

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Creating Passionate Readers Through Independent Reading

How can we ensure that students are successful not only at learning to read but also at becoming as driven about reading as they are their video games, sports, or other hobbies?

As *Fortnite*, the latest downloadable action game to dominate the gaming scene, captivates middle school and high school students across the globe, teachers may wonder, how can we compete for students' attention in learning to read? How can we inspire a similar level of passion? How can we ensure that students are successful not only at learning to read but also at becoming as driven about reading as they are their video games, sports, or other hobbies?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer, but there is an instructional approach that produces results: giving students control over their reading lives through independent reading.

A common, long-held belief of teachers and parents is that “the more you read, the better you read.” Because many students either did not choose to read at home or did not have books at home, schools began to provide independent reading time in the classroom. In the 1980s and 1990s, this time may have been called DEAR, or Drop Everything And Read. Students and teachers read simultaneously or, in some schools, all staff and students read for a specified number of minutes.

As the years progressed, more and more requirements were added into English language arts instruction and curriculum. Teachers could no longer provide time for everything and anything, so crucial decisions were required about what to include in daily instruction. Some decisions are made at the district level, whereas others are made at the teacher level. Depending on the ages and stages of the students, decisions about *how* to spend time require careful thought.

The ILA literacy leadership brief *The Power and Promise of Read-Alouds and Independent Reading* identifies the following components of independent reading:

- Classroom time to self-select and read a large number of books and variety of text
- Explicit instruction about what, why, and how readers read
- Teacher monitoring and support during the in-class independent reading time
- Authentic conversation about what students are reading

Each component instills student competence, confidence, and joy. Independent reading is a valuable use of time because of the many benefits students realize from reading practice and

volume: Students develop reading stamina, their vocabulary and background knowledge increases, and they acquire reading habits.

Reading Stamina

Stamina in reading is a relatively new discussion but whether students do or do not read has been a common topic for decades. Students are required in classrooms and in life to put sustained attention into reading tasks. Sometimes the reading seems connected to life, but at other times, the reading seems to be connected to external factors such as assessment. Readers who have time to read can grow their skills. Readers who do not have time to read or who are working on isolated skills may not be reading texts of their choice.

Choice of reading texts may not be sufficient to engage all students in reading because texts matter and need to be appealing, on topics of interest, and representative of the students in the room. Better texts mean better book choices and increased student motivation to read heightened by personal work, actions of peers, and teacher promotions without artificial quizzes or book reports. Consider implementing any (or all) of the following strategies to increase student engagement:

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- Promote “book tastings” or “speed dating” to create lists of books to read.
- Organize a display of new book arrivals and reader “waiting lists.”
- Collect “golden lines” lifted from current text shared on a graffiti board.
- Encourage student development of “book ladders.”
- Leave a note with some tantalizing highlights inside the book for the next reader.
- Draft a post about a book read for a classroom blog.
- Add a sticky note to a class Padlet about a book read.
- Plan, storyboard, and record a Flipgrid video to convince would-be readers in the form of “If You Loved ____, You Must Read ____!” with reasons to support.

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These approaches for students to share their voices about *what* and *why* they read provide specific feedback to other student readers for motivation as well as encouragement to continue with daily independent reading.

Research establishes that one cause for the difference between good readers and poor readers is the difference in the amount of time spent reading. Providing time at school for independent reading becomes an equity issue when some students have access to a wide volume of books at home and other students have none.

The lack of reading time to increase stamina is also problematic. Motivating students to read is easier to accomplish when students select their own books because student choice in reading materials develops a love for reading that often lasts a lifetime. These students can name the books that have affected their lives, the next ones they want to read, and those favorite genres that keep them up at night reading.

Because love of reading is not an academic goal, teachers may overlook it. Others argue that it is perhaps the most important goal because it imparts a lifelong interest and is real in terms of developing a purpose for reading. Scholastic surveys of students report that students who read daily typically outscore students who do not read on a daily basis. Self-selected reading to help build stamina is imperative in classrooms to encourage the volume of reading that is necessary to grow as a reader and to increase confidence, competence, and a love for reading.

Vocabulary and Background Knowledge

Independent reading also enlarges vocabulary and background knowledge. The relationship of wide reading and increased vocabulary is commonly accepted because many studies support the proposition that time and ample opportunity to read relate to a growth in vocabulary. There are not enough days during an entire academic career to teach students all the words that they need to know. Wide reading can help students learn the meanings of thousands of new words each year while also building schema or background knowledge. Students' reading ability is influenced by the amount of schemata or interrelated information they have about a topic under study. Wide reading exposes students to diverse topics and information that can be used in future reading.

Reading Habits

When independent reading focuses on reader choice, readers inevitably find books they love, and then they often find friends and others to hold a conversation with about such books. The conversation can be held face to face, in a text, or through Skype, Zoom, a Google Hangout, or the use of Flipgrid or Padlet.

Reading habits matter. Reading the first book in a series leads to reading the second book and then the third. Students learn to have an “on-deck book” or a “to-be-read list” in order to have a book at hand to fill free minutes. Research establishes that students with strong reading habits are more likely to reach their full literacy potential. Celebrating and encouraging reading habits with time during the school day for independent reading furthers that goal.

The Teaching Side of Independent Reading

Just as independent reading offers benefits for students, it also offers benefits for the “teaching side.” Teachers who use the gradual release of responsibility model know that the independent work phase allows them to determine whether students can apply their learning independently. Independent reading allows teachers to seize upon students’ appropriate and applicable postreading responses to extend inquiry and stimulate additional reading. Students are not expected to respond in cookie-cutter fashion to texts. Differences in ideas are celebrated.

The inclusion of independent reading also opens opportunities for teachers to coach, instruct, provide feedback, and even assess the effectiveness of independent reading during those precious daily scheduled minutes. Teachers can coach individual students or small groups to deepen specific skills and strategies in order to increase students’ reading competence, habits and behaviors, and purposes for reading. Check-ins with students can quickly determine whether additional scaffolds are necessary. Both coaching and conferring with students fuel continued reading while supporting additional independence and transfer. Student confidence also increases when independent reading continues to be successful.

Teacher feedback to students can fill the range from skills and strategies to habits, routines, and even volume of reading.

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How much is enough? How much is needed to encourage each student to stretch for his or her own goals? Teacher monitoring of how quickly students begin working, the number of pages read, and even the number of books read by students, the class, or both, can all be used to monitor the effectiveness of independent reading and the classroom routines in place.

Comprehensive literacy instruction makes room for students to have time to read, write, speak, listen, and view many texts of their own choice during class time while teachers confer with students about their progress and check in on instructional goals. Teachers must have flexibility to allocate time for a wide balancing act: increasing student skills and capabilities, fostering students' confident reading of required text, and the even more important goals of motivating students to explore their world and developing and sustaining a love for reading.

Independent reading is tricky. Setting aside time is just the first step for teachers. Having a plan to provide adequate books that students will choose to read requires student input to find the books that match their passions. Teacher scheduling also requires thought and attention because putting 10 minutes in the daily lesson plan book may not correspond to day-to-day classroom actions, as schoolwide announcements, assemblies, and other factors may cut the actual reading minutes. Teachers will also need to weigh the delicate balance of the school curriculum and the goal of creating passionate readers. Teachers who are committed to finding opportunities for students to read independently during each school day will adeptly juggle student and school needs in order to create the best and most equitable lifelong readers.

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MOVING FORWARD

- Purposefully build independent reading time into your classroom schedule to provide equitable access to books.
- Boost student interest in and engagement with books through book tastings, new book displays, classroom blog posts, or Flipgrid or other video discussion platforms, where teachers can make connections between books and make recommendations to similar titles.
- Foster self-selected reading by providing books that reflect topics of interest and stories that are representative of all students in your classroom.
- Encourage and allow time for student discussion on favorite books through face to face conversations or through online chat platforms or apps.

ILA RESOURCES

[The Case for Children's Rights to Read](#)

The goal of ILA's Children's Rights to Read campaign is ensuring every child has access to the education, opportunities, and resources needed to read. This companion resource identifies why the 10 fundamental rights were selected.

[Choices Reading Lists](#)

Download the Children's Choices, Teachers' Choices, and Young Adults' Choices reading lists for high-quality, popular titles selected by students and educators alike.

[Literacy Glossary](#)

Curated by a team of literacy experts, this interactive resource defines the shared language of literacy research and instruction.

[The Power and Promise of Read-Alouds and Independent Reading](#)

This literacy leadership brief identifies two instructional approaches that instill strong reading habits.

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Principal Author

Fran McVeigh, Morningside College, Sioux City, IA

Panel Chair

Diane Lapp, San Diego State University

Panel Members

Dorit Aram, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Diane Barone, University of Nevada, Reno

Eurydice B. Bauer, University of South Carolina

Nancy Frey, San Diego State University

Andy Goodwyn, University of Bedfordshire, England

Jim V. Hoffman, University of Texas at Austin

David E. Kirkland, New York University, Steinhardt

Melanie Kuhn, Purdue University College of Education

Maureen McLaughlin, East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania

Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, Virginia Tech

Donna Ogle, National Louis University

D. Ray Reutzel, University of Wyoming, Laramie

Alyson Simpson, University of Sydney, Australia

Jennifer D. Turner, University of Maryland

Amy Wilson-Lopez, Utah State University

Jo Worthy, University of Texas, Austin

Ruth Yopp-Edwards, California State University, Fullerton

Hallie Yopp Slowik, California State University, Fullerton

Bernadette Dwyer, Dublin City University, Ireland, President and Board Liaison, International Literacy Association

Douglas Fisher, San Diego State University, Immediate Past President, International Literacy Association

Kathy Headley, Clemson University, Vice President, International Literacy Association

Marcie Craig Post, Executive Director, International Literacy Association

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Media Contact: For all media inquiries, please contact press@reading.org.

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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