, they're unlikely to internalize them as part of their normal reading process.

Finally, to reassure myself that kids are actually using these strategies even when I'm not with them in conferences, I will often ask them to tell me how they figured out a new word. If a kid says, "I don't know; I just figured it out," then I know something hasn't quite clicked. While I can assume the kid is using some set of strategies, I can't tell which ones. For all I know, the kid could have figured out a word by sheer luck. But when I

hear kids describing specific features of a word and the way they used those features to puzzle it out—and I see them using the rereading process I've described above to check their efforts—I feel satisfied that they've internalized an important set of tools that will improve their reading fluency, allow them to acquire new vocabulary, and increase their enjoyment of reading.


# The Harry Potter Effect

*Motivation and the Magic of Challenging Texts*

In general, I'm not a fan of letting kids pick books they can't read. Letting kids struggle day after day with books two or three years above their reading level is a recipe for fatigue, frustration, and the reinforcement of bad habits. But kids often want to read books they can't read precisely because they can't read them. Hard books are cool books, and many kids would rather be cool than literate. So over the years, I've developed an approach to dealing with this situation that tries to square kids' motivations with my instructional goals.

I was working one year with a great bunch of 3rd graders. Whatever they may have lacked in reading skill, they more than made up for in reading enthusiasm. In fact, it seemed not to matter at all to them that they understood little of the books they were attempting to read. They just liked reading.

It took me about a month to convince them that the point of reading was to understand ideas, not just to call out words. As Halloween approached, I felt like we were finally on solid ground. Most kids had books at their independent reading level, most

were understanding what they were reading, and some were even beginning to experiment with phrasing and expression.

Then Harry Potter came to town.

The librarian announced a spectacular book fair jam packed with the latest titles. The kids couldn't wait. They saved their allowances, did extra chores, raided piggy banks and college savings accounts. These kids were going to buy some books!

The day after the book fair, I noticed large hard-bound volumes all over the room. Small kids have small desks, and now these small desks were covered by monstrous tomes. One tiny tot couldn't actually hold the book in his hands to read it. He had to lay it flat instead.

Gone were the tiny transitional chapter books they'd been reading. *Junie B. Jones, Magic Treehouse, The Boxcar Children,* all had been disappeared by *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.*

The kids were more excited than ever about reading. And at first, I was, too. Then I realized something: the kids didn't want to read their regular books anymore; they only wanted to read Harry Potter. I didn't know exactly what to do. How do you tell an 8-year old who just spent two month's allowance on a book that he can't read it? The answer is, you don't. At least not right away.

So I let the Harry Potter fans read their new books for a few days. As I conferenced, I tried not to cringe as they muggled their way through unfamiliar names, got knocked off their broomsticks by unusual vocabulary, and stumbled through sentences as dense and tangled as the fog-shrouded streets of Diagon Alley.

I wasn't surprised that the kids couldn't read Harry Potter. But I was struck by how much they wanted to read it, and how

hard they were willing to work. Several kids who had previously demonstrated reading rates of almost 200 words per minute, were now barely reading two pages a day. And though everyone knew the basic story, few could parse the wonderful details lurking in almost every paragraph. I had a vision of kids reading this book for the rest of the year and understanding only the most obvious elements. At the same time, I didn't think I could get away with banning Harry Potter simply on the grounds that it was well above the kids' reading levels. So I decided to make a deal with Lord Voldemort.

I told the kids they would have to go back to their original books but that they could continue to read Harry Potter for part of our reading time each day. During "Harry Potter Time," however, they had to promise to use several strategies.

**Word Breaking.** These kids had grown out of sounding out most of their words but now they were back in a text that required a lot of it. We went back over several simple techniques, most involving syllable patterns and word-within-a-word strategies. The kids pledged to apply them conscientiously and to figure out all the new words they could.

**Phrase Breaking.** This strategy involved breaking long sentences into many short phrases. This was the only way most kids could begin to understand the details.

**Questioning.** Rather than just decoding their way through, I needed them to start wondering about things that didn't make sense. To do this, I had to get them to actively question their reading. We decided as a group that they would ask at least one

question per page unless there was a lot of dialog which was easier to understand.

**Inference.** While they could ask questions, they didn't seem to know how to answer them. I told them this was normal and got them into making inferences. We practiced the basic pattern of asking a question and making an inference for the answer by putting paragraphs up on the board, posing questions on the left side, and putting up answers on the right. Sometimes we figured things out, sometimes we didn't. But we always had a better sense of the passage just by making the effort, and this was the point I wanted to make to them.

**Rereading.** To integrate the results of all the strategies they were trying to use, I told them they had to reread tougher spots until they were smooth and fluent. This lowered their speed but raised the quality of their reading to a point where I could feel confident that they were reinforcing good habits and not developing bad ones.

If it sounds like I gave them a lot of hard work to do, that's because I did. Initially, I thought they wouldn't do it. I figured they'd give up, go back to their original books, and put Harry Potter away until 5th or 6th grade. Instead, they jumped right in and stuck to it. As a result, they got excellent practice applying good reading strategies to a challenging text for a few minutes every day. And I got a lesson in how good books motivate kids to work harder than I ever thought possible.

Normally, I can't get very young readers to apply multiple strategies to a challenging text. They get tired. They get bored.

And eventually they get frustrated. But when kids really want to read something, even if that something is way above their grade level, I know now that there are ways I can work with them to accommodate their preferences and ensure they have an experience that will make them better readers at the same time.

I now use that same kind of deal-making on a regular basis. Whenever kids pick books that are too hard for them, I identify a strategy or two they need to apply to overcome the gap between their ability and the level of the text. As long as they continue to apply the strategies, they can continue to read the book. If I'm thoughtful about the strategies I choose, and if students use those strategies conscientiously, the reading experience improves and the reader learns new skills. If the reader can't or won't apply the strategies, they agree to pick an easier book.

Most kids, when they pick books, make choices that are above their reading level. And they often don't like it when I ask them to pick something easier. Now I've got an approach to mediating that situation more effectively. I've also learned when I can let kids go with a hard book they really love.

I want kids to take risks with their learning. The best thing I think a kid can do in school is volunteer for a challenge. While I don't want kids reading two or three years above their grade level all the time, I do want them to pick a "challenge" book every once in a while. And when that happens, I want to give each kid the exact set of tools he or she needs to meet that challenge. Striking a deal about using strategies to read effectively in hard texts brings me and the students into an informal learning contract that matches their motivation with my instructional goals. I couldn't ask for anything more magical than that.

# Raising Reading Levels

*Seven Principles That Accelerate Reading Progress*

I heard a news story about how schools are helping struggling readers. One school had taken a group of low-reading 9th graders and put them into a special class. Reading levels ranged from 3rd to 5th grade and, predictably, many kids admitted they didn't like to read. As the teacher called the class together, something caught my attention. Everyone was reading *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

The last time I checked, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was well above the reading level of kids with 3rd-5th grade abilities. So how were these kids going to improve when the book they were reading was a book they couldn't read? How many kids would do extra reading at home? How many would improve their fluency? How many would increase their stamina for long sustained reading sessions? How many would become hooked on books as a result of spending several weeks on a text that might be three, four, or even more years above their independent reading level?

If this were an oddity, I wouldn't bother mentioning it. But I see it in almost every school I visit. The whole-class novel is the

sacred cow of American reading instruction; so sacred, in fact, that we can't imagine any other way for kids to become better readers. But whole-class reading is the least likely way to help a classroom full of kids raise their reading levels in a hurry.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not against the classics. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a terrific book. It's beautifully written, the story is well told, kids can relate to it, and it covers important issues that still resonate with us today. It's most often taught in middle or early high school, and most of the grade level listings put it somewhere around 8th or 9th grade. It's a great book for teenagers but not if they read at pre-teen levels.

All across our country, we have millions of kids who are not proficient readers. If we extrapolate results from the most recent reading test of the National Assessment of Education Progress, the number of kids reading below grade level could be as high as 25 million. Clearly, there's some catching up to be done. And setting up special classes for low readers isn't necessarily a bad idea. But making them read the same book when it's well above their reading level is.

Even if we don't teach a special reading class, we all encounter kids who are far behind in reading. Think about how hard school is for them. Almost every class they take requires some reading, and virtually everything their teachers give them is above their reading level. When I see kids who are two, three, or more years behind, I know I have to be very focused in the way I help them. And what I need to be focused on is raising their reading level—fast. To help kids raise their reading levels

as quickly as possible, I focus on the following instructional principles:

**Most reading is individual**. I want each student in a "just right" book. This means that every kid is reading something they like at their independent reading level. Whole-class texts will be used sparingly and for legitimate instructional purposes like introducing a new reading strategy, modeling reading response, or choral reading activities related to fluency and expression. Most of the time, most of the kids will be reading in their own self-selected "just right" books.

**Most reading is done at the students' independent level.** The research is very clear on this. There's a small window of difficulty where kids can maximize their growth as readers. Read too low and progress is slow; read too high and progress can halt entirely, especially if kids start to develop bad habits as ways of compensating for texts they can't read.

**Kids are taught how to pick their own books.** Kids must take ownership of their reading and the key to ownership is choice. Kids must be taught how to pick their own "just right" books, and they have to be monitored closely to make sure they're doing it.

**Fluency is the focus of instruction.** Raising reading levels means raising fluency. To do this, we'll concentrate on a variety of strategies related to reading speed, accuracy, phrasing, and expression. Concentrating on fluency is the key to raising levels because it improves kids' abilities to decode progressively difficult texts with greater accuracy and automatic word recognition.

**Kids read significant numbers of books**. Kids who are behind need to work hard to catch up. And that means reading

large numbers of books. Kids with 2nd or 3rd grade reading levels need to read one or more books per week. This means regular reading at home, at least a half hour a night, five nights a week, plus 20-30 minutes of reading time in class each day where the teacher can perform frequent conferences.

**Kids develop the stamina to read for long periods of time.** One of the big differences between a high reader and a low reader is stamina. Low readers struggle to read for long periods of time. This has to change. We may start with just five minutes of silent reading at a time during the first week of the year. But within a few months, kids should feel comfortable reading for 20 minutes or more. By the end of the year, they should be able to read for an entire class period.

**Kids interact with other readers in ways that mimic the behaviors of adult readers.** I don't want kids doing worksheets or silly activities out of an English book. That's probably what has turned them off to reading in the first place. The best activities for struggling readers are authentic and social. Book talks are especially powerful. Nothing gets kids wanting to read new books more than an enthusiastic presentation from one of their friends.

Contrary to popular belief, and current educational statistics, it is not hard to raise the reading levels of low readers. I frequently see kids making 3-4 years of progress during a single academic year in classrooms where teachers apply the principles discussed above. Too often, however, we force low readers to read books above their level. I have no idea what the justification

is for this since it goes against the most fundamental research we have on how kids learn to read. Nonetheless, whole-class reading persists, and many mockingbirds are killed in the process.

# Getting Ready to Conference

*Things to Think About Before You Get Started*

Conferencing is the most important part of my reading instruction. It's where I get to hear kids read. It's where I get to ask specific questions. It's where I get to head off problems and push for breakthroughs. It's also where I work my hardest. Some conferences don't seem to go anywhere. Others drag on and on without a strong sense of purpose. And the minute I sit down quietly with one kid, I seem to cue all the others to start talking.

Because conferencing is at once so important and so challenging, it helps to be prepared. Here are some important things I put in place to make conferencing work as smoothly as possible.

**Establish My Reading Time Procedure.** The biggest challenge to successful conferencing is commotion in other parts of the room. So I create a formal procedure for reading time that

tells kids exactly what they can and can't do. The procedure is slightly different for each group but it almost always contains the following essential items: (1) You may read silently; (2) You may write in your journal or log; (3) You may get up to get another book but only one person may be up at a time.

To make sure kids are clear about this, I rehearse the procedure with them. I tell them that reading time has begun and ask them to begin reading. Then, instead of conferencing, I spend a few minutes slowly circling the room, using proximity to keep the noisiest ones calm, reminding them quietly of our new rules, and praising them for following the procedure so well.

**Establish My Conference Procedure.** Just like my reading time procedure, kids need to understand my conference procedure, too. I tell them that conferences will be no more than 2-3 minutes in length, that I will probably want to hear them read a bit, and that I may want them to answer a few questions for me. In the beginning, I'll be calling them for conferences. But later on, they'll be signing up ahead of time.

The essential items of my conferencing procedure are these: (1) Have your journal open and dated, and have a pen ready in case we need to write something down; (2) Speak quietly so you don't interrupt other readers; (3) When we finish, write a note about the conference we had in your journal that includes what you'll be working on next. This last rule is just as much for me as it is for them. It reminds me to be focused and goal-oriented, and to make sure each reader is clear about what I want them to do.

**Have a Recording Mechanism.** There are many ways to record conferences and everyone seems to have his or her own favorite. Mine is to use a clipboard and a sheet of paper. I make

a grid with enough squares to have one for each student in a class. Then I put my conference notes in the appropriate square. When the paper is filled up, I know I've conferenced at least once with every student.

**Know My Place.** I can go to them or they can come to me. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. If I go to their desk, I save time and I improve my ability to manage other students by proximity. If they come to me, I can talk louder without interrupting other readers, the student gets more privacy, and I get an often much-needed rest. In an ideal situation, I will set up what I like to call "my office" with two desks or a table away from the main seating area, and have students come to see me there. If I think kids are going to get squirrelly, I'll move my office into the center of the room or some other more prominent location.

**Queue Up My Most Challenging Kids First.** If I can predict the kids who are likely to have the most trouble during reading time, I'll conference with them first. Before I release kids to reading, I'll say something like, "Josh, Lisa, Amy. I'll conference with you first in that order." This lets them know they won't just be sitting there the whole time. It also gives me a chance to make sure they have appropriate books to read and that they're clear on my expectations.

**Give Myself Some Reflection Time.** I try to take a short break after three or four conferences. This gives me time to reflect on how I'm doing, to survey the room and get out of my chair if necessary, and to collect myself for my next set of conferences. There's no need to do conference after conference. And I've come to the conclusion that trying to cram ten or fifteen into a single class period isn't good for me or the kids.

Reading is an individual sport. And though we often have to coach 25 players at once, we know intuitively, if not from direct experience, that whole-class reading activities aren't as effective as one-on-one conferences. For most of us, there are two challenges to conferencing: maintaining good classroom management and directing each conference to a focused conclusion where readers understand what they need to do to improve. The second of these challenges seems the most important to us. But we can't even begin to work on it if we don't address the first.

Management issues remain the most common reason teachers sight for why their conferences don't go well. Some cut out conferencing all together because they can't control the class. This is a shame because cutting out conferencing cuts out our best opportunity to help kids become better readers.

The best approach is to focus first on management issues in the context of short conferencing periods. There's no rule that says you have to have 40 minutes of conferences your first time out. Start with five. Tell kids your goal is to have two brief conferences while everyone else reads silently. Add a minute or two to your conference time each day. Set a goal with your kids to achieve 15-20 minutes of uninterrupted reading during the first month of school. Then you're on your way.

# Conferencing with the Six Qualities

*Using the Model to Improve My Interactions with Kids*

When kids are learning to read, they need a lot of help. Reading is hard and it only gets harder as kids move up to new texts at higher reading levels. To make consistent progress, kids need a lot of coaching. But it's not always easy to know how to help them.

We know we don't want to correct every error they make. But we don't want them to repeat the same mistakes over and over either. And we certainly don't want them to get frustrated or fatigued. At the same time, we know they need constant and consistent feedback to make progress.

To improve the comments I give, and to increase the efficiency of my reading conferences, I use the Six Qualities of Good Reading to structure my interactions as follows.

**Speed.** If kids are reading too quickly, I remind them to slow down to a normal talking speed. If that doesn't work, ask-

ing them to concentrate on phrasing and expression usually does the trick. If kids are reading too slowly, and they can't seem to speed up, I suggest an easier book or more frequent re-reading with increased attention to phrasing and expression on subsequent passes.

**Accuracy.** If kids are missing too many words, I ask them to slow down, practice the tougher words, and reread. To help them work through words they've never seen before, I show them how to sound things out by breaking words into logical pieces. If accuracy doesn't improve, the text may be too hard and the student may need to find something else.

Assessing speed and accuracy is the easiest way for me to know if a book is too hard. But often, kids don't want to give a book up. So I make a deal with them: they can keep it, and read it at other times, if they'll choose another book for reading time that's a little easier. However, they have to promise me that when they read the hard book, they'll slow down and work hard to improve their accuracy by using the sounding out strategies we've covered along with reasonable amounts of rereading. At some point, I tell them they will need to show me that they can read the hard book just as well as they can read the "just right" book—albeit in smaller chunks and with more practice.

**Phrasing.** If kids are reading word by word, stopping and starting in odd places, or if their reading is accurate but not smooth, I'll show them how to group words into phrases. I do this by reading a line for them and showing them where the breaks in the phrases go. They follow my example to get the hang of it and continue on their own. Periodically, I check back to see if they're still doing it.

**Expression.** Expression puts the feeling into reading, and

working on it is a good way to make reading more fun. As with phrasing, I'll demonstrate first by reading a line or two from the student's book. As I read aloud, I'll show them specific ways I change my voice as certain words go by. Most kids don't realize that they can hear expression even when they read to themselves, and that even when reading silently, expressing a text to a small degree as they sub-vocalize improves their enjoyment and their comprehension.

In my experience, kids get very little explicit instruction in phrasing and expression. But I have found that working on these two qualities gives me some of my best results. Over the years, I have come to believe very strongly that these neglected qualities provide an essential bridge between reading words and understanding ideas.

**Understanding.** If readers have speed, accuracy, phrasing, and expression under control, I ask them literal questions about what's going on in their text. I focus on questions that I, as a reader who hadn't read the book, might want to know the answers to. I do this to make the discussion feel natural and to model the kind of curiosity I want kids to bring to their reading. I also ask kids about the meanings of particular words as they are used in context.

**Thinking.** If a reader's understanding checks out, I engage them in a more reflective discussion. I might ask about their reactions to certain events and ideas. Or, if I can spot an opportunity where they're reading at the moment, I'll ask them to make an inference, prediction, or connection. I also look at their journal responses and try to use these as departure points for deeper discussions.

By identifying one of the six qualities to work on, I find a focus for the conference. This tells me—and the reader—what we need to do. The fact that the student understands the model just like I do makes conferencing easier for both of us. And when I'm done, the student and I can usually agree on a goal that we write in the student's reading journal. Then, when we meet again, I'll have a complete record of what the kid was reading, what we worked on in conference, and what we're trying to improve.

As we get farther along into the year, I want the kids to be practicing all six qualities in every text they encounter. They won't practice all of them all the time. But each time I give a comment or have a formal conference, I'll refer to one or two of them as the focal point of our work at that time. By teaching kids what these six qualities are, why they're important, and how to work with them to develop reading skills, my interactions with students improve and so does their reading.

# Tips for Better Conferences

*Little Things That Make a Big Difference*

It has taken me many years to grow into being a good conferencing partner in reading. And each year it seems I learn something new. At first, big things came to me, like the fact that I really didn't know much about reading, and that's why I could never figure out what to say to kids in a conference to help them improve. Understanding the Six Qualities of Good Reading really helped me there. Now it's the little things that matter most to me, some of them so obvious I can't believe I didn't see them clearly before.

In a typical school year, a single teacher will have hundreds of reading conferences. Making each one just a little better can make a huge difference in what kids learn.

As I look back over all the things I've discovered about conferencing, here are a few that seem just as important to me today as the day I first learned them. Thoughtfully implemented

and regularly practiced, they can help anyone improve the results of one-on-one work.

**Make sure kids are ready.** When I begin a conference, I want students to have their book, their reading journal, and a pen to write with. Ideally, each of these things have been out since reading began, but prior to beginning conferencing, I make sure they're out. I can't tell you how much time I used to waste waiting for kids to get ready to conference—or trying to find their journal half way through a conference so I could check on something.

**Connect your conference to your lesson.** If I've just given a lesson on inference, it makes sense for me to focus my conferences on that same skill. In fact, connecting the conference with the lesson is really the only way I have of knowing how well kids are able to apply it—or if they're even applying it at all. Doing this regularly also sets an expectation for the students. As I give my lesson, they know I'm likely to want to see them apply it one-on-one just a few minutes later. That improves their attention during the lesson and their accountability thereafter. Connecting conference and lesson also lends a predictable structure to each class period where students have a clear understanding of my expectations.

**Focus on one thing.** Conferencing can be a lot of fun. After all, what reading teacher doesn't like to talk about books? So it's easy to get into a good discussion with a reader and let the minutes tick by. But I want to get some teaching in, so that means focusing on the most important advice I think I can offer. My conferences usually have three parts: finding the focus, delivering the advice, and wrapping up. To find a focus, I think of the Six Qualities of Good Reading (speed, accuracy, phrasing, ex-

pression, understanding, and thinking) and settle on one aspect that I feel the reader can benefit from. More often than not, I'm just reminding a reader of something we've already talked about. But occasionally it's something new. That's when I make a note that I might need to give a whole-class lesson, especially if several other kids need the same advice.

**Leave the reader with something to do.** As I wrap up a conference, I want to make sure the reader has something to do that relates to what we've talked about. If there's a task involved, like making a journal entry or picking out a new book, I want to be sure readers know that I expect them to begin right away. If we've worked on a technique, like re-reading to improve fluency, I want to get a commitment from the reader that he will start using it as soon I leave. The most value a student can get from my advice comes from applying it as soon as possible after it has been given.

**Have students note the conference topic or goal in their journal.** This is something new for me but it's working very well. The last thing I do in a conference now is have the student make a journal entry about what we went over. This is either a reminder of what I want the student to be working on, a question I like readers to think about as they read, or a goal I hope they achieve in the near future. Making a journal entry about a conference has had two benefits for me: kids are more likely to remember what I want them to do, and I can see a record of our conferences in their journal any time we meet without having to refer to my notes and correlate them with other work the student may have done on their book.

**Record a short note.** This last tip remains by biggest weakness. I don't take enough notes. Maybe I'm lazy. Maybe I'm not

a note-taker. Maybe I just have bad handwriting. But having looked at the conference notes of many other teachers, I can see how valuable they are in reminding us about important tendencies in our students. Every teacher seems to have a system for taking notes. Mine is very simple: I note what we focused on and what I told the reader to do about it. I may also write an additional comment if I feel the student is doing extremely well or extremely poorly. And finally, if something comes up that I think is worthy of a whole-class lesson, I'll make a note to remind myself of that as well.

I'd be lying if I said that I can do all of these things perfectly every time I conference. On some days, it's hard to do two or three. But when I reflect on the best days I've had, and the progress I've seen over time with individual students, I can see how these little things can make a big difference in my results.

If a single theme runs through these bits of conferencing technique, I think it's the theme of focus. I get better results when I'm clear about what I want students to learn. For me, this often takes the form of a specific goal. Nowadays, I find myself boiling down my advice into simple ideas like, "Break long sentences into short phrases," or "When you stumble on an important word, go back to the beginning of the sentence and read it again," or "Pay attention to the punctuation," or "Question things that seem unusual." Sure enough, as I've gotten better at keeping kids focused on one important thing, they've gotten better at doing it.

# Questioning

*The Best Strategy There Is*

The first thing I do with a group of readers is get them picking good books. It's a bit chaotic at first, but after a few days, everyone settles down to some serious reading. Then I start to get nervous. It's hard enough helping kids figure out what to read, now I have to show them how.

When I first started out, I used the popular "read and hope" method: have kids read and hope they get better. That was before I knew anything about reading strategies. Now, when kids begin their reading time, I usually have some kind of strategic focus for them based on something I've taught in a lesson. Rather than just letting kids read, I give them something I want them to think about and implement as they turn the pages, something to work on with me in a conference, or something to share at the end of class.

There are many reading strategies to choose from, but the

one I almost always start out with is questioning. I start with questioning for several reasons.

**Anyone can question.** Human beings are natural questioners. It's virtually impossible to read the first few paragraphs of something and not have questions pop into your head. At first, we don't even talk about which questions are better than others, so every question counts and every kid can ask at least one.

**Questioning works with any text.** Though I usually start with fiction, questioning works just as well with non-fiction texts. Questioning also works well with different text forms like newspaper and magazine articles.

**Questioning is safe.** Since all I'm asking kids to do is ask questions, there are no answers to worry about. In fact, answers aren't part of the exercise at all. Later, I'll point out that simply asking questions makes coming up with answers a lot easier. But for now, all we need to do is think of questions.

**Questioning is an easy way to get kids digging deeper into their reading.** Sometimes it's hard to get kids past the surface in their reading. They'll retell everything but won't rethink anything. Questioning gives them a natural entry point into deeper reading.

**Questioning leads naturally to other strategies.** If kids can make a good guess at the answer to a question, they'll often stumble on an inference. If they ask a question about an event yet to come, they may wind up with a prediction. If they ask about the meaning of an unknown word, they might discover how to use context to add something new to their vocabulary. Kids can find their way to many different strategies by starting with a question.

**Questioning in reading leads to questioning in writing.** What if, instead of questioning a novel, writers questioned themselves about something they wrote? Questioning is the heart and soul of revision in writing. Once I have kids questioning what they read, it's a lot easier to get them to question what they write.

I teach questioning by finding a good opening paragraph to something. Beginnings are always full of curiosities as writers attempt to draw us in without revealing every little detail. Here's an introduction to a story I've used many times called *Eddie Takes Off:*

> Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnsons' lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know...," said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found

> Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

Now we brainstorm as many questions as we can:

Is this story like Harry Potter where kids do strange things?
Why is Eddie's flying a "social problem?"
What happened on his fifth birthday party?
Why is Eddie's flying called an "airborne peculiarity?"
What's a "childish whim?"
Why doesn't Eddie thinks that flying is unusual?
Why aren't Eddie's parents freaked out about Eddie's flying?
What time period is this story set in?
Why don't we see new paragraphs when someone speaks?
Why does Eddie's mom think Eddie should go to a doctor?
Why does it say Eddie's father "vetoed" his mother's idea?
What's a "complex?"
Can Eddie really fly?

The first thing I like the kids to notice is just how many questions there are. Often there are more questions than sentences. This allows me to show kids—quite literally—that there's a parallel "reading" of a text that goes on inside their brains. In this case, it's all questions, but I can easily show them as we

work more together that each new strategy they learn adds to the quality and variety of responses they'll become aware of as they read.

What the kids don't see, and what I love to point out, is how this set of questions reveals their understanding of the text. By looking at their questions, I can tell what parts they've read and understood (most of the first two sentences, for example), what they read and didn't get (bits and pieces of vocabulary), and even what they might have missed altogether (the author's portrayal of the parents as cliché figures who don't really care much about their son).

Now I'll ask them to apply their questioning skills in their own books. But before we do that, we'll go over a set of questions that applies to almost any story. I call it our "Top 10 Questions."

**1. What does this word or phrase mean?** I love it when kids puzzle over unfamiliar words. Learning new words is more fun when you learn them while you read. And using context to figure out unknown words strengthens kids comprehension of the text around the new word so that even if they get the word wrong they still learn about what they're reading. For example, in *Eddie Takes Off*, a hard-working reader might be able to learn that "whim" has something do with being temporary or unusual, and not a permanent condition.

**2. Why did the writer use this word or phrase?** This is the next level up from wondering what a word means. In this case, the reader knows what the word means but questions why the

author chooses it as opposed to a different, and often simpler, word. This isn't just thinking about vocabulary, it's thinking about word choice, and it can lead to some of the best inferential thinking readers do. For example, in *Eddie Takes Off,* doesn't the author's use of the word "vetoed" in the last sentence suggest that Eddie's father is like the President of his family and that no one can overrule him?

**3. How does this character feel?** Every character has feelings but writers rarely tell us how their characters feel; they show us, instead. For example, there are three characters in *Eddie Takes Off.* Eddie's mother seems worried. Eddie's father seems frustrated. And Eddie seems like a happy baby boy with no idea that he's any different than anybody else. Each of these pieces of information has to be inferred. But before we can make those inferences, we have to wonder about these characters first.

**4. What does this character want?** Every character wants something. That's what makes them do what they do. But writers rarely tell us what that motivation is. So we have to question our characters to discover it. For example, what do you suppose Eddie's father wants? The line, "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," and his later comment about not wanting Eddie to get a complex, suggests to me that he wants Eddie to be a normal boy—and that he might be upset if Eddie's not.

**5. Why did this character do or not do something?** Sometimes, we have to work backwards and infer what a character wants from how they act. One thing's for sure: just like in real life, characters do what they do for a reason, and it's always interesting to know what that reason is. If Eddie's flying upsets his parents, why does he do it? Or, even better, why do they let him?

**6. What is the relationship between one character and**

**another?** Characters rarely exist in isolation, so it's important to figure out how they relate to one another. For example, how do Eddie's mother and father get along? The author doesn't tell us much but he shows us everything we need to know in the way they speak to each other. Notice how Eddie's father dismisses everything Eddie's mother says as though it's not true or not important.

**7. How does a character change?** Most characters don't change. But main characters—and sometimes important minor characters—do. This is called character development and it's something worth paying attention to. How do you think Eddie will change in this story? Do you think his parents will change?

**8. What's going to happen next?** An easy question to ask but often a hard one to answer. In general, the more formulaic a story is, the easier it is to predict. Really great stories break the mold and defy prediction. Can you guess what happens at Eddie's fifth birthday that becomes a "social problem?"

**9. What idea is the writer showing you an example of?** This gets kids thinking of themes. I want kids to follow the actions of characters and the events of the story, but I also want them thinking on another level—the level of the writer's ideas. Writers of fiction work with ideas just as well as writers of informational texts do. But in fiction, we have to look at literal story elements as examples of the ideas they represent. *Eddie Takes Off,* for example, makes me think about what it's like to be different or not be accepted by one's parents.

**10. What message is the writer trying to convey?** This gets kids thinking about main idea. The main idea is the one most important thing the writer wants the reader to know; it's the lesson, the moral, the message. Whereas themes are often

expressed as abstract concepts (loneliness, fear, courage, etc.), a main idea is usually expressed as a complete thought (Absence makes the heart grow fonder. A life lived in fear is a life half lived. Etc.) It would be hard to get a main idea out of just one paragraph of *Eddie Takes Off* but if that was all I had to work on, I'd say it might be something like, "Kids' unusual talents are often not appreciated by their parents or society."

During reading time, as kids attempt to question their own texts, they come up with all kinds of questions, many I've never thought about. I ask them to write these in their journals and to share them at the end of class. Whenever we think we've come up with a new kind of question—a type of question that might apply to almost any text—we add it to our list.

Questioning is a strategy I teach all year long. It's often where I want to start when we look at a difficult text together. And it's a requirement when we attempt to tackle poems. Kids may get tired of me asking them to come up with questions. But I think it's incredibly important. And besides, as I like to tell them, it's easier than coming up with answers.

I work on questioning so much because, of all the different strategies I can teach, I think it's the one strategy that most positively changes the way readers approach their reading. A questioning reader is fundamentally a better reader than a reader who doesn't question. And I think, just by using questions as a primary critical tool, that I can help almost any reader become a questioning reader.

By the end of the year, there are several things about questioning that I want kids to come away with.

**Foundation questions.** There are sets of questions—like our Top 10 list—that go with certain kinds of writing. These questions, and their answers if readers can find them, form the foundation of a solid understanding. I want kids to know what foundation questions are and which ones go with which kinds of texts.

**Questioning is an essential part of reading.** When we begin the questioning activity, kids act like I'm asking them to do something weird, something they're not used to doing. By the time we're finished, I hope they know that questioning is an essential part of reading anything, and that if they're not questioning, they're not reading.

**Questions are more important than answers.** Yes, I want kids to be able to figure out the answers. But in order to find an answer, a reader has to ask a question first. And the better readers' questions are, the better their chances are of understanding a text. Even more important is the idea that readers can improve their understanding whether they answer the questions or not. Just asking them and trying to find the answers helps.

**Questions focus our attention and prepare our mind for understanding.** A text is like a maze with thousands of twists and turns and no way to know ahead of time why one direction might be better than another. A good question is like true North on a compass. It tells readers which parts of a text to focus on and when they've reached their destination.

**Questions are the key to a reader's greatest discoveries**.

Reading the words only gives us part of the story. The rest is hidden somewhere else. If we never question what we read, we never gain access to the rest of the story.

I'll admit that I'm biased toward questioning as the single best reading strategy to teach. My feelings about questioning come from my own experience of reading in school. I became an English major (which is just a conventional way of saying I majored in reading) because of one great professor. Dr. Canedo taught American literature and seemed to know everything there was to know about it. One day, I stopped him in the hall after class. "Dr. Canedo," I called to him. "How come you know all the answers." "Who me?" he said with mock humility. "I don't know all the answers. I just know all the questions."

# Take the Pledge for Better Reading

*Using the Pledge of Allegiance to Improve Fluency*

Every year, it seems we experience a minor controversy in education around *The Pledge of Allegiance.* Should kids have to say it? Should it include the words "under God?" And so on. What do I think about this? I think *The Pledge of Allegiance* is one of the best tools we have for teaching kids how to read.

One of the most important skills we can help readers develop is fluency. Reading fluency is the ability to decode words automatically, to maintain a steady reading rate, and to read with expression. It's the strongest predictor of comprehension and the quality we're most aware of—whether it's present or not—when kids read aloud.

When kids first learn to read, they're not very fluent. They stop and start, stumbling over tough words in almost every sentence, reading in an irregular, halting word-by-word fashion. As reading teachers, we want to help kids smooth things out. And this is where *The Pledge of Allegiance* comes in.

I start by writing out the *Pledge* on the board in one long sentence.

> I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Then we say it together. Kids know it by heart, including—and this is the key—where to pause between phrases. So after we've said it a couple of times, and we're all sure where those pauses go, I put in phrase markings like this:

> I pledge allegiance / to the flag / of the United States of America, / and to the republic / for which it stands, / one nation / under God, / indivisible, / with liberty and justice for all.

This is where things start to get interesting. Most kids have never given a second thought as to how we say the *Pledge*; they just follow along each morning. The interesting thing is that the *Pledge* is said with exactly the same phrase patterns everywhere. I've done this lesson with kids all over the United States and it always works the same way. There must be a reason for this. And that's what we're about to find out.

"How do we all know where to pause?" I ask the class. "*The Pledge of Allegiance* is one big long sentence. Why don't we just read through all the way to the period at the end?"

After a few seconds of silence, a kid might say, "We just do", or "Because we say it every day." So I attempt to clarify. "If you

didn't say it every day, how would you know?" After a few more seconds, a kid will say something like, "Because of the commas." Now we're getting somewhere.

Now that kids are looking at the structure of the sentence, I can point something out to them that they've probably never considered. Pointing back to the sentence with the phrase marks in it, I say: "I count seven pauses, but only three commas. So there must be another rule we use to decide where to pause."

At this point, the kids are confused but also curious. What we've stumbled onto is the concept of phrasing, a universal aspect of reading and the key to helping kids become fluent readers. Contrary to how every child in America has been taught, we don't just pause at periods and commas, we pause, just ever so slightly, at the end of every phrase, too. This is true no matter what we read. We also do it when we talk, so we know it's something everyone can do and is familiar with.

Now I write out the *Pledge* with the lines broken at the end of each phrase:

I pledge allegiance
to the flag
of the United States of America,
and to the republic
for which it stands,
one nation
under God,
indivisible,

with liberty and justice for all.

I call this "phrase breaking." Then I pick up a book and begin to read so I can demonstrate that readers phrase break all the time in everything they read. I also show kids how my reading sounds when I don't break phrases (too fast), when I read one word at a time (too slow), and when I break phrases in the wrong places (awkward and hard to understand).

Having demonstrated what phrasing is and why it's so important, we go back to the *Pledge* to figure out the next big thing. "How do we know where the phrase breaks go?" I ask.

We start by looking at the length of a phrase. Most of the phrases in the *Pledge* are between three and six words long. If we take a look at other texts, we'll see this is a pretty good generalization. Occasionally, we might see a two-word phrase, and in the *Pledge* there's even what looks like a one-word phrase. In other texts, we might even find the occasional seven- or eight-word phrase. But this is not the norm. So we write this down: *In general, phrases are two to six words long.*

Now we look at how phrases begin and end. The first words of the first five phrases of the *Pledge* display an obvious pattern:

I..
to...
of...
and...
for...

The pattern is even easier to see when we contrast them with the last words in each phrase:

...allegiance
...flag
...America
...republic
...stands

From this we can make another generalization: *In general, phrases start with little words and end with big words.*

With older kids, I can bring in some grammar. The "little" words are called "function" words and the "big" words are called "content" words. Function words don't mean anything. They merely show how content words function in a sentence. Function words help us figure out how content words relate to each other and what part of speech they are. Content words hold the meaning of the sentence. Function words help to clarify that meaning.

The last thing we have to figure out is how phrases feel when we read them. To do this, we need to understand how accent patterns work in words and syllables. Earlier in the lesson, I read examples for the kids with poor phrasing: one example that was too fast, one that was too slow, and one in which I broke the phrases in the wrong places. In the "too slow" example, I read word-by-word like... most.. readers... do... when...

they're... first... starting... out. Some kids even put their finger on each word as it goes by.

In word-by-word reading, each word is read at the same speed and with the same stress. Actually, every word is accented: LIKE... MOST... READERS... DO... WHEN..., etc. But our language doesn't work that way. The basic rhythm of English is based on patterns of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables:

i PLEDGE al-LE-giance TO the FLAG

There are also variations on this pattern:

OF the u-NI-ted STATES of a-MER-i-ca

But we almost never encounter situations where several consecutive syllables are stressed. That would sound like shouting. Or like a young reader putting his finger on each word as he read it.

This discussion may be too technical for some kids but I go through it anyway because I know I can wrap it up with one thing everyone can understand. Just like they all knew how to phrase the *Pledge* without knowing what a phrase was, they all know how to read with the right rhythm because it's the same rhythm they use when they talk. All we're trying to do with this entire lesson is help them bring the fluency of the way they speak to the way they read.

To help them understand this in a more practical way, we make one more generalization: *In general, tuck the little words into the big words.*

The "little" words, or any part of a word that is unaccented, are read a little quicker and with a little less volume than the "big" words, or any part of a word that *is* accented. This is the last piece of the fluency puzzle we're trying to solve.

Now that we understand phrasing, and how it helps us read more fluently, we can begin to practice it with everything we read. We do this first with choral reading where I can help kids identify appropriate phrase breaks and we can develop a feel for phrasing by reading together. In their own individual reading, I will listen to them in conferences, helping them adjust their phrasing whenever necessary.

When kids aren't phrasing well, we go back to the beginning of a sentence and try again. Repeated reading is the best way to get the hang of it. Often, kids can improve the phrasing of a sentence by just reading it over one additional time. If that doesn't work, I will model the phrasing for them and have them read after me. If they're sill having trouble, I'll model one phrase at a time, having them repeat the phrase right after I say it, until they piece the entire sentence together on their own.

Phrasing is one of the most valuable reading skills kids can develop. Teaching kids to phrase, or to do "phrase breaking" as they often like to call it, has several significant benefits.

**Phrasing improves fluency.** Good reading has a smooth and satisfying flow to it. But telling kids to read more smoothly rarely helps them achieve this. Phrasing is the key to smooth reading. And practicing phrasing using the skills we develop in this lesson is the key to helping kids become more fluent. It's

also the easiest and most accessible way to teach fluency explicitly and systematically; when we know how to teach phrasing, we don't have to wait around hoping that kids will one day become fluent readers.

**Phrasing improves comprehension.** Phrases naturally make sense to us in ways that single words can't and that long sentences often don't. Our language uses what linguists call a "phrase structure grammar." This just means that words are grouped into phrases according to how they work grammatically, and that "chunks of grammar" are the easiest things for us to understand. Reading word-by-word it's often hard to recognize how words function in a sentence. And for most of us, most sentences have too many words to keep track of all at once. The size of a phrase (usually 2-6 words), and the structure of a phrase (one or two content words connected by function words), create a unit of language that is just the right size for us to understand as we read.

**Phrasing helps readers infer meanings of unfamiliar words in context.** When kids encounter a word they don't know the meaning of, they naturally focus on it to the exclusion of the words around it. But considering individual words on their own can make them tougher to understand. Rereading the word as part of the phrase in which it occurs, along with the other phrases in the sentence, provides the context that helps readers infer meaning.

**Phrasing helps kids find "just right" books.** As soon as kids understand phrasing, I can give them another way to know if the book they're reading is "just right." In general, a "just right" book is one you can read with good phrasing. If kids have trouble with phrasing, and they can't improve it with a little reread-

ing, the book might be too hard.

**Phrasing makes reading more fun.** Word-by-word reading is exhausting and hard to understand. On the other hand, kids who read a million miles an hour miss important details. And readers whose phrasing is halting and irregular have a terrible time making sense of what they read. But well-phrased reading is very enjoyable. Phrasing is also the stepping stone to better expression which makes reading a more emotionally satisfying experience.

I can't remember now the fortunate set of circumstances that lead me to the connection between *The Pledge of Allegiance,* phrasing, and reading fluency. But whatever it was, I'm convinced it was one of the best gifts I have ever received. I teach phrasing, using the *Pledge*, to every group of kids I work with, even kindergarteners. It's especially useful with second-language learners who don't have the native language rhythms of English speech to fall back on.

In addition to being a great thing to learn, phrasing is a lot of fun for me to teach. It sounds great when a group of kids reads together with good phrasing. And I love the "Aha!" reactions I get when I work on phrasing in individual conferences. For helping kids figure out the meaning of a complex passage, there's no better activity than phrase breaking. Breaking long sentences into more manageable pieces, and then teasing out the meaning phrase by phrase, turns light bulbs on all around the room. Best of all, the skills associated with using phrase breaking to improve comprehension are simple enough for kids of all

ability levels to use on their own.

Perhaps the best thing about adding phrasing to my teaching repertoire is that it requires no planning to work into a lesson. It works with any text at any time, and if I ever have to re-teach the basics, I know I can pull out *The Pledge of Allegiance* and be successful with kids of any age in any classroom in America.


# Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer

*An Organized Approach to Strategic Reading*

Like many educators, I was attracted to the idea of strategic reading. Prior to learning about the strategic reading movement, I often felt that what I taught kids about reading never addressed the task of reading itself. I realize now that what I had in my teaching repertoire was a set of reading activities, things kids could do before or after they read something. By contrast, strategic reading gave me things I could teach kids to do *while* they read, things that would actually help them read better.

But my enthusiasm for reading strategies soon led to a problem. I was using so many strategies that kids were doing more strategizing than reading. So I decided to organize my approach into a single framework I could use for all types of texts and all levels of readers.

I called this framework *Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer* for two reasons: I wanted kids to have a model for response that integrated reading and writing, and I wanted them to think about two distinct but complementary ways of interacting with text. I also wanted kids to experience reading strategies

in a natural way that mirrored as closely as possible the experience of adult readers.

From participating in book discussions, attending readings at bookstores, and reading book reviews, I noticed that adult readers moved easily back and forth between what they thought a text meant and the quality of the author's writing. This natural integration of reading and writing was exactly what I wanted kids to be able to do.

When we "read like a reader," we try to figure out what a text means. We root for characters, we follow the sequence of events, we ride a wave of emotions as the author guides us from beginning to end. We might think of this as the "normal" experience of reading. But it certainly isn't the only experience.

We can also "read like a writer." In this way of looking at a text, we focus less on *what* the writer is trying to say and more on *how* the writer is saying it. Specifically, we look at techniques the writer is using to get his or her message across and how those techniques affect us as we experience the text.

When we "read like a reader," we use six common strategies: question, connect, infer, clarify, predict, and evaluate.

**Question**. When we "read like a reader," we ask questions about the things we read. What kinds of questions do we ask? Just about anything that comes to mind: why something is happening or not happening, why a character feels or acts a certain way, how an author reached a conclusion, things we wonder about or are confused by, words we may not know the meanings of, and so on. Questions help us focus on specific things we

need to understand.

**Connect.** When we "read like a reader," we think about what our reading reminds us of. We can't help but be reminded of our own lives as we read. We're also reminded of similar things we've read in other texts and in other parts of the same text we're reading at the time. We may also be reminded of movies we've seen, songs we know, and other things we've experienced. Connecting helps us understand things by comparing something in the text we're reading to something we know from the world around us.

**Infer.** When we "read like a reader," we figure out things about what we read that aren't actually written in the text. There's almost always more to a text than just the words on the page. Often, writers leave clues readers can use to discover important information. These clues usually take the form of something the writer shows us (a character, an event, a situation, a metaphor, etc.) that represents something the writer is trying to tell us.

**Clarify.** When we "read like a reader," we're always trying to understand more about what the writer is saying. With each new piece of information we encounter, we attempt to fit it into our understanding of what has come before. When we get confused, we stop to sort things out. Our goal is always to be clearer and more confident about what an author is trying to tell us.

**Predict.** When we "read like a reader," we make guesses about what is coming up next. No reader, it seems, can resist thinking about what a writer is going to write next. It's just part of human nature to anticipate things. Predicting helps us sort important information from unimportant information. It also helps us organize our thinking as we encounter new material.

**Evaluate.** When we "read like a reader," we make judgments. Is this text good? If so, what's good about it? Do I like it? Why? Should I keep reading or should I put it down and get something else? How do I feel about this part? Do I like this character? And so on. As readers, we are finicky, impatient, emotional judging machines. The evaluations we make help us decide whether or not what we are reading is valuable and, if so, how we might use it.

When we shift gears in order to "read like a writer," we look at text a little differently, almost as if we were seeing it through a different set of lenses. To assess the quality of an author's writing, we rely on the same language we use to assess our own. I've found the Six Trait writing model to be the most useful in my teaching. So when I'm teaching kids to read like writers, we focus on ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions.

**Ideas.** Ideas are the heart of the piece, what the writer is writing about and the information he or she chooses to reveal about it. When we "read like a writer," we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer reveal the main idea? What types of details does the writer use? How does the writer achieve his or her purpose? How does the writer's choice of ideas affect the reader?

**Organization.** Organization refers to the order of ideas and the way the writer moves from one idea to the next. When we "read like a writer," we try to answer questions like these: What kinds of leads does the writer use and how do they pull us in and

make us want to read more? What kinds of endings does the writer use and how do they work to make the writing feel finished and to give us something important to think about? How does the writer handle transitions? What techniques does the writer use for sequencing? How does the writer control pacing?

**Voice.** Voice is how the writing feels to someone when they read it, it's the expression of the writer's individual personality through words. When we "read like a writer," we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer demonstrate passion for the topic? How does the writer reveal emotions? How does the writer put personality into the piece?

**Word Choice.** Word Choice refers to the writer's selection of particular words and phrases to express ideas. When we "read like a writer," we try to answer questions like these: What techniques (simile, metaphor, strong verbs, etc.) does the writer use to make ideas more specific, more memorable, and more effective?

**Sentence Fluency.** Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language as we read it aloud. When we "read like a writer," we try to answer questions like these: What kinds of sentence constructions does the writer use? How does the writer vary the length and construction of sentences? How does the writer use "sound" effects like alliteration and rhyme, or special rhythmic effects?

**Conventions.** Conventions are the ways we agree to use punctuation, spelling, grammar, and other things that make writing consistent and easy to read. When we "read like a writer," we try to answer questions like these: How does the writer use conventions to make the writing meaningful and easy to read? Does the author use conventions in unusual ways that are successful?

I introduce "Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer" to kids by explaining that our brains are very active when we read. Not only do we process text as we convert print into words and words into ideas, we also process information, thoughts, and feelings about what we read. The twelve elements of the "Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer" framework are not ways of testing kids to see if they're reading. They're ways to help them become more aware of the thinking they do naturally every time they encounter a text.

To prove this point, I put up short passages on the board and ask kids to comment on them. I write down everything they say and then I go back and show them which "Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer" categories their responses fall into. So, for example, if I put up the opening of *Catcher in the Rye,* and a students says, "The character is angry about something," I can point out that that's an inference, and I can take it further by asking the student to show me how the writer's choice of words lead her to believe that the character was angry. Kids use the framework all the time. They just don't know it.

My goal is to use the "Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer" framework to help kids develop a broader range of reading responses. As time goes by, I'll expect students to use the framework whenever they share, whenever they write in their journals, and whenever they give book talks or write book reviews.

Talking about the framework helps, but kids don't really get it until they see models. So I look for particularly interesting passages, often from the beginning of a good novel or short story, and show them what it might look like if they responded with something in each of the twelve categories.

Read like a reader:

Eddie Takes Off

Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnsons' lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know..." said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I

don't want him getting a complex about it."

**Question.** Is this a fantasy story where people have special powers? Or is the author using the idea of flying to stand for something else? If he can really fly, why aren't his parents a little more freaked out about it?

**Infer.** Eddie's parents seem strange. They don't sound like real people, more like characters from a bad TV show. I think the author is trying to tell us that they may not be very smart or very sensitive.

**Connect.** This reminds me of Harry Potter where a boy has special powers. But it also makes me think of other kids I have seen who may be different. Sometimes, kids with unusual abilities aren't accepted by other people.

**Clarify.** Eddie's parents aren't alarmed by his flying but at the same time, his mother thinks about whether he should see a "specialist." Eddie clearly isn't a normal baby and that's what his parents are most concerned about. It's as if being normal is the most important thing to them.

**Predict.** I think Eddie's flying is going to get him in trouble. In the very first sentence, the author refers to Eddie's flying as "a bit of a social problem" and to me that hints that things can only get worse.

**Evaluate.** I like this story so far; I want to find out more. I feel sorry for Eddie. I think he's going to be lonely because people aren't going to understand him. I especially like the way the author describes Eddie's mother and father, though I don't like them at all. I don't think they're very good parents.

Read like a writer:

**Ideas.** A flying baby boy, in the context of what appears to be a realistic setting, is an original and interesting idea.

**Organization.** The opening line is great. It certainly gets my attention and makes me want to find out more. The author has us wondering about three things: Eddie's flying ability, his parents strange reaction, and the embarrassing incident on his fifth birthday.

**Voice.** The author's voice is light-hearted and playful, just as one might imagine a flying baby boy to be.

**Word Choice.** The phrase "airborne peculiarity" in the second sentence is both unusual and memorable. It also seems like the perfect way to describe Eddie's unique talent as viewed by his parents, as though it were something just slightly odd or mildly eccentric. In the last sentence, the strong verb "vetoed" tells a lot about how Eddie's mom and dad interact: Eddie's dad is sort of like the "president" of the family; any time he wants he can cancel his wife's ideas.

**Sentence Fluency.** The balance of the two quotes works nicely. Several long sentences read very smoothly. And I love the sound of this line: "...ring the bell on his cradle railing." It's as though the L's, R's, and A's almost make a ringing sound in my ears.

**Conventions.** Normally, when quoting characters in a story, we have to start a new paragraph for each new speaker. But here the author quotes the two parents inside a paragraph. The use of the ellipsis at the end of the mother's comment makes her seem even more vague than her clichéd words imply.

I would never ask kids to make twelve different responses like this to a single passage. But in showing them how the framework can be used to help them get more out of what they read, I think this is a very effective example. As a final note, I like to point out to the kids that my responses are longer than the passage itself. That is, there's often more going on inside our head than there is on the page. This will become more apparent to kids when I teach them how to do close readings.

"Read Like a Reader" and "Read Like a Writer" certainly aren't the only two ways to read. But I think they represent interesting and valuable ways of thinking about a text. The point of all this is to help kids enjoy reading more by making it a more active and interactive process. When we read actively, we don't just wait for the meaning to come to us, we go after it aggressively. We look deeply into the text, hunting in specific ways, searching for clues about what the writer is trying to tell us. When we read interactively, we ask questions about the text and our reactions to it, and we use the answers to develop a sense of how it works. It's as if we start a conversation between the writer, the writing, and our self.

Too many kids are passive readers. They read the words and turn the pages but they don't seem to do much else. The "Read Like a Reader, Read Like a Writer" framework changes this. At first, it's very hard for kids. It's as if they never had a thought in their lives about what they were reading. But soon they realize they're thinking all the time and that the framework is just a way for them to organize their thoughts. This is when it starts to get fun. Kids become more active. Sharing gets better.

Journaling gets better. Book talks and book reviews get a lot better. Soon, we can drop the framework altogether because we no longer need it. That's when I know it has worked and that the kids have really learned something important about reading.

# Close Reading

*When Every Word Counts*

In our everyday lives, we don't pay close attention to every word we read. We read for the gist of things, concentrating more on big ideas than on subtle shades of meaning, new vocabulary, and unusual turns of phrase. This is just as it should be. There's too much information in the world for us to ponder every bit of it every time we skim the newspaper or scan a web page.

But there are times when close reading is required. When we're following directions, signing a contract, or taking a test, every word matters. Reading closely also makes a difference when we're learning to read. If we gloss over unfamiliar words, we never get the chance to learn them. If we ignore complex logic, we miss the opportunity to improve our own. If we skip the hardest parts of great novels and poems, we undermine the purpose of reading them.

This is why teaching close reading is so important to me. When I conference with individual readers, or teach a lesson to the class, I encourage kids to use every strategy they have to

wring out every last drop of meaning from every word they encounter.

We can work on close reading using any text, but for formal lessons, I often pull out short pieces I've written myself specifically for the purpose of giving kids a challenge:

> Test Anxiety
>
> When she saw her score, she became depressed. Or was she elated? After all, her strategy had been successful. But this was beyond expectations. People would be suspicious. There would only be rumors at first, just speculation. She rubbed the inside of her forearm. She hadn't even bothered to wash it off yet. And if she chose to keep it always as a trophy or a talisman, could anyone decipher the code? A present from her parents, she had told everyone; an easy way to obscure her ruse. But now, with perfection staring back at her from the page, she surmised that her plan had worked too well. She cast a furtive glance around the room to spy on the scores of others. The difference would be telling. She timidly approached the teacher's desk, feigned illness, and dashed to the bathroom.

The first thing we do is read it out loud together. I love choral reading because it gives me a chance to show kids how to

read carefully. We try to maintain a slow and steady speed. The kids usually run ahead but I hold them back by focusing their attention on phrasing like this:

When she saw her score,
she became depressed.
Or was she elated?
After all,
her strategy had been successful.
But this was beyond expectations.
People would be suspicious.
There would only be rumors at first,
just speculation.

When we've read the passage once through, I ask them to tell me what it's about in a single sentence. We usually come up with something like this: "It's about a girl who cheated on a test and now she feels bad about what she did."

This one-sentence summary is crucial to our close reading process because it establishes the context. In close reading, kids will be depending on context clues to make inferences. But often, they don't have an explicit understanding of the context. A simple summary, even if it isn't entirely correct, makes all the difference.

Once we understand the context of the whole, we can begin to work on the parts. I like to work sentence-by-sentence. Specifically, I want kids to go back to the first sentence and tell me if there are any words, phrases, or ideas we need to talk about in order to have a more complete understanding.

When she saw her score, she became depressed.

In the first sentence, we need to talk about two things: What does "depressed" mean? And why did the girl become that way when saw her score? If there's not enough information yet, we'll read one sentence further.

Or was she elated?

Now we've got another question to answer: What does "elated" mean?

From the way the sentences sound, "depressed" and "elated" are probably opposites. So now I'll have the kids make some guesses, or inferences, about what "depressed" means. It's a word they think they all know but in the process of defining it, we're likely to discover that the meaning is a little richer than they might have thought. Typical guesses include: "sad", "tired", "angry", "hurt". Now I'll ask kids to substitute their guesses back into the sentence to see which ones do the best job of clarifying the meaning. In this case, "sad" is probably best but "hurt" also works.

We continue this process for every sentence in the passage. When we finish, we retell the passage using our own words and some of the extra information we've picked up about it along the way. I also try to pose so-called "big questions" that apply to the entire passage. These are typically open-ended questions with no right or wrong answer. All I require is that kids support their answers by citing the text. For "Test Anxiety," I ask questions like, "What is the girl running off to do?" or "What is she most afraid of?" or "What do you think will happen in the near fu-

ture?"

There are several things I like to point out to kids about close reading.

**We don't have to know the exact meanings of words.** It's hard to say what the exact meaning of a single word is. Even with a dictionary, it isn't always possible to come up with a definition that exactly matches the way a word is used in context. A good guess, or two, is a great way to figure things out, and to learn new words at the same time.

**Meanings change in context.** The word "depressed" means one thing to a girl getting back a test and another thing entirely to a psychologist diagnosing a patient. It's important to know what words mean, but what they mean is often determined as much by context as by the word itself.

**More guesses mean more meaning.** If we stop after making the single guess, "sad", we know we get most of the meaning. But doesn't the last guess, "hurt", give us just a bit more of an understanding of how this girl feels? Usually, the meaning of a word in context will be defined by the overlap of several guesses. Making several guesses, as opposed to just one, also insulates readers from the problem of guessing wrong. The reader in this situation who goes with "tired" or "angry" makes a mistake. But with the other words to choose from, it's easy to see which fits better in context.

**Wrong guesses are not a problem.** Because we're always going back to see how our guesses fit with the sentence, we'll be able to catch most of the errors we make. Even a wrong guess helps us improve our comprehension because we're discovering

words that aren't part of the solution and we're revisiting the context one more time to evaluate them. Knowing that something doesn't make sense is often the precursor to discovering something else that does.

This process of identifying important words and attempting to define them in context leads us to an important discovery about close reading. Close reading depends on the coordination of three essential reading strategies.

**Question.** We start with questions. What's confusing? What's important? What does that word mean? What don't we understand? Close reading begins with any question we might have about the text as we move through it sentence-by-sentence. Nothing happens until we ask a question.

**Infer.** Every answer we offer is an inference. We hope the answers are right, of course, but often they're not. Even a relatively simple word like "depressed" can only be understood in context as the overlap of two good guesses.

**Clarify.** Every answer, or inference, has to be checked out. Specifically, we hope to use our inference to understand more about what we're reading. The goal is that our understanding becomes clearer as we go along. If it doesn't, we throw out our inference, go back to our question, and start the process over again.

Question, infer, clarify; question, infer, clarify. To get the most out of a challenging text, readers have to move through this three-part process over and over.

It's important for me to practice close reading often with kids because I need them to internalize the question-infer-clarify process. Breakdowns in comprehension can almost always be traced back to readers leaving out one or more of the three steps.

**Start with a question.** If readers neglect to question, they never dig deeply into a text to begin with. All they have is their surface comprehension, and even when this is very good, it isn't as deep as what they might otherwise be able to achieve if they would simply start by asking a question or two.

**Just take a guess.** I can often get kids to ask questions but many won't make inferences. They tell me that they're worried about getting something wrong. As we've just discussed, even wrong answers can be helpful. So I have to help kids break the habit of not making guesses. The tendency to think or say, "I don't know," as the default response is probably the single most serious impediment to kids improving their reading comprehension.

**Try to make things clearer.** Questions and inferences get the ball rolling but they don't finish the job. For every question asked and inference made, we have to go back and attempt to use what we've just come up with to clarify our understanding. Without this step, our comprehension can actually degrade as we pile up incorrect inferences and begin to confuse ourselves.

As kids move through this process, I like them to mark up the text they're reading with a record of their comprehension. There are several ways we can do this:

**On the board.** I start by copying the passage double-spaced on the board. As we work the text together, I note the group's questions, inferences, and clarifications in the margins and in between the lines. Working as a group, there's lots of comprehension to write down. Kids are often impressed with the volume of their own thinking and the fact that, in the end, our understanding of the passage is often longer than the passage itself.

**Printed handout.** When I want kids to work on their own, I print out the passage, double-spaced, and centered on a page so there's lots of room to write all around it. Kids record their comprehension individually and then we share our results.

**Copy double-spaced.** Though the kids like to complain about it, it's not a big deal for me to ask them to copy out a passage into their reading journals. I ask them to do this regularly using a passage from the book they're reading, so they get used to it quickly.

Teaching kids to mark up their text is a big part of what makes this such a valuable activity. For the kids, it helps them see how much work there is to be done on a single line or paragraph. For me, it provides an assessment of how kids are thinking while they read. Short of having a conference, reviewing their understanding of a close reading passage gives me the best vantage point on their comprehension that I can imagine.

Close reading is an exercise I try to do often with kids. I also reinforce it when we conference or share. At first, it's tedious and time consuming; the first time we do it, it might take 30 minutes or more. But once we get the hang of it, we can close read a short passage in 5-10 minutes.

If I want kids to become better readers I have to challenge them with tougher texts. But I also have to give them a reliable process for working through those texts. Close reading with question-infer-clarify and text mark-up is the best activity I've come across. It helps kids internalize important reading behaviors, it helps them develop their vocabulary, and it helps them improve their stamina for critical reading. Perhaps best of all, it gives low readers a set of tools they can use when faced with texts above their reading level.

Though I'm inclined to introduce close reading with fiction in Language Arts, it works for informational texts in the content areas as well. The question-infer-clarify process is perfect for working through a textbook chapter, and the notes kids generate reinforce their comprehension and often aid in answering end-of-chapter questions. Close reading is also an essential skill for maximizing student performance on high stakes state tests.

# Listen to This!

*Learning How to Share in Reading*

On evenings when we're not mesmerized by bad television, my wife and I have family reading night. She has a stack of books on her side of the bed. I have a stack on mine. Our dog sleeps at the foot, mildly disappointed that we won't be having treats with TV. Not much happens, but occasionally one of us will turn to the other and say, "Listen to this." And that's how sharing in reading begins.

Most of us are familiar with sharing in a writing class. Writers share what they've written. Audience members give feedback. The teacher moderates and tosses in a few words of wisdom. That all makes sense. But sharing in reading doesn't. Readers don't know what to share. Audience members don't know how to respond. Teachers don't know how to interact.

So the first thing I do to get sharing started in reading is to model the only way I know how to do it. "Listen to this," I say to the kids. Then I read them a little something, tell them what I think about it, and why I think it was worth listening to. After that, I ask for comments or questions by saying something like,

"So what do you think?" If I'm lucky, a natural discussion breaks out. If I'm not (and when it comes to sharing in reading, I'm usually not), I begin to teach sharing explicitly.

Kids don't know what they can share in reading, so I have to tell them. I also have to teach them how to share. This is just another way of looking at reading response. It's not inherently any harder than teaching kids how to write in a journal. But it's foreign to them, so I break it down by response type, and I teach different types one at a time over a period of several days.

Different groups of kids develop a knack for sharing different things. But here's a list of things to share in reading that has worked for me in many different circumstances.

**Share a passage that interests you.** This is just like turning to a friend and saying, "Listen to this." The reader reads the passage and then tells why he or she thinks it's worth listening to. The audience can ask questions or chime in with their opinions. I'm always surprised by how hard it is for kids to find passages they think other readers should listen to. Initially, most kids just don't have strong feelings around their reading. So often, when I'm conferencing, I'll look for good stuff that I can tell a reader is enjoying, and then I'll tell the reader to share that with the class to get the ball rolling.

**Share an example of a good writing technique.** I do this all the time as a way of introducing writing lessons. So when I get the kids to do it, it's almost as if I'm turning them into writing teachers. At the beginning, kids can identify good leads and endings, good details, and successful examples of extended de-

scription. As time goes by, they learn to talk about things like characterization, metaphor, showing versus telling, and some of the traditional literary terms their college teachers might want them to know.

**Share a passage you're confused about and ask the audience to help.** I wish I could get this to happen more often than it does because it's almost always a great discussion. Having the entire class work out a tricky passage is just as valuable as a good lesson. And when it comes up in sharing, it's a lot more spontaneous. Kids rarely want to admit they don't get something, so I have to model first. They love the fact that I was absolutely mystified by many of the books I was assigned in college, and even though they can't really figure them out when I share them, they get a kick out of trying.

**Share a journal entry.** A journal entry is just a piece of writing, so why not share one just like we do during writing time? Some of the best discussions we have come out of journal entries. I do have one rule for this kind of sharing that is different from sharing in writing: *Questions only from the audience, please.* Journal entries aren't intended to be revised and published. So it doesn't make sense to give the writer feedback on the quality of the writing. But audience members can ask clarifying questions and often these lead to more thinking and more writing on the part of the journal writer.

**Share part of a review you're working on or some other piece of reading-related writing.** This is exactly like sharing in writing. The strange thing is that it never occurs to kids to do it on their own. They'll gladly share a book review during writing time, but they won't share the same thing during reading unless I tell them to.

**Share something interesting about an author or share other background information.** Believe it or not, some kids read the flyleaf or the "about the author" page. And some authors have personal stories which intersect in interesting ways with their writing. I'm always surprised, and pleasantly so, when kids bring up background information about their books. Most adult readers possess this kind of knowledge, and I think of it as a sign of reading maturity when kids pick it up, too.

**Share how you applied a strategy or the day's lesson.** I'm usually the one who asks them to do this. After I've given a lesson, I tell kids that I want them to apply it as soon as they can. Using this as an opportunity for sharing just makes sense. What I like to see most is when a reader applies something from a lesson several days or weeks in the past. It's always heartening to know that kids are remembering at least a little of what I teach them.

**Share your experience of reading.** I tell kids that I want them to think of reading a book as a creative act no less tangible or legitimate than writing one. We all have our ups and downs as we progress. We hit bumps along the way. We get stuck. We solve problems. We have breakthroughs. I hope, as kids get more comfortable with sharing in reading, that they start to share their experience of moving from one end of a book to another.

Reading is, by definition, a lonely pursuit. Even if you count a novel's cast of characters among your closest literary friends, it's not as if you can turn to Huck or Hamlet and share your impressions of Twain's down-home patois or Shakespeare's time-

less sensitivity to the human condition. Hence the need to share what we read with others.

Initially, kids don't think there is such a thing as sharing in reading. But I know there is so I push hard to make it happen. Admittedly, it's a tough sell. But it's always worth it. Sharing is the launch pad for almost everything we do. It lets kids try out their voices in preparation for formal readings. It lets them float ideas for book reviews. It lets them listen in on the thinking of other readers. It turns a group of individuals into a community.

Sharing in reading is hard, especially at first. And it requires a lot of teacher modeling. But the hard work pays off in lively discussion, spontaneous lessons, and the tremendous sense of ownership kids develop as a result of initiating and contributing to high-quality interactions around books.

# Identity

*Teaching Kids to Read is Easier If They're Already Readers*

In an era of testing and standards, it's easy to develop the mindset that kids aren't readers until they've passed a test that says they are. But I've found that kids do better when I can convince them that they're readers the minute they step into the classroom—even during their very first days of school.

I love working with kindergarteners at the beginning of the year. Thinking about a complicated skill like reading, and trying to figure out where to start, is exactly the kind of teaching puzzle I thrive on.

I want to start right away with an authentic reading activity. So before the kids arrive, I write a letter on the board. Not a letter of the alphabet, a real letter, from me to the kids, about how I excited I am to be working with them.

If I asked the kids at this moment whether they could read, most would probably say "no" and those that said "yes" probably couldn't tell me what reading was or how they know they can do it. But in five minutes, after we've read this letter together, I'm going to pronounce all of them readers, and I really do expect

them to believe me.

To get started, I gather the kids up close to the board and we begin looking at what I've written. We start by asking questions: What is it? Who wrote it? Who is it for? What does the first word say? And so on. What amazes and delights me is that a class of kids who say they can't read will almost always be able to figure out the following things without too much help from me:

It's a letter.
It has the date at the top.
The first word is "Dear".
The next word is "Kids".
The first word of the body is "I."
The letter is from me.

The letter is short and written in words we can easily figure out. It usually starts out like this: "Dear Kids, I am so happy to see you today." It's maybe two or three sentences long at most, and it ends with the highly predictable closing, "Sincerely, Mr. Peha."

The form is easily recognizable. The vocabulary is familiar. And it's short enough to memorize. With just a little work, the kids can read it together from beginning to end with me pointing at the words as they go by. Admittedly, most kids are memorizing words and not decoding them. But everyone participates and, best of all, everyone has a successful experience of reading something real that is meaningful and relevant to their lives.

At the end of the activity, I tell them they're all readers. I want them to go home and tell their parents they're readers,

too. I don't want them to have to wait until they've learned enough letters or reached a certain level of book. I want them to know they're readers now because they've been engaged in the process of getting meaning from text regardless of how they got that meaning.

The thing about learning is that it's all in our heads. I want the kids I work with to know that they are readers from the first moment we go to work. Can they read a lot during the first week of kindergarten? No. But they can read something. And as soon as that happens, I want them to know they're part of the literate world.

Many kids have anxiety around reading. They think they can't do it and they worry that they never will. They think of themselves as non-readers from the start and they wait for us to confirm their official status with texts that are above their reading level, comprehension questions they don't understand, and complex assessments that confirm their worst fears about what they don't know and can't do. I like to start with what they do know and can do. Why not have them experience some level of reading success during the first days of school? Why not consider kids readers based on the fact that they're engaged in the process? And why not make sure they consider themselves readers, too?

At issue here is identity, an important concept that often gets lost when we think of teaching as merely a set of objectives, skills, standards, or benchmarks. Identity has a profound impact on learning, especially learning to read. Kids who think of them-

selves as readers pay attention to text and to reading instruction differently than kids who think they are not readers. In my experience, kids who see themselves as readers learn to read faster and better than those who don't. Here's what I've noticed about why that's true:

**Kids who think they are readers have higher expectations of themselves.** If kids are readers, they expect to be able to read. It's not something that is foreign to them or confusing or scary. Reading is natural and normal, even if it's sometimes hard.

**Kids who think they are readers expect text to make sense.** When readers see text, they expect to be able to understand it. When they can't, they work to figure it out. The expectation that text makes sense helps them reject incorrect assumptions about the ways letters make words and words convey ideas.

**Kids who think they are readers read more.** Kids who are readers see reading opportunities all around them. They read signs, they read packaging, they read text on TV. They're constantly processing text because text is everywhere to be processed and because processing text is what readers do.

**Kids who think they are readers have better attitudes about reading.** In the pecking order of school, readers have significantly higher status than non-readers. Since reading is the first "r" and an intense focus of the first years of school, kids who think they are readers have better attitudes about themselves as learners and about learning in general.

**Kids who think they are readers take bigger risks and assume more challenges.** Readers like to show off their skills. There are always bigger words and harder books to tackle, and readers volunteer readily for the chance to master them.

**Kids who think they are readers enjoy reading more.** Kids

know that adults think reading is important and that being a reader is good. Kids who see themselves as readers like to read because it makes them feel good whether they're good at it or not.

A kid's sense of identity with regard to reading isn't just something I think about when I work with kindergarteners. By 3rd or 4th grade, students who see themselves as non-readers may already be years behind. In this case, convincing them that they are readers is a tougher job. Even the lowest kids at this age can easily read a simple letter I might write for them on the board. And they're no longer so willing to believe me when I tell them they can read—even if they really can. So, for kids at this age, I use a different reader's identity activity.

This is a listing activity that focuses on reading behaviors. Using myself as a model, I make a list for the kids like this:

As a reader, I...

- Almost always have a book I'm reading.
- Read at night before I fall asleep.
- Read when I'm stuck on an airplane or other long trip.
- Read several magazines each month.
- Read novels.
- Read more non-fiction than fiction.
- Read several blogs and websites on a regular basis.
- Read parts of two newspapers each week.
- Read to learn new things and to add skills.
- Re-read something if it doesn't make sense to me.

Read to solve important problems in my life.
Read to stay safe and to follow the law.
Read text on TV.
Notice examples of good writing when I read it.
Read text on my cell phone and other hand-held devices.
Read signs and other environmental print.
Read my own writing.
Talk with other readers about my reading.
Have favorite authors, favorite genres, and favorite forms.

The list goes on and on. As the kids catch on to what I'm doing, they remind me of other ways I express myself as a reader. Sometimes we come up with 30-40 things. When my list gets that detailed, it's a pretty good description of my identity as a reader. That's when I turn it over to the kids and ask them to make their own lists.

In ten years of doing this activity, I've never had a kid with a blank list, or even a really short one. Even kids who would describe themselves as non-readers engage in many reading behaviors on a regular basis.

In closing this activity, I point out that anyone with anything on their list is a reader, and that my goal is for everyone to regularly add new reading behaviors to their lists all year long based on things they learn in class. I tell them that this list is their reader's fingerprint, and that as we work more together, that fingerprint will become bolder and more detailed. I do this activity—and will keep doing it all year long—to help everyone become more conscious of the fact that they are all readers regardless of their level of ability or degree of interest.

When I work with older kids, especially high schoolers, I like to look at reader's identity more the way adult readers do. Adults think of themselves as readers in terms of what they've read in the past and what they read on a regular basis. When I model this activity, I refer to it as my reading career and I tell kids that making lists of what I read is like creating my reading resume.

I often start the reading resume activity by asking kids what they read during the previous year. Many will say they didn't read anything but we all know they did. If nothing else, most of them at least glanced at the required readings from school. What I'm most interested in finding out is whether or not kids did any reading on their own. In Language Arts, for example, did anyone read novels they chose themselves? Or did someone read something on their own for a research project? Did anyone read anything outside of school? Who reads text on the Internet? Etc. Because independent reading is the most common reading adults do, and the most common reading kids will do with me, that's what I want to learn the most about.

As with the previous activity, where kids write down their reading behaviors, I will want kids to update their reading resumes from time to time as we go through the year. Essentially, this activity will be their final project at the end of each grading period. Like any resume, their reading resume will tell the person reviewing them about their qualifications. In this case, their resume is proof they show me and their parents of their abilities as readers.

No test will directly measure a student's reading identity.

Nor will the concept of identity show up in any list of state learning standards. But I can think of few things that are stronger predictors of a student's ability to learn to read. The key to helping kids claim their identities as readers is self-assessment. Each of the reading identity activities I use is a self-assessment activity. And throughout the year, self-assessment will be the most common form of assessment we engage in.

While I want kids to take formal testing seriously and to do as well as they can, I don't want them to define themselves by it. Reading tests vary significantly from the authentic task they are designed to measure and some kids may perform poorly for a variety of reasons only indirectly related to their reading ability.

I'm also aware that kids do a ton of reading outside of Language Arts class. They're really reading all day long, and ideally I'd like them to be using the same strategies they learn from me whether they're reading with me or not. Though I can't prove it, I've always had the feeling that kids who see themselves as nonreaders or as poor readers shut down when they're asked to read in many other school and real-life reading situations. If I can help them change this behavior by helping them take ownership of their reader's identity, I believe I can do more for them than I can through any skill I help them develop or any strategy I teach.

# Making Reading Journals Work

*Important Things I Need to Tell Kids About What to Do and Why*

For years I never used reading journals. I didn't keep one myself so I rationalized that kids didn't need to keep one either. Nobody needs to keep a reading journal, I thought. But I've realized since then that this isn't the point. While readers don't need to keep journals, those who do can get a lot out of them as long as they get the right guidance.

Now that I enjoy using journals, I want to tell kids a million different things about them. But I'm lucky if they might remember half a dozen. So here are the most important things I think kids need to know to make journaling a valuable experience.

**Record your experience of the text, not the text itself.** Left to their own devices, kids tend to summarize what they've read. This is not what I want. I don't want their version of the text, I want their experience of the text. If I want to know what happens in the book, I can read it myself. But I can't read their

minds. As the text goes by, readers have an experience of it. Sometimes this experience is emotional, sometimes it's intellectual, sometimes it just feels to readers like they're talking to themselves. This is what I want kids to write in their journals. The journal is not a record of the text, or the fact that the reader has read it. The journal is a record of the reader's experience, what he was thinking or feeling, what questions he wanted answered, what judgments he made, and so on. For me, getting this information down on paper is what a reading journal is all about.

**Date your entries and tell where you are.** I love journal entries that begin like this: "11/17/2007, p. 36, Right now I'm at the part where Jonas is about to discover his role in the community." This provides the perfect context for understanding how the reader's response has come about. It also fulfills any requirement I might have for wanting kids to summarize or to prove in some way that they're actually reading. It's also great when we want to look back at a series of entries many days later. Knowing the context in which the entry was made keeps us from having to go back into the book to remember what was going on.

**Make entries regularly.** There's no ideal number of entries to make and I hate to impose minimums (though, of course, I do when necessary). I don't want kids to make too few entries because that defeats the purpose of recording their experience. But I don't want them to make too many either because that gets in the way of their reading. As an easily remembered guideline, I tell kids I don't want them to go more than 10% of the way through a book without making an entry. So if it's a short book, say 150 pages, I'd prefer not to see more than 15 pages

between entries. Ideally, I like to see regularly spaced entries with more frequent clustering at important points. I sometimes require kids to respond to journal prompts, but I really want them to get in the habit of making entries on their own.

To encourage their independence, I tell them there are many points at which entries can be made: before you start reading, after you finish reading, before you share, after you share, before a conference, after a conference, when you're excited, when you're bored, etc. I especially like to see entries from kids when they're confused about something and are trying hard to figure it out. It's tough to get kids to do these, but I value them greatly because they give me a unique window into the comprehending mind of the reader.

**Use journal entries as pre-writing for other activities.** Kids have a right to ask why I make them journal. I tell them I need to see how they think about their reading for my own assessment purposes. But that's an answer from my perspective, not theirs. The best reader-centered answer I have for them is that journal entries are the seeds of more formal reading response. Journal entries make perfect notes for book reviews, book talks, and close readings. And when kids are in book groups, they seem to need them even more to keep up with the discussion. The deepest thinking they will do about their books, I tell them, will come from journal entries that develop into more formal responses.

**Look for patterns in the entries you make.** Each book comes to each reader a little differently. Some details stand out, others recede. Conscientious journalers often find that they keep coming back over and over to the same characters, the same themes, the same features of a text. This is good. It gives

me and the reader a sense of what's important to them and what they might choose to share or to focus on for a book review, book talk, or close reading.

**Write the most about what matters most.** Once I model a variety of entries in my own reading journal, it becomes clear to kids that they can write about almost anything, and for long periods of time. But I want them to write the most about what matters most. This, to me, is the best part of journaling. By focusing on the part of their experience that is most meaningful, readers begin to put some of themselves down on paper. It's as if the book is like a mirror and we can see readers reflected in their entries. This is how I get to know the students. And how they get to know themselves.

There are many different ways to do reading journals. In my experience, what seems to distinguish ways that work from ways that don't is purpose. Why should a reader keep a reading journal? Why should they make regular entries? Why should they write one thing and not another? Why should they work so hard to capture their experience of reading in addition to keeping up with the text itself? When I'm clear on the answers to these questions, and can answer them legitimately both from my perspective as a teacher and from a student's perspective as a reader, I get great results.

It's certainly possible to teach reading well without reading journals. But the longer I work with readers, the more curious I get about their thinking. And journals have proven to be the best tool I have for understanding how that thinking works.


# Journal Prompts

*Aligning Questions with Key Strategies*

I hate giving kids prompts for their reading journals. In my ideal reading world, kids would spontaneously compose entries of such quality and variety that using prompts would seem silly. However, the reading world is far from ideal, and I've discovered a way to use journal prompts to introduce kids to valuable reading strategies and useful ways of reflecting on their books.

While I don't like the idea of constraining readers' responses to narrowly defined topics, I do want them to apply important reading strategies and note the results. So I've been experimenting with the idea of creating journal prompt questions for specific reading techniques that I know I'll be teaching lessons on. After teaching a particular lesson, I can tell the kids that I want them to respond to a particular prompt some time during that period. I can also use the prompt question during conferencing. Aligning the prompt with my lesson and my conferencing makes the exercise seem more purposeful to the students. It also increases the quality and quantity of the responses I get.

As I do this more and get better at it, I find that I can come up with at least one key question for any concept we cover. Here are some of the questions I use most frequently and the strategies or concepts I pair them with.

**Questioning.** *What do you wonder about?* Questioning is my favorite strategy to teach and it's the one I start with first. But it's not something most young readers are used to. I want readers to get into the habit of questioning everything they can: the meaning of a word, the name of a character, why a character does one thing and not another, etc. Questions are the best way to open kids up to new possibilities in their reading.

**Inference.** *What do you know that the author hasn't told you?* Many young readers find inference baffling. But I like to point out that readers do it all the time. After reading even just a few pages, readers seem to know things authors haven't mentioned. If we can write those things down, and connect them with what we've read, more often than not we'll have a valid inference.

**Predicting.** *What do you think is going to happen?* I used to ask kids, "What do you think is going to happen *next?"* But I realized that by leaving off the last word, I could get a more interesting range of responses. "What do you think is going to happen next?" focuses readers exclusively on the most immediate action. By taking off the last word, I can get kids to speculate about any future outcome. I can also get kids to think about other types of outcomes in non-fiction writing such as which way an argument is going to turn out.

**Connecting.** *What are you reminded of?* Kids think they don't connect to what they read but almost everything they come across reminds them of something. What I'm most interested in is how what they're reminded of compares to what they read, and how this comparison shapes their reading experience. The classic book-versus-movie discussion is a good example.

**Visualizing.** *What can you see like a picture in your mind?* Have you ever had kids close their eyes and describe a main character or a particular setting? What's fascinating to me is the degree of detail kids can evoke, and how much of that detail isn't in the text. To the extent that our minds create logical elements that aren't explicitly defined, visualization is another form of inference. A reader's visual experience of a text is often different than the text itself. What I want to understand is the logic of how a reader's inferential thinking brings additional elements to mind.

**Determining Importance.** *What's the one most important thing the writer wants you to know?* This is my cue for kids to think about the main idea. I ask them to state their response as a single complete sentence. I also ask them to think about something that is both important to them and, in their opinion, important to the author as well. They can reflect on the text as a whole or only on the part they are reading at the time.

**Beginnings.** *What caught your attention and made you want to read more?* Writers often put more effort into the beginning of something than they do into any other part. So I like kids to put effort into appreciating beginnings. Beginnings of individual chapters are interesting, too, so there are many opportunities to think about this.

**Endings.** *What were you left thinking about?* Most kids think

endings just end things. But the best endings often get the reader thinking about something else. And that "something else" is exactly what I'd like to see written in a reading journal. Over time, I hope to get readers in the habit of reflecting just a little after something ends instead of just rushing off to the next chapter or the next book.

**Word Choice.** *What interesting words or phrases can you remember?* I used to think that kids never remembered specific bits of language from the books they read. But then I realized I never asked them. Initially, kids claim to draw a blank. But if I pose this question after showing them some examples from my own reading, they can usually come up with something good during the next reading session.

**Characters.** *Who is this person?* This is an intentionally wide open question. I often model it by writing something like, "Holden Caulfield is a person who [is, has, wants, etc.]..." and creating a list of statements representing my analysis. Anything works as long as kids can tie it back to the text in a logical way. The best thing about such an open-ended question is that I tend to get a mix of literal and inferential detail.

In addition to knowing what readers think, I also want to know why they think it, and how they know they're right by referring to something specific from the text. This gives us an opportunity to practice rendering our responses in the form of the "What-Why-How" strategy. I don't often make kids use a What-Why-How chart, but I like them to know that the most effective responses use that structure.

Most successful responses run about a paragraph in length. But occasionally, kids will go farther. When they do, I know we've come across something that matters to them. These are the re-

sponses that often become the basis for reviews, essays, and talks.

The more I play with the idea of aligning a question with each strategy, technique, or concept I teach, the more valuable I find it to be. It's great to end a lesson with a reading response question kids can dig into right away. Instead of becoming a formulaic approach to making kids respond in certain narrow ways, "the big question," as I've come to call it, has become the perfect tool for focusing my lessons and making sure I get a specific assessable result. Rather than prompts, I see these questions as tools that keep me and the readers I work with focused on important instructional goals.

# The Plot Thickens

*Keeping Summaries Under Control*

I want kids to talk and write about what they read. But sometimes, when they give book talks or write book reviews, I feel like it's déjà vu all over again. Instead of talking about their books, kids regurgitate them in episodes of endless summary. Even when I ask them to stop, they keep piling up details until their summaries are so thick it's as though they've rewritten an entire novel.

Summary has its place, that's for sure. But kids seem to think that place is everywhere. The challenge is to teach them where and when summary is appropriate, and how to summarize economically, so most of their time and energy can go into more rewarding types of reading response.

The reason kids summarize so much is because we ask them to. Summary is a popular way of testing kids' comprehension. But I'm uncomfortable when class is one big year-long test, so I try not to use summary as a way of assessing how kids read. I used to ban summary summarily. But that was a childish overreaction. Now I focus on teaching kids how to use summary in

the same way readers use it in the world outside of school.

I start with some basic information.

**Summaries have a real purpose; they're not just tests.** People don't summarize their reading to get a grade or pass a test; they summarize it to help another person understand something in an efficient way. I point out to kids that anyone who really wanted to know about a book could simply read it. They don't need a reader to retell everything that happens.

**Summaries are as short as possible; don't retell the entire book.** If I ask another reader, "What's that book about?", I expect to get no more than a sentence or two in reply. If I'm reading a review, I might appreciate a paragraph. And if I'm studying an intense piece of literary criticism, several paragraphs of summary sprinkled throughout the paper might be appropriate. Summarizers are always trying to get their work done as efficiently as possible. They know that it's their ideas about the text, and not the text itself, that their audience is most interested in.

**Summaries support other important ideas; they're not the main idea.** If I want to tell you why I liked a certain book, I might have to refer to the plot from time to time just so you'll know what I'm talking about. But the plot is not the important thing I want to share with you. It's a set of supporting details I need to present so you'll understand my message.

**Summaries rarely exist by themselves; they're usually part of something else.** Summaries usually exist as part of some larger communication. Summaries play a small but important role as part of any book talk, book review, or critical essay. Publishers

use brief summaries as part of their marketing materials. Except for catalog listings and similar references, summaries don't stand alone.

**How we summarize is determined by why we're summarizing and who we're summarizing for.** Kids think every summary is the same: tell all you can about a book. But purpose and audience matter more than content. When we summarize, we make choices about what to include and what to leave out. Unless we consider our audience and our reason for summarizing, we won't have good rationale for making those decisions. It is this lack of rationale that lies at the root of kids' tendency to summarize too much.

This information is all well and good. But when it comes to summarizing, it takes more to convince kids to change their ways. So the next thing I do is show them two summary styles.

**The One-Sentence Starter.** The best summary is the shortest. In this approach, the summarizer produces one sentence that captures the essence of the entire book: "Louis Sachar's *Holes* is about a group of juvenile delinquents sent to the barren Camp Green Lake where they discover a secret that may hold the key to their freedom." In this type of summary, the summarizer usually alludes to one or more big themes in the story. So practicing this technique gives me a great opportunity to teach theme.

**The One-Paragraph Wrap-Up.** This is my personal favorite. Not so short that it's hard to come up with; not so long that I get bored: "*Ramona Quimby, Age 8* is about a girl in third grade. She started school with a surprise gift from her dad, only

to have it stolen by a boy she called 'Yard Ape.' One day at lunch she tried to be cool and show off for her friends by cracking an egg on her head and found herself in a big mess. When flu season hit, she learned how awful it felt to throw up in class. As time goes on, Ramona and her family solve their problems, and learn to be more caring for each other. They also learn to be more considerate for each other when time alone is needed."

Both of these summary types are short, and that's the point. To get kids used to writing so little, we create several examples together based on books or movies or fairy tales or any common narrative. Creating models of summaries as a group activity forces us to make hard decisions. With a room full of kids making suggestions, we're bound to have more information than we need. That gives us a chance to talk about what needs to be included and what doesn't. This is when kids start learning how to summarize.

Summaries can, of course, be longer than a sentence or a paragraph, but I want kids to get the hang of summarizing quickly, so I stick to short models at first. We also discuss other issues like whether or not we can give away the ending and how to create teaser lines that would make a reader curious enough to want to read the entire book.

Now that we have models to look at, it's helpful if we have some informal criteria to judge our work. This is not a formal rubric per se; just simple tips that remind kids to keep their summaries short and sweet.

**Hit the highlights.** Include only the most important as-

pects of your book in your summary. Don't worry about all the little things that happen.

**Connect the Dots.** Don't just list things that happen; tell your audience how one thing leads to another.

**Support your important points.** What you decide to include in your plot summary should be determined primarily by which parts of the book you plan to comment on and the arguments you plan to make.

**Don't spoil it.** Don't tell your readers anything about the book that might spoil it for them. After all, the purpose of giving a talk or writing a review is to help readers decide which books they might want to read—not to do the reading for them!

**It's a sprint, not a marathon.** If you're giving a three-minute book talk, limit your summary to 30 seconds (about 75 words). If you're writing a book review, limit your summary to no more than 20% of the total length (100 words in a 500-word review).

While I don't like specifying numbers of pages or numbers of words to make sure kids produce minimum amounts of writing, I love giving them maximums. With summaries, this is one of the most effective things I do. When I tell kids as they give their book talks that summaries can only last 30 seconds, they get very creative about including only the most important elements. The same thing happens when I limit summaries to a single paragraph or 100 words in book reviews. These limits, while artificial, are effective. They're also consistent with the requirements of real world writing. Rarely do professional writers get minimum word counts. But maximum word counts are common as publishers have to watch how they use their space and how they respect their reader's attention spans.

Taking a more structured approach to summary has turned

something I used to hate into something I now enjoy. What used to be a tedious exercise is now an interesting puzzle: Who can give the best summary in the shortest amount of time or space? Best of all, showing kids how to produce good summaries has gotten them out of the habit of producing bad ones.


# Theme and Variations

*Confronting a Classic of the Curriculum*

When it comes to critical reading of great literature, the concept of "theme" is one of the most important things readers need to understand. And yet it can be hard to teach, especially if our students don't seem to have an inherent grasp of the idea. For starters, theme isn't typically defined in ways young readers can easily understand. If you look in the dictionary, you'll find definitions like: "A topic of discourse; A subject of artistic representation; A unifying idea that is a recurrent element in a literary work; etc." All correct definitions, but try using that language to explain theme to a 5th grader.

As we go through school, we pick up many variations on the basic idea. Some teachers conflate theme and main idea. Are they the same or different? And if they're different, how so? Others may speak of themes as being related to symbols and "deeper meaning." By the time we reach college, some of us figure it out, but many are still confused like I was when I started taking my first classes as an English major. There are no easy answers; it's a tough concept to work with. But here's where I

like to start out.

Things that happen in a story sometimes have two meanings: a concrete meaning where something that happens is just what it appears to be, and an abstract meaning where that same something is an example of an idea like loneliness, friendship, trust, courage, hope, honor, love, etc. When several concrete things that happen in a story share the same abstract meaning (different concrete events, same abstract idea), we often say that the author is exploring a theme, especially if the abstract idea deals with something important in life that could apply to many people.

Theme itself is an abstract idea, which is why it can be hard to understand. To make theme more concrete, I'll ask kids to think it through from an author's point of view by posing a question like this: "If you were writing a story about a little boy and you wanted to say something about courage, for example, what kinds of scenes would you put into your story?" Immediately, they can come up with all kinds of ideas about little boys doing courageous things.

When we play this little game, it's easy for kids to come up with many different examples that work. We can play over and over with new themes, new characters, and new situations. We can even choose teams. One team gets to pick the character and the theme, the other team gets to sketch the scene. It's this kind of interaction, where kids are manipulating plot elements to represent abstract ideas, that helps them develop a solid understanding of theme in the books they read.

An explanation and a game get us started with a basic exploration of the concept, but there are other important things I want kids to learn about themes:

**Story elements represent ideas.** It's not always easy to realize that stories carry both concrete and abstract meaning, and that the author may be choosing specific elements to convey specific messages. Authors may not even be intending to communicate thematically when they make choices in their work. But as our "theme" game shows, readers can interpret almost any event in a story as representing something other than its literal meaning would indicate. That's the point I want to make: It's not authors who create themes on the page, it's readers who create them in their heads.

**Experience evolves in patterns.** All human beings are, to some extent, creatures of habit. Because of this, the same things seem to show up in our lives at different points in time. Characters in novels are like this, too. There's often a thread of similarity that ties together the important events in their lives. Looking at the totality of a character's experience, we often become aware of patterns: the pattern of embracing one's true identity in *Harry Potter;* the pattern of survival in *Hatchet;* the pattern of societal expectations in *The Giver.* Seeing these patterns often enough might convince us that while the book is about a certain character, it is also about a certain idea as well.

**Fiction explores important issues.** People don't write fiction just to kill time or to make a living, they write it to talk about important truths in a unique way. Many ideas in human existence are best explored through examples, especially ones where we become emotionally invested. Any writer can write an essay on courage. But only the best fiction writers can craft a

story that helps us experience the contradictory sensations of fear and determination that mark most courageous acts. Fiction writers like to discuss ideas just like non-fiction writers do. In one sense, a work of fiction is just a collection of examples that represent ideas a writer wants to talk about.

**Stories apply to many readers.** Ideas like envy, loneliness, courage, and greed enter into all of our lives at one time or another. The best stories are those that speak to the most readers in the most powerful way. This is where the notion of "Universal Truths" comes in. Where non-fiction writers often speak to particular truths about the world, fiction writers are often capable of speaking to things that are true for all of us.

**Themes are abstract nouns.** Themes are nouns, just things, really. But they aren't the kinds of things one can easily survey with the five senses. In other words, they are not concrete. You can't see loneliness, for example, you can only see examples of it. You can say that J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* is about the challenges kids face as they grow up, but the story itself is really just a set of things that happen to the main character. Salinger supplies the concrete examples, we interpret them through an abstract filter.

**Everyone takes a position.** Themes don't exist in stories for their own sake. We're supposed to think about them, to discern an author's opinion of them, and to see how that opinion squares with our own. It's not enough to say that *Catcher in the Rye* is about growing up. It's what *Catcher in the Rye* says about growing up, and how readers react to that, that really matters.

**The main idea is the most important position.** A story may have several themes. But it can have only one main idea. The main idea is the one most important thing the writer wants the

reader to know. It's the lesson, the moral, the message. If a theme is what a story is about, the main idea is what the author has to say about it. You can think of it as the position an author takes on the most important theme. Of course, the author isn't taking the position, the reader is just interpreting the story that way. Only in the most simplistic stories do authors contrive specific messages. Readers, however, can't help but look for a message or moral in their experience.

**Fiction is instructional.** As a genre, fiction exists to entertain us, but it also exists to teach us valuable lessons, often the kind that are not easy to learn unless we're wrapped up in a good yarn. Themes are the subject matter of the lessons fiction writers want us to learn, so *Harry Potter* can teach us about being ourselves, *Hatchet* can teach us about survival, *The Giver* can teach us about conformity, and *Catcher in the Rye* can teach us how not to have a good time with a free weekend in New York—or how to be more compassionate for kids who grow up awkward, lonely, and scared.

Theme is one of the great traditions of the academy. But writers themselves don't pay much attention to it. English teachers regard theme as an essential aspect of critical reading. Writers regard it as an affectation which often keeps readers from understanding and appreciating good books. I think kids need to understand both of these ideas.

It's hard to imagine not wanting to prepare kids for future courses with the standard understanding of theme. At the same time, as someone who has written a bit myself, I wholeheartedly

agree with writers who insist that the whole notion of theme is arbitrary and artificial. The best I think I can do with these opposing views is to represent them both as well as I can and give kids the benefit of both perspectives. When we "discover" a theme in a novel, I validate the discovery as the work that readers do to interpret what they read. At the same time, I caution that there's no way for us to know if the writer intended for us to discover it, or if the writer even thought about themes at all.

Regardless of where one comes down on the issue of theme, it's well worth the time and effort to explore it with young readers. Thinking about theme turns on a certain kind of critical reasoning in kids and lets me introduce interesting notions like multiple interpretations of the same text and how the reader's background influences what they see in a story.

Over the years, I've started introducing theme to younger groups of readers. What used to be a staple of high school English is now something I'm eager to discuss in 3rd and 4th grade, albeit in a simpler way. Younger students, I find, are more sincere about their study of themes. They still believe in books as instruments of truth and power. As kids get older, and more cynical, theme can seem corny and contrived so I often turn the tables and ask kids to go at it as writers. Do they believe in themes or not? They can read each other's stories and find out.


# The Five Facts of Fiction

*Giving New Life to an Old Genre*

The first time I taught a novel to a class of students, I was painfully aware of one thing: I had no idea what to do. I knew I was supposed to take them through the novel in some way and, ideally, teach them something about fiction. But what? And how? Needless to say it was an unsuccessful experience for both teacher and students.

Then something even more depressing hit me: I'd be teaching fiction all the time. Fiction is the most commonly taught genre in all of school. No matter what grade I was working with, whenever reading came up, fiction would come up, too.

As is often the case, this little crisis of confidence inspired me to do some thinking. What is fiction? How is it different from other genres? Why do we teach it so much? Etc. Finally, it dawned on me to track down my answers from the other side of the page. So I started looking at what fiction writers had to say about the issue. This lead me to The Five Facts of Fiction—five essential elements of every fictional work that every reader has to understand.

**Fact #1: Fiction is all about character.** Great fiction is built around great characters. Where readers, especially young ones, focus on plot, writers focus on characters, sometimes working for weeks and months without developing much in the way of plot at all. To help young readers understand this, I spend a lot of time analyzing characters through character traits.

**Fact #2: Fiction is all about what a character wants.** Every character wants something. In this case, we're looking for that one thing that is so important a character will do almost anything to get it. Sometimes this is a tangible thing in the story like fending off the attacks of a rival or finding a lot of money. But at other times, it's a conceptual thing like courage or love or freedom. The best stories have both.

**Fact #3: Fiction is all about how a character gets or doesn't get what he or she wants.** This is how the plot develops. Stories aren't just a bunch of random happenings. They grow out of who characters are and what they want. That's why it's so important to understand characters well. The plot literally depends on them.

**Fact #4: Fiction is all about how a character changes.** At the beginning of a story, characters are a certain way. Then they want something so badly they're willing to go through incredible experiences to get it. As a result of those experiences, they change, sometimes just a little, sometimes a lot. This is character development, and it's one of the most important things to follow in a novel. For this reason, Fact #4 is my personal favorite of the Five Facts.

**Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world an author creates.** Even when we're reading realistic fiction, the world of the book is not the same as the world around us. It's a special world created by the author just for this story. You can think of this as the setting but it's really a lot more. For example, it includes characters in the story other than the main character and often many diverse locations and even time spans.

Once we understand the basic facts and how they work in any story, we apply them to a specific story we all know. Here, for example, are The Five Facts of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.*

**Fact #1: Fiction is all about character.** Harry Potter: 12 years old, black tousled hair, bright green eyes, glasses, lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. Naïve, a bit shy at times, kind, compassionate, curious. Discovers that he is a wizard (and a rather famous one at that) when he is invited to attend the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. He is famous because, as an infant, he somehow survived an attack by Voldemort, the world's most powerful evil wizard.

**Fact #2: Fiction is all about what a character wants.** More than anything in the world, Harry wants a family. He is orphaned as an infant when his parents are killed by Voldemort. He is sent to live with his closest relatives, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, his uncle and aunt, and their exceedingly obnoxious son, Dudley. The Dursley's treat him badly and, through their abuse and neglect, he grows up to be a lonely, confused, and often depressed young boy.

**Fact #3: Fiction is all about how a character gets or does not get what he or she wants.** Does Harry get what he wants? In a way, yes he does. Harry joins the family of wizards at Hogwarts. During his first year as a member of Gryffindor House, he forms sibling-like bonds with Hermione Granger and the Weasley brothers. Hagrid, the school groundskeeper, is like an uncle or a big brother to Harry; Dumbledore takes on a fatherly role. Together, these people become the family Harry lost when Voldemort killed his parents.

**Fact #4: Fiction is all about how a character changes.** In the beginning, Harry is sullen and scared. He spends most of his time locked in a small closet beneath the basement stairs. When the Dursleys let him out, he is taunted and terrorized by their son Dudley. Harry is miserable and hopeless, a victim of his unfortunate circumstances. At the end of the story, however, while sad to be returning temporarily to the home of his aunt and uncle, Harry is no longer helpless, hopeless, and hapless. In his year at Hogwarts he has gained tremendous self-confidence and a better understanding of who he is and what his life is all about. The lesson of the story is this: If we're lucky enough to find out who we really are, and if we have the courage to claim our true power and embrace our destiny, we can take control of our world instead of letting it take control of us.

**Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world an author creates.** This is really two worlds in one: the world of wizards and the world of regular humans, or muggles as the wizards like to call them. The magical world is full of spells and potions and amazing beasts. There are special games like quidditch. People fly around on broomsticks. And they go to a magical school to learn about witchcraft and wizardry. There is also danger in this mag-

ical world, danger in the person of Lord Voldemort whose sole motivation is to rid the world of Harry Potter.

You can see that the Five Facts help kids create a very complete inventory of a work of fiction. Rather than just picking up cursory plot details, readers have to think deeply about what's going on in the story and, in particular, what motivates characters and how they change.

What I like best about The Five Facts of Fiction is how it helps kids look at literature from the writer's point of view. These are the kinds of issues writers deal with as they craft their stories, and I think it's wonderful for kids to get a peak, however brief, at the wizard behind curtain.

# The Five Big Questions

*Building a Foundation for Critical Thinking*

We all want kids to think critically about what they read, but often we don't know how to get started. That was the position I was in when I started teaching reading, and I certainly felt uncomfortable about it. No matter what I tried, it seemed that all I could get out of kids was surface detail and plot summary.

Then I got lucky. Something happened in my teaching of writing that I was able to borrow for my teaching of reading. And kids' responses got a lot better as a result.

In writing, I was focusing on revision with a group of 3rd graders. For weeks we were getting nowhere. And then we stumbled onto a set of questions we would ask ourselves every time we wanted to revise a piece of writing:

- What makes this piece good?
- What would make this piece better?
- What's the one most important thing the writer wants the reader to know?

- Why did the writer write this piece?
- What does the audience need to know?

All of a sudden, revision got a lot more interesting. So, after a couple of weeks of enjoying writing, I decided to try the same five questions in reading.

**What makes this book good?** This is as open as an open-ended question can be. The kids can say just about anything. But they have to tell me why and they have to tell me how they know they're right by referring back to text to make their point. I want kids to use this What-Why-How structure whenever possible to make their assertions.

**What would make this book better?** Again, I get a range of responses. And again, I want those responses supported with explanations and references to the text. If a kid says the book should have been shorter, for example, I ask which parts could have been shortened or removed. Kids get into some fascinating and deep discussions trying to justify their suggested improvements.

**What's the one most important thing the writer wants you to know?** I like to call this the "Main Idea" question. Here we're looking for the main idea, the message, the moral of the story. This question, like all the others, works best when kids have read the entire book. But it can still be used when kids are in progress. In that context it becomes a kind of "main idea prediction" which is interesting in its own right.

**Why did the writer write this?** Kids think writers write to be famous or to get rich. Then I explain to them how un-fa-

mous and un-rich most writers are (yours truly among them). What I'm thinking about here is purpose. Of all the books a writer could writer, why did he or she writer this one. It takes a lot of time and effort to write a book. Why would anyone want to spend their time this way? There must be an important reason. And that's what we've got to figure out.

**What does the audience need to know?** Books are filled with secrets and if you miss them, you miss big parts of what an author has to say. We try not to give these away while people are reading a book so instead we come up with hints that help people find their own way.

Any reader who can answer these questions well has read their book well, in my opinion. And if they can't answer them well, I can always lead them to better answers with just a little interaction. When we think, too, that these same questions can be used during the revision stage of the writing process, we realize we have a very powerful tool in these five questions that can be used in many different contexts.

In reading, most kids use these questions as pre-writes for book talks and book reviews. In writing they work best for revision. The reason we call them The Five Big Questions is because they play such a big role in everything we do.

# Book Reviews

*The Best Writing About Books*

I love book reviews. I love reading them. I love teaching them. I love watching kids put them together. To me, the book review is the ideal post-reading assignment.

Even though each review is as unique as the book being reviewed, most contain a small set of essential elements. Here's a good example of a basic review written by a 3rd grader.

**A Real 8-Year Old Girl's Life**

Touch of the flu? Egg in her hair? Poor Ramona!

*Ramona Quimby, Age 8* is a nine chapter, one hundred and ninety page book about an 8-year old girl in third grade. She started school with a surprise gift from her dad, only to have it stolen by a boy she called "Yard Ape". One day at lunch she tried to be cool and show off for her friends by cracking an egg on her head and found herself in a big mess. When flu season hit she learned how awful it felt to throw up in class. She and her sister learn about using good

manners at the dinner table. As time goes by, Ramona and her family solve their problems, and learn to be more caring for each other. They also learn to be more considerate of each other when time alone is needed.

My favorite part was during a scene where Ramona's class is at lunch: "She took a firm hold on her egg, waited until everyone at her table was watching, and whack—she found herself with a hand full of crumbled shell and something cool and slimy running down her face." I thought that was funny because she wanted to be cool like the rest of her class, by breaking a hard boiled egg on her head. But guess what, her mother was in such a hurry, she gave Ramona a raw egg. Whoops!

I think the most important thing the author wants me to know is that when my family may be having problems I can be of help by obeying them and not fussing, disturbing, and/or annoying them.

I liked this book because the author chose strong, powerful, descriptive words that made gross, imaginative pictures in my mind. Like in the lunch scene at school ("something cool and slimy running down her face") and at the dinner scene at home ("One edge of her meat was covered with tiny bumps.").

*Ramona Quimby, Age 8* is one of the best Beverly Cleary books I've ever read because it pulled me in better than any other book in the Ramona series. (I have read six of her books.) It made wonderful pictures in my mind and sounded like a real 8-year old girl's life. This made me want to keep on reading all

the way to the end.

I recommend this book to good readers who enjoy good long lasting chapters (max 25 pages).

There are dozens of different things a writer can talk about in a book review. And though this reviewer explores only a few, the writer definitely takes care of the basics.

**An original title.** It is possible to get away with titling a book review like this: "A Review of…[put the book title here]" but it isn't very entertaining and it isn't likely to draw readers in unless they've already read the book themselves or are considering it. It's much better to do what this writer did here and come up with an original title. In this case, the writer has chosen to use a phrase that refers to why she liked the book so much.

**An interesting lead.** Having a good lead is just as important in a book review as it is in any other piece of writing. I think this lead is clever. It's only ten words long and yet it gives us a very accurate sense that the book is about someone's life and all the things that happen to her.

**A brief summary of the plot.** For readers who have not read the book, it's always nice to offer a summary of what it's about. This summary should not be long. A single paragraph, just as the author has used here, is often all you need. It's also important that you don't spoil the end or any other important parts for the reader.

**The reviewer's favorite part.** In a favorable review, one of the reviewer's jobs is to tell other readers why the book is worth reading. Of course, this is just one person's opinion, so we'd like

to know as much about that one person's tastes as we can. One good way to discover this is when reviewers share the parts they like best.

**The author's message or main idea.** Most stories you read will have a message, one important thing the writer wants you to know. This is what the book is all about—at least as the reviewer is concerned. The interesting thing about this is that different reviewers can read the same book and come up with completely different messages.

**The quality of the writing.** In addition to talking about the story, we can also talk about the way it is written. Sometimes books have great plots but really aren't written with inspiring and interesting language. On the other hand, I've read books where almost nothing happens at all but the quality of the writing is so good that I remain fascinated with it from cover to cover.

**How the book compares with other books.** Sometimes, in addition to knowing if a book is any good, it's helpful to know how it is like or unlike other books in the same genre or by the same author. Even if we haven't read the book being reviewed, we might know one or more of the books the reviewer is using for comparison.

**A recommendation.** In a way, the entire review is one big recommendation. But sometimes, right at the end, reviewers will say something more specific to define the kind of reader they feel will most appreciate, or not appreciate, the book.

Most book reviews can be broken down into different sec-

tions like I've described here. In this case, the reviewer dealt with eight different things in her review: title, lead, summary, favorite part, message, writing quality, comparison with other books, and a recommendation. Kids can write many reviews with just these simple elements or they can come up with others. For example, some reviews talk more about characters while others talk more about the authors who wrote them.

Relative to the books they describe, most book reviews are very short. In fact, I would suggest that most run 500 words or less. The book the student has read might be a hundred times longer than that (or maybe 400 times longer if it's the fifth Harry Potter book) so how do we help kids say something meaningful and interesting about such a long book in such a short review?

The solution is to think carefully about the things that matter most to us as readers.

Every book is filled with ups and downs. Even our favorite novel of all time has parts we find dull, difficult, or otherwise impossible for us to enjoy. While reading a good book, we run through a huge range of emotions. We also have a range of thoughts, many that go beyond the book itself to our own lives and the world around us. The task in a book review is to bring to someone who hasn't read it a sense of what mattered most to the reader.

Because they come in all shapes and sizes, it can be hard to categorize book reviews. Below you'll find a review that looks and feels a bit different from the one in the previous section.

In the review of *Ramona Quimby, Age 8,* the reviewer con-

centrated on presenting some of the basic elements of a review in a particular order. In the review below, 8th grader Micaela Arneson isn't really thinking about essential elements or what order they're supposed to go in. Instead, she's thinking about what mattered most as she read the book, and simply letting the review organize itself around each idea she comes up with.

### A Tale of Things Beyond the Surface

*Hidden Talents,* written by David Lubar, is about a boy named Martin who has a problem respecting authority and who has been kicked out of every single school his father has sent him to. His last chance is Edgewood, a school for the troubled. During the course of his stay, he befriends four unique boys, boys with strange powers. Together they must control their powers, with Martin as their coach, and save their school from being shut down.

#### Storybook to Reality

*Hidden Talents* has very strong characters. Martin is not your everyday troublemaker. Lubar creates an almost surreal aura around him, making his "problem" much more dramatic and intriguing. Martin's friends are also realistic outcasts: rejected, hopeless (to the world's eyes), and unique.

While the five friends battle their powers, they also battle other kids, specifically a group of violent, big, rude bullies. They are typical fictional bullies: strong, mean, and stupid. But Lubar adds his creative flare to make them less storybook and more real.

### Hook, Line, and Sinker

The beginning of *Hidden Talents* is my favorite part of the story. Martin is looking out the window of the bus, staring at the barren landscape. No other kids are aboard, only the bus driver, a pot-bellied, muscle-bound man, bigger than three Martins put together. Gradually, Edgewood comes into view, its grimy walls looming overhead.

I think the beginning is the best part of the book because, unlike many other young readers' novels I have read, it intrigued me right away and kept me interested. David Lubar also answers most of the general questions we might have about Martin's life towards the beginning so the reader has important background.

At one point, Martin makes a somewhat nasty remark toward the bus driver and this adds a bit of humor. The way Edgewood looms in the distance increases the suspense. The reader knows that something big is up ahead but is left guessing as to what direction the story will take.

### Beyond the Surface

It looked like Martin's life was over the minute he set foot in Edgewood. But over the course of the novel, he faces and battles his enemy, himself. The novel ends with his knowing it is time to go home and battle the last thing that has bothered his conscience—his own father.

**Hidden Benefit**

*Hidden Talents* is a unique teen book. Most young adult books are exactly like one another, full of gossip and silly relationships; they often lack good plots and strong characters. But *Hidden Talents* tells an exciting and powerful story of an unwanted boy who, in the process of trying to find himself, grows as a person and helps those around him to find themselves, too.

In addition to being just plain fantastic, I think this novel could be very beneficial to teens who are struggling to find themselves or struggling to sort out their family relationships.

There are many things to like about this review but the best thing to me is how much I feel as though I'm getting to know the reviewer in addition to the book she's talking about. I especially appreciated the following.

**Caring about characters.** The first thing I noticed was how much the writer cared about the characters in the story. It wasn't just about the plot and everything that happened. The writer was looking for—and found—rich, complex characters she could care about.

**Looking below the surface.** Looking for deep characters usually leads readers to look for deeper meaning, too. I can tell, especially in the last two sections, that the reviewer is interested in looking below the surface of what happens to find aspects of the story that are truly meaningful.

**High standards and serious intentions.** In the last section, the writer compares the book to other books written for kids her age. What she says about it makes me feel like the book is, indeed, as unusual as she claims. She's obviously a serious reader in search of serious reading.

**Heading in the right direction.** I love the clever headings that introduce each section. This tells me that the writer is not only thinking of what's important to her but that she also wants her readers to have an enjoyable experience as they move through her review.

There's no one right way to write a book review. You can follow the same structure that the reviewer of *Ramon Quimby, Age* 8 chose to follow. Or you can follow your heart like the reviewer of *Hidden Talents* did. All you have to do is tell your readers why the book is important to you—and entertain them a little along the way.

# Giving a Reading

*Sharing Books Like Authors Do*

One of the things kids can do after they've finished a book is give a reading. We've all been to book readings. Typically, the author reads a small section and then answers questions. In this case, a student is going to be doing the reading but the format is still the same: the reader will come to the front of the room, read an important passage from the book, and then take questions from the audience.

What I care most about here is the quality of the expressive reading. To express a text well, to read it with feeling that matches what it means, is one of the best ways to understand it. In order to match the proper expression to each word or phrase, readers have to understand both the meaning of the words and the grammar of each sentence. Expression is such a powerful comprehension strategy because it instantly increases our access to meaning as we read.

Daily practice in expressive reading is now a regular part of my reading instruction. I like the kids to give readings frequently based on their favorite passages in books of their choice. I also

like to do reader's theater activities because acting out texts seems to heighten the use of expression even more.

I once asked a drama teacher who also taught reading what he thought the connection was between expression in drama and understanding a text. He put it this way: "Actors put so much effort into choosing just the right expression because they have only one chance to deliver a line, and they need to be sure the audience will understand it perfectly." This rings true for me. It also reminds me that if I want kids to be 100% certain that they're understanding what they read, they may need to slow down, and practice a passage many times, in order to get the expression just right.

I teach expressive reading just like I teach everything else: by giving students authentic strategies they can use to achieve the best results. Over the last few years, I have identified about 15 different expressive reading strategies, but here's a useful subset that gets most of the job done.

**Go slow.** To increase expression, most readers have to lower their speed. If you feel like you're going a bit too slow, you're probably doing just fine. It feels strange at first, but kids get used to it with practice.

**Repeat till it's complete.** If you mess up, don't go on, go back and repeat the sentence from the very beginning. If you keep messing up, take a moment to practice the word or phrase you're having trouble with, then try again.

**Sentence high and low.** Start a bit higher in pitch at the beginning of a sentence then, as you approach the end, gradual-

ly lower the pitch of your voice.

**Sentence fast and slow.** Start out at a good clip but taper off your speed just slightly as you near the end. This should be very subtle, don't over do it.

**Up at the end for a question mark.** The pitch of your voice should go up at the end of a question.

**Straight up for an exclamation mark.** Shoot your voice straight up in both pitch and volume if you see an exclamation mark.

**Full stop at a period, small pause at a comma.** Pay attention to punctuation. Treat colons, semicolons, dashes, and parentheses just like commas.

**Character high, narrator low.** In passages that contain dialog, raise the pitch of your voice for spoken parts (the dialog), and lower the pitch for attributions or "tags" (the "He saids" and "She saids") and other text by the narrator.

**Emphasize the important word.** Pick one key word in a sentence and call attention to it by raising the volume of your voice, changing tone, or stretching it out to make it last just a bit longer than normal. This strategy should also be used subtly.

A formal reading in front of the class should last no more than a few minutes. I limit kids to a maximum of two minutes of reading followed by two minutes of questions from the audience. This way, I can work in several readings during sharing time.

Kids are a little skittish at first, so I have to model several formal readings before they'll give it a try. Ultimately, however, I

think it becomes one of the most entertaining things we do. And I have found few things that do so much to make kids better readers. The work they have to put in to get a passage just right brings together all their reading skills into a single, challenging act. Ideally, I'd like to have a reading every day. It's one of my favorite experiences of teaching.

# Giving a Book Talk

*The Most Natural Thing a Reader Can Do*

One of the most natural thing readers do after they finish reading a book is talk about it with other readers. "Did you read such-and-such by so-and-so?" someone will say at a dinner party, and off they go. So why not make formal book talks part of the normal set of post-reading activities in your room?

In a formal book talk, a reader who has finished a book, gets up in front of the class and talks about it for two to three minutes. The class then gets to ask two to three minutes of questions. The reader giving the talk can talk about any aspect of the book they wish. And the audience can ask any questions that interest them. The whole thing takes at most five to six minutes, and then we're on to the next one.

To structure their talk, kids can use a variety of strategies they've learned at other times in class.

**The Five Facts of Fiction.** Five Facts is great for books that are dominated by a single character. Responding to the Five Facts before giving a talk, and then using that structure, often makes for a very successful discussion.

**The Five Big Questions.** Less structured, but just as useful is The Five Big Questions. Answering the questions prepares the reader well for any kind of talk. Less character-focused than Five Facts of Fiction, The Five Big Questions is very good for non-fiction texts.

**Journal entries.** The best way to prepare for a talk is to review journal entries. This really helps the reader capture his or her experience of the book in a way other readers can understand and appreciate.

**Favorite passages.** I love to hear a reader's favorite passages from a book. Hearing them, and finding out why they are the reader's favorite, not only introduces me to some of the best parts of a book, it also introduces me to some of the best parts of a reader.

**Brief plot summary.** The key word here is "brief." It's important to have some kind of plot summary in a book talk. But I want to keep it short. Twenty to thirty seconds is plenty. And don't give away ending, please.

**Character study.** Using the Five Facts of Fiction or a focus on character traits, readers can get up and give what is essentially a character talk. Sometimes, for some books, this makes more sense than a normal book talk.

**Expressive reading.** I love to hear a good expressive reading from a book. Ideally, this will tie in with something important in the plot and the reader's favorite part. But any kind of good expressive reading is always appreciated.

**Author's life and background.** Sometimes a book talk turns into an author talk. That's OK by me as long as it's interesting. Some author's lives are deeply interwoven with the books they write. In this case, an author talk *is* a book talk.

**Series or genre information.** For series books, particularly in the sci-fi and fantasy genres, a little background information is vital. For kids who like to read trilogies and other sets of books, this kind of discussion makes a lot of sense.

Of course, the best part of the talk comes from the audience's questions. This is where the best discussions spring up and where we head off into unexplored territory. Sometimes, I have become so enamored of questions during book talks that I've had the entire talk come from the audience's questions. No formal book presentation. Just questions from the audience that the author has to answer as best as he or she can. Without the structure of the initial talk, the questions seem freer and more interesting, and I think we end up with a better discussion overall. Or, it could be that without the formal presentation, we just have more time to explore the questions.

Book talks can generate a lot of excitement in a classroom. The simple Q&A format is easy for the kids to pick up and enjoy. And hearing about books first hand from peers is the easiest way to sell them to the rest of the class.

There was a time when I never did anything like book talks with kids. Now I can't imagine teaching reading without them.


# What Do They Do When They Finish a Book?

*After-Reading Activities That Go Beyond the Grade Book*

"It's great that kids do all this reading and that teachers do all this conferencing, but when do I get something to grade?" I get this question, or a variation of it, all the time. It probably comes from that part of us that says kids aren't really working unless they have work to turn in. Another part simply reflects the reality that standards-based teaching is driven by the need for assessable products.

Personally, I feel very comfortable letting kids finish one book and pick up another without doing some kind of assignment. My conference notes and their journal records tell me almost everything I need to know about their reading development. But I also like to review tangible work product, and I believe that kids benefit greatly from producing a lot of it. So the question isn't whether the work matters more than the reading, it's what matters most when it comes to the responsibility we have to help kids become better readers and better thinkers?

I base the selection of assignments I give on the kinds of after-reading activities pursued by literate people in both popu-

lar and academic traditions. As a student struggling to understand the purpose of my teachers' assignments, I never felt comfortable with many traditional book activities, especially book reports and anything that involved art. Nor as an adult have I ever jumped up from bed after finishing a novel with the irresistible urge to make a diorama.

The after-reading activities I like are based on talking or writing, and each is grounded in traditions of real-life literacy. Here are a few things I like to see kids doing after they finish a book.

**Give a talk.** Book talks are my favorite because of the wonderful contribution they make to our reading community. I try to keep them short. The reader gets 2-3 minutes to tell us about the book, and then the audience gets 2-3 minutes to ask questions. Invariably, they go well over the 5-6 minutes I usually allot for them. But that's just because everyone enjoys them so much. More often than not, kids in the audience are inspired to choose the book under discussion for a future read. Then we get additional talks on the same book. This is even more interesting because I tell kids they have to come up with new and interesting things to say, and because I tell the audience they have to come up with new and interesting questions to ask.

**Give a reading.** Kids need to hear a lot of good reading. Much of that comes from me through modeling and thinkalouds, but the most effective demonstrations come from the kids themselves. I do a lot of explicit teaching on expressive reading so kids understand many different techniques for reading out loud.

I ask them to copy out the passage they plan to read, to practice it many times, and even to mark it up with specific notations for how they plan to present it. I want this to be a formal dramatic reading and I work with kids much as a director might work with an actor. They don't have to put on costumes or anything like that, but I insist on "full-throated" expression, and I establish the expectation that they have to be entertaining as well as precise. If book talks do the most to inspire good discussions in class, formal readings do the most to inspire quality in our reading. Each successful reading seems to ratchet up everyone's expectations of what is possible. Ideally, I would like to have a short formal reading almost every day.

**Write a review.** Like book talks, book reviews sell readers on books (or scare them away; although I don't get too many negative reviews). Book reviews are a great way to help kids develop critical thinking skills related to reading. We start with models of real reviews from sources like Amazon.com. But we also look at more formal examples in newspapers and magazines. We work through an ongoing lesson called, "What Can You Say About a Book?" where we make a list of all the different aspects of a book a reviewer might discuss. Kids enjoy the power they have to influence others. Reviews are the best first step in getting kids comfortable with literary criticism. They lead naturally to traditional academic forms like close reading and literary analysis.

**Do a close reading.** In the traditional close reading, a reader takes a poem or short prose passage and interprets it extensively in as detailed a way as possible. In one sense, a close reading is the opposite of a review. Where a review treats lightly many parts of an entire work, a close reading focuses intently on a

small but significant portion. Writing up a close reading is hard; I have to teach kids many things about it, and we have to practice it together many times before they can do it well. We also have to practice interpreting short passages together on a regular basis either in lessons or in conferences. I don't typically ask elementary age students to do full essays based on close readings, though I do engage kids of all ages in frequent close reading activities because I want to make sure that every student develops the basic skill of careful study and thoughtful explanation that close reading requires.

**Write a literary analysis.** At the high school level, it's important to introduce kids to the kind of formal academic writing they'll be doing about books if they decide to go to college. Working on book talks, book reviews, and close readings gets kids ready for this most challenging form. I share many models and talk about my own experience as an English major in college.

**Write an essay.** Readers are often inspired to write by the ideas they encounter. When a reader has been significantly affected by a book, and the traditional forms don't seem to capture their experience, I encourage them to write an essay. The essay can take any form and serve any purpose, but it must include explicit references to the book that inspired it. Kids don't often choose to do this kind of writing but when they do, it's often very interesting.

**Present an annotated collection of excerpts.** Serious readers, especially if they think of themselves as writers, too, get in the habit of copying down passages that catch their attention. I love to have kids collect them. As a potential after-reading product, I allow kids to formally collect and publish a set of these excerpts from one or more texts. Each collection has to have

some organizing principle like "great descriptions" or "effective characterizations" or "well-constructed sentences," and each passages has to be annotated briefly to explain why it was chosen.

**Publish your journal entries.** Some kids are incredible journal writers, and since journals are often published in the real world, I tell kids they can publish parts of their reading journals if they feel like it. This usually involves gathering together the most prominent entries on a particular book, editing them for clarity, and writing a brief commentary that ties together the reader's experience.

I like to see kids reading 20-30 books a year plus bits and pieces of poetry, journalism, and other forms. Ideally, I would like to see students succeed at each of the activities I've listed here. But that doesn't happen. Every student has his or her strengths and I like to nurture individual talents as much as I can. My bottom line is that I want every kid to do several book talks, book reviews, and formal readings. The other essential activity is close reading. But I work on that so regularly in lessons and conferences that it's easy for me to gauge a student's skill without an assignment. For students in the high school years, however, I feel that close reading is required because so much of what they will do in college depends on this ability.

As I mentioned above, I don't think a kid should have to do something for every book they read. After all, the most frequent after-reading task an adult reader undertakes is to think about what he or she will read next. Based on other things we're doing, I determine a reasonable number of reading-related assign-

ments to include in their portfolios but I don't worry if this is less than the total number of books they read. Nor do I think kids should do any after-reading task simply to prove to me that they have read a book. I can tell just by conferencing with them if they've read it. The point of these activities is not to have something to grade or something I can use to check up on kids. The point is to give them authentic experiences that increase the ownership they have of their literacy.

Kids value reading differently when we ask them to think, talk, and write about it. When they represent their reading to the class, they become more aware that their reading represents them. They start to think about the books they choose. They start to care about whether a book lives up to its promise. They start to realize that the once solitary and passive act of reading has a powerful social dimension they had never before considered.

The question, "What do they do when they finish a book?" has an infinite number of answers. The best response I can give is this: "Do something real." It's important to me that the work I ask kids to do around books be as authentic as possible. It's incredibly helpful to base my teaching on real-world models. I also find it easier to teach something if I've seen it out in the world for much of my life. From the kids' perspective, authenticity can be a motivator—at least they know that I'm not arbitrarily wasting their time just to get something in a grade book.

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

# Learning Patterns

## *Teach Smarter Not Harder*

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

*Learning Patterns* are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

*For more information about Learning Patterns click here.*

*"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."*

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

# Agile Transformation

## *Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change*

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

*Agile Transformation* is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **"Stand Up" Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **"Just in Time" Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.

*"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."*

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

# Essential Elements of Agile Schools

## *The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities*

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.

*"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."*

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

# Essential Elements

*continued...*

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.

8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.

9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.

10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.

12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.

*"Learning begins with teaching that makes sense."*

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

# ttms

## teaching that makes sense

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