

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Middle School Reading Curriculum 2008-2009

Overview of the Middle School Reading Curriculum Calendar

Towards the end of every school year, the teachers, school leaders and staff developers who comprise the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, reflect on the insights gleaned from our experiences with the preceding year's curricular calendar. We recall the research and study in which we've been engaged, consider lessons learned from interim and high stakes assessments, and set forth a newly revised curricular calendar for the upcoming year. The curricular calendar that the Project puts forth is especially important because the organization offers almost two hundred full-day conferences during the upcoming year that are aligned to this document. Those conference days support K-8 classroom teachers, special education teachers, teachers of ELLs, and administrators in forming communities of practice that support high level literacy instruction. We also highly recommend three texts that will help middle school teachers understand the teaching of reading and adolescent literacy: Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Reading*, Donna Santman's *Shades of Meaning: Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School*, and Kylene Beer's *When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do*.

September	Crafting An Independent Reading Life: Teaching Adolescents to Read With Passion, Rigor, and Intent in Fiction and Nonfiction
October	Becoming Inferential Readers of Literature: A Close Study of Character
November	Deepening Reading Habits: Reading Nonfiction With Purpose and Comprehension, While Sustaining a Thoughtful Independent Reading Life
December/Early January	Maintaining a Varied and Independent Reading Life, and Getting Ready to Demonstrate Reading Skills on the Reading Tests
February	Reading with Close Comprehension: Genre-Based Clubs
March	Talking and Writing About Texts to Infer and Interpret: Same-Book Partners or Clubs to Support Deeper Reading
April	Content-Area Reading (or A Return to Genre Clubs)
May	Social Issue Clubs
June	Reading Projects: Building a Reading Life or Authoring Your Own Unit

Although we hope and expect that the teachers in schools linked to the Project will study our recommended curricular calendar with great care, we do not expect that you necessarily follow all of the recommendations in this document. We are aware that there are scores of different ways in which a yearlong reading and writing curriculum could unfold for any one grade-level and that this is just one possible plan. The organization of the Project cannot support every conceivable journey of study, and so we put forth one recommended path. We also encourage you to gather your own

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sources of information, tap into your own passions and interests, and devise a plan which incorporates and also adapts the collective wisdom in this document.

For the first time, we have developed a separate curricular calendar for readers who are in the transitional phase of their development. These will be readers who enter your grade level reading somewhere within the vicinity of level H and who, hopefully, leave reading in the vicinity of M. (For teachers who are using the *Words Their Way* spelling study, you may find that students who fall in the “Within Word Patterns” stage may be transitional readers.) The Transitional Reader curricular calendar will follow the units detailed in this calendar, but each unit will showcase instruction aimed to support these readers’ (and writers’) needs.

This calendar, like last year’s, puts a special emphasis on assessment-based instruction. In each unit, the teacher needs to determine the specific reading skills he or she has decided to highlight, and then the teacher must design instruction that moves students along a developmental trajectory within that skill.

This year’s curricular calendar also places greater emphasis on *narrative* nonfiction as well as *expository* nonfiction reading. There is an additional unit emphasizing content area reading. Also, this year we have tried to support more reading-writing connections, helping students see reading and writing as reciprocal processes.

This curriculum assumes that above all, a unit of study in reading must not get in the way of students having opportunities to read everyday for long stretches of time—at the very least for 40 minutes in school, and almost as much time at home—and to read with engagement, fluency, accuracy and meaning.

The curriculum also assumes that students profit from direct and explicit instruction in the goals (skills) of proficient reading, and in the specific step-by-step strategies that readers often use in order to achieve those goals, those skills. Units of study are designed to teach reading skills, especially including word solving, monitoring for sense, close reading, prediction, envisionment, inference, personal response, interpretation, determining importance, critical reading, and intertextuality (carrying ideas from one text to another and thinking/talking/writing across both texts).

Assessment

Determine a Reader’s “Just-Right” Book Level

We all know the joy of finding a book which is “just-right” for us. When we are well matched to a book, reading can be one of life’s greatest joys... and on the other hand, when a book is “all-wrong” instead of “just-right” for us, reading can feel interminable, humiliating, and tedious. There will never be a single litmus paper test which can accurately match a student to books, but as teachers, we can make some progress towards this goal if we provide each student with four things: 1) the opportunity to choose books that he or she wants to read, 2) a community of other readers who promote and summarize and talk about books with enthusiasm, 3) books that are easy enough for the reader that he or she will be given lots of opportunities for high-success reading and 4) encouragement to occasionally read a text which is just a little challenging, and the scaffolding to make the experience fruitful.

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Assessing reading is enormously complex. Reading is every bit as rich, multilayered and invisible as thinking itself. Anyone who aspires to separate one strand of reading from all the rest, and then to label and measure that one strand or aspect of reading, must approach this effort with proper humility. No number, no label, no indicator is adequate for the task. Still, as responsible people, teachers need to assess students' reading in ways that give us as full a view as possible. In the upcoming year, New York City teachers have all been asked to track each student's progress in reading and send the results of those assessments home at regular intervals throughout the year.

Some NYC schools may opt to use an assessment tool patterned after the state test. This assessment instrument contains passages of widely varying difficulty levels, followed by multiple choice questions which aim to ascertain whether the student can infer, synthesize, predict, etc. The TCRWP's position is that this assessment alone is not sufficient unless a teacher knows the text-difficulty of the passage in question; a wrong answer in a multiple choice question may not say anything about a student's ability to infer, for example, or to determine importance. The teacher will not know whether the error reflects a problem with inference or whether it suggests that the student couldn't read the passage in the first place.

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, in concert with many NYC schools, has developed a way to track readers progress and it has been accepted by NYC's Department of Education as an option for all schools. This tool is available on the TCRWP website (<http://rwproject.tc.columbia.edu>). One tool assesses a student's fiction reading. This tool contains two passages at each text-level (A-Z), ranging in length from 20-400 plus words, followed by literal and inferential comprehension questions for each passage. Level A-K readers read books from one or two small sets of leveled texts (TCRWP uses one collection published by Be-Bop and one published by Scholastic.) Students read the text at one level aloud to teachers, who record reading behaviors and miscues. Teachers record miscues for 100 words; if the student reads with 95-100% accuracy, then the student reads the remainder of the passage silently and then answers questions (hopefully answering at least three of the four questions correctly). Through this assessment, a teacher can ascertain the general level of text-difficulty that a student is able to read with ease and comprehension.

If a school chooses to use the TCRWP reading level assessment, you'll conduct an independent reading inventory of a student's work with leveled texts in order to learn the text level that the student can read with 96% accuracy and strong comprehension. When you have determined your students' reading levels, you may want to compare them to the chart on the next page*:

	In November, students on grade level read at level:	In June, students on grade level read at level:
Kindergarten		B/C
Grade 1	E/F	I/J
Grade 2	J/K	L/M
Grade 3	M/N	O/P
Grade 4	P/Q	R/S
Grade 5	S	T/U
Grade 6	U/V	V/W
Grade 7	V/W	X/Y
Grade 8	Y	Z...

*Any school may develop standards which are different from these.

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You'll also want to track each student's reading rate, and note the way this changes across time. Here's a table that shows *targeted* reading rates (words per minute), by grade level:

General Range of Adequate Reading Rates by Grade Level

Grade	WPM	Grade	WPM
1	60-90	6	195-220
2	85-120	7	215-245
3	115-140	8	235-270
4	140-170	9	250-270
5	170-195	12	250-300

Harris and Sipay (1990)

The truth is, using a short passage in order to ascertain whether a student can read a “T” or “V” level text, is not perfect, and it is also true that students can generally handle a band of texts (say texts at level S/T). However, we find teachers generally prefer to distinguish between reading at each level, because this makes it more likely that students find themselves making tangible progress within shorter lengths of time. Teachers reassess periodically (formally as well as informally) and track each student's progress across the year. It is crucial that teachers across the school keep records of each student's progress along gradients of difficulty in books, and those teachers pass the records to the next teacher.

Consider Also the Results of a Spelling Inventory – Synthesizing Data Across Assessment Measures

Another window into the student's reading is the spelling inventory designed by Donald Bear, et. al. This spelling inventory is not about getting the word right, it indicates the *spelling features* that students control; such as beginning and ending consonants, long and short vowels, the variety of suffixes, etc. The spelling inventory reveals a student's developmental level on graphophonics and also suggests the level of text at which a student will be successful. You can use this information as a source to draw upon when determining students' reading levels. More importantly, this information will suggest the word study work that will most benefit this reader. It is the act of reading across this information which is most important.

Maintaining Reading Logs

We recommend that schools establish and implement policies so that each student in the school (grades 2-8) maintains a daily record of the books he or she reads in school and at home. This log must contain the title, author, the level of difficulty (for example, Level P,) the numbers of minutes the student spent reading, and the starting and ending page number. Some people question whether it is necessary to include the level of difficulty (when it is available). Our response is that this provides the teacher with vitally important information—information which exponentially increases the usefulness of the tool. For example, if a student devotes a week to reading *Joe Sherlock*, *The Neighborhood Stink*, a teacher may conclude little from this. But if we know that book is level M (the level of *Magic Treehouse* books), then we know that the student has done an alarmingly small amount of reading during that week. On the other hand, if the book is *The Golden Compass*, or any level Z text, then we would think that the student was reading enough.

These logs are not places for responses to reading, nor do students write book summaries in them. They are simply records of time spent reading and volume of reading accomplished. You may ask, “How can a teacher be sure that the log accurately reflects the reading that the student has done?”

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We've found that if both logs and books are out on the table everyday, this transparency brings a huge amount of accountability to students keeping accurate records inside book logs.

We suggest that every day during reading time, every student always have his or her log out on the table. The first thing the student does at the start of reading is to enter the starting time and page number, the last thing the student does before moving from reading to talking is to enter the ending time and page number. We also encourage teachers to refer to logs often in reading conferences: "I see you have been reading this book especially slowly. Look, you galloped through that last book—why is this one progressing so differently for you?" "You seem to be skipping between books a bunch lately—why do you think it has been hard for you to stay engrossed in one book?" "I notice this book is easier than the ones you have been reading—do you find your reading process is different now, when you are reading a lighter text?"

After a few weeks, we suggest you encourage students to study their reading logs in order to articulate their reading habits. Students can work analytically with their partners to notice and think about changes in the average number of pages read. Students can also notice the genre choices made across time and the relationship between genres or levels and volume. They can also discuss patterns seen by studying the time they spend reading at home versus at school. The logs provide an irreplaceable window into students' reading lives. It's also helpful to gather logs across a grade after a month, or across grades, to compare how much students are reading, and how they are moving through books.

School leaders, as well as teachers, should collect, save and study these critical records. For example:

- A general rule of thumb is that a student should usually be able to read approximately ~ page a minute. (This rule of thumb works across texts of varying levels because generally, as the pages become denser, the reader's abilities also becomes stronger.) A teacher and/or a principal will want to take notice if a student seems to be reading a book at dramatically slower paces than ~ page a minute. For example, alarms should go off if a student reads 8 pages in 30 minutes. Why is the student not reading closer to 24 pages in that length of time? There may, of course, be good reasons, but this should raise a flag that something in the student's reading is not "just right".
- If a student reads an amount—say, 34 pages during a half hour in school, then brings that same book home and claims to read a much smaller amount—say, 8 pages within half an hour of reading time at home, alarms should go off. Is the student actually making enough time for reading at home?
- If you suggest the students reads books which are Level T, and she instead reads many books which are far easier, this discrepancy also needs to promote further research. Perhaps the easier books are nonfiction texts, and the student has wisely found that when reading nonfiction texts, she needs to search for books she can read with meaning. Perhaps the student recently completed a very taxing book and wants some easier reads. Then too, perhaps the student simply can't find other books that are a bit more challenging, and needs your help.

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- When teachers convey information to parents, it is crucial to let parents know if the volume of reading their child is doing is high, fairly high, quite low, or very low. The wonderful thing about this information is that parents can do something about it... and progress on this one front will have enormous pay off for every aspect of the student's reading development.

Above all, student logs are a way to be sure that everyone, teachers, principals, and students, keep their eyes on the volume of reading that students are doing. Dick Allington's research suggests that it takes a student reading 200 wpm, eight hours to read *Hatchet*. The chart below shows how long it should take students to complete different leveled books. Assuming that your students read for thirty minutes in class and thirty minutes at home, and they read at a rate of 200 wpm, then you should expect a student to finish reading *Hatchet* in eight days, which seems reasonable. You may find that a particular student takes twice as long to read *Hatchet*. This should prompt some teacher research. Why is this student reading especially slowly? (If the student is reading below 120 accurate wpm, then alarm bells should go off. This student should be reading easier texts!! Or perhaps the student is sitting in front of a text, rather than reading it.)

**How Long Should It Take a Student to Read a Book
According to Their Reading Level?**

Title	Level	approx# of words	Reading rate	# of minutes per book
<i>Henry and Mudge</i> (Rylant)	J	800-1000	100 WPM	10 minutes
<i>Horrible Harry</i> (Kline)	L	4500	100 WPM	45 minutes
			200 WPM	25 minutes
<i>Magic Tree House Series</i> (Osborne)	M	6000	100 WPM	60 minutes
			200 WPM	30 minutes
<i>Henry Series</i> (Cleary)	O	25000	100 WPM	4 hours
			200 WPM	2 hours
<i>Howliday Inn</i> (Howe)	P	30000	100 WPM	5 hours
			200 WPM	2 1/2 hours
<i>Stone Fox</i> (Gardiner)**	P	12000	100 WPM	2 hours
			200 WPM	1 hours
<i>Hatchet</i> (Paulsen)**	R	50000	100 WPM	8 hours
			200 WPM	4 hours
<i>Missing May</i> (Rylant)**	W	24500	100 WPM	4 hours
			200 WPM	2 hours

* *Allington (2000)

Getting Time to Assess at the Start of the Year

Years ago, the Project suggested that a teacher start the year by putting crates of mixed-level texts at the center of each table in the classroom, then asking kids to graze through those crates, reading whatever appealed to them while the teacher circled quickly about the room, assessing. Once a student was assessed, the teacher would give that reader a magazine-box for his or her books. This student would no longer read from the mixed-level bin but would, instead, choose a few just-right, leveled books, storing the short-stack of these books in his or her private bin. Visitors to the room in mid-September could see at a glance the percentage of kids who had been launched into just-

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right reading because these students had magazine boxes containing the students' books. The aim was to get everyone to this point within two weeks from the start of school.

Once an entire school has been working to match readers to books for a year or two, however, there will no longer be a need for a teacher to begin the year with students in the holding pattern of reading through random collections of books from a crate at the center of the table. Instead, each teacher's class roster will convey the level of just-right books that each student was reading at the end of the previous school year. Ideally, students will also keep logs of the books they read during the summer, so teachers can estimate whether the student's reading progressed or took a dive during those crucial months. If a student did not read over the summer, that student will lose several levels during the summer and so a teacher who ascertains from the summer log that a particular student only read a few books will then move this student back two levels from where the student ended the previous school year. If a student did a lot of just-right reading during the summer, he or she can resume reading at levels he or she was reading in June. In this way, teachers can rely on reading records to start the year off with each student reading from a short stack of appropriate books.

Middle Schools that begin with grade 6 (K-8 schools will be able to pass on reading levels from grade 5 to 6) will need to start assessing reading levels in September. This is a large undertaking and needs thought put into the planning. You need to assess so that you know if you have books in the classroom that your kids can read. Yet, if 6th grade teachers spend all of their class time assessing reading levels, it is problematic. September is a crucial time for instituting routines, procedures, and most of all, getting to know the reading habits and interests of your students! Many middle schools take on the task of assessing the incoming 6th grade as a whole school project. Support teachers and push-in teachers are trained on giving the reading level assessment and they spend the first few days of school pushing into the 6th grade to help assess the readers. Literacy coaches and special education coaches may spend several periods in 6th grade rooms helping with assessments. In a few schools, teachers in the 7th and 8th grades have been gracious enough to volunteer to go into the 6th grade rooms to help with assessment. These are, of course, just a few ideas. Be creative as a school community and create your own supports for the 6th grade team. What is important here is that the 6th grade team isn't putting all of their attention to assessing and neglecting the critical work of launching the reading workshop.

Of course, the fact that 7th and 8th grade teachers start students reading books you've been told will be just-right for them does not mean you won't re-assess their reading; you will. But this assessment can be woven into your reading workshop once it is going full-swing, a week or two from the start of the year.

Your first priority will be to assess any reader who seems to not be actually reading. Watch for signs of disengagement: the head that revolves, the student who is always losing his or her place in a book, the adolescent who uses reading time as a chance to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom.

We suggest you call three students over to you at a time, each carrying his or her book. Get one started on the TCRWP formative assessment. While you listen to his or her reading, the other two can be reading independently. The assessed student needn't finish the passage before you ascertain whether it is too hard; and if it is, move to another passage right away. Once one student has read aloud 100 words and you have recorded the student's miscues, he or she can read the rest of the

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passage silently while you get the second student—who will already be right beside you—started reading aloud to you.

The Components of Balanced Literacy

The term “balanced” literacy comes, in part, from the recognition that readers need a variety of different opportunities to learn. The reading workshop provides students time to read with a mentor who is a passionately engaged reader and wears his or her love of reading on their sleeve, one who offers opportunities to talk and sometimes write about reading, a mentor who offers explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient reading. All of this is incredibly important, but alone, it is not sufficient. Students also need the opportunities to learn that can be provided by the other components of balanced literacy.

They need, above all, to write. We assume that the reading workshop, as described in these pages, is balanced by a daily writing workshop, and we assume Teachers College Reading and Writing Project teachers will refer to the writing curricular calendar for help with writing.

Then, too, students also need opportunities to hear wonderful literature read aloud and frequent opportunities to participate in book talks around the read-aloud text. We hope teachers read aloud, and lead interactive read aloud sessions several times a week.

They need opportunities to read texts within content area disciplines, and to receive instruction in reading those texts well.

And students who struggle with fluency (that is, students who read slowly and robotically) need opportunities to participate in shared reading and in repeated oral readings.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is crucial even in instances where the teacher does nothing more than read spectacular literature aloud in such a way that students listen with rapt attention, clamoring for more. The pay off for reading aloud becomes even greater when teachers read aloud from a wide range of genres, which generally happens when teachers comb reading aloud into all parts of the days, regarding reading aloud as a terrific resource during science, social studies, math, etc. This can be done by creating a school-wide read aloud schedule.

If you are fortunate enough to have a schedule that allows for a one hour reading workshop, then it is possible to work in a read aloud, a mini-lesson and independent reading each day into reading workshop. If you have only 45 or 42 minutes for reading workshop, you probably can't work all pieces in each day. You might consider creating a schedule like this for your reading workshop:

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Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Read aloud (about 20 min)	Mini-Lesson (about 10 min)	Read aloud (about 20 min)	Mini-Lesson (about 10 min)	Independent Reading (about 45 min)
Independent Reading (about 25 min)	Independent Reading (about 30 min)	Independent Reading (about 25 min)	Independent Reading (about 30 min)	
	Share &/or Partner Talk (about 5 min)		Share &/or Partner Talk (about 5 min)	

If you are working within the 42 or 45 min periods, we encourage you to rally your colleagues in joining you in a study of the benefits of read aloud. Current research supports the tremendous benefits of daily read alouds and their relationship to promoting growth in independent reading. Perhaps you might get the science and social studies teachers to read aloud for 20 minutes just one time a week from a piece that connects to their units of study. It might be that ELA teachers read aloud to students on Mondays and Wednesdays, science teachers read aloud once a week on Tuesdays, and social studies teachers read aloud once a week on Thursdays. With just a bit of planning, you could insure that your students are engaging with both narrative and non-narrative texts each week across many topics and subjects. The content area teachers may be amazed at how the read aloud supports their units of study and increases student interest and knowledge.

The best way to tap into the potential power of reading aloud, however, is to use the read aloud and book talk time as ways to explicitly teach the skills of higher level comprehension. To do this, a teacher first reads the upcoming section of the read aloud book to himself or herself, noticing the mind-work that he or she does while reading. Then the teacher decides whether to use the upcoming read aloud as a means to help students draw upon their full repertoire of reading strategies or to angle the read aloud in such a way as to support the development of a particular comprehension skill. Based on this decision, the teacher decides to demonstrate and then scaffold students in using either one or many skills and strategies.

If the teacher decides, for example, to highlight envisionment, the teacher will insert post-its in a couple places during the first pages of the read aloud, reminding the teacher to pause as he or she reads, to lower the book, and to muse orally. Perhaps the teacher will say--“I’m just picturing this. I can see Artie in the lead, walking down the path in the woods. It’s a narrow path, so Cleo is a few steps behind—there’s just room for one of them. The sun is filtering through the canopy of leaves overhead.” Of course, the teacher’s envisionment could spin on and on and on—it is important to stay brief! After demonstrating in such a manner for 30 seconds, the teacher will be apt to tuck in a comment which names what she has done (“Readers, I don’t really know that the path is narrow—the book hasn’t said that. But I draw on all the forest trails I’ve ever seen, adding details from my own experiences. When I read on, though, sometimes I need to revise my picture. Let’s see.”) Once the teacher has demonstrated whatever the skill may be (in this case, envisioning) a few times, across perhaps three or four pages of the read-aloud, then the teacher is apt to pause in the midst of reading and to scaffold the students in envisioning. (“I can just see the river, can’t you? I’m picturing it—the colors... I’m hearing stuff too, aren’t you?.. Use all the rivers you’ve ever stood beside to help you imagine the river,”). Sometimes these pauses are followed with, “Tell the

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person beside you what you are seeing, hearing...” and sometimes they lead to the prompt, “Stop and jot what you see, what you hear.” Either injunction can, a moment or two later, be followed with specific tips: “Make sure you are talking/writing in details. Are you using specific words to make your mental movie real?”

Of course, the sequence described above could be altered to show students how to develop theories about characters, how to think across texts, predict, or how to do a host of other reading skills.

If you choose carefully, the read-aloud text can support the independent reading work your students are doing. For example, if the class is engaged in the unit of study on character (and students are thinking about characters as they read independently), you’d be wise to read aloud a chapter book with strong characters who change over the course of the text. This means that the read-aloud book will offer opportunities for deep talk about characters. If, on the other hand, the class is working on nonfiction, and some of the students’ independent reading involves nonfiction texts, you will want to read aloud nonfiction texts that allow you to show students how nonfiction readers talk and think about (and between) texts.

Whatever skill you aim to teach, it’s essential that you read in ways that not only demonstrate skills, but that above all bring stories to life. Read with expression, fluency, intonation, and good pacing so that students feel like they are a part of the story and understand that this is what good reading sounds and feels like.

Supporting Students’ Vocabulary

Teachers are wise to recognize that we need to model not only a love of books and of writing, but also a fascination with words themselves. If you wear your love of language on your sleeve, exuding interest in words and taking great pleasure in them, you’ll help your students be more attentive to vocabulary.

Research is clear: The single most important thing you can do to enhance your students’ knowledge of words is to lure your students into lots and lots and lots of reading; if students read a diverse range of books they’ll encounter a wider range of words. The vocabulary in historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy and non-fiction will often be richer than vocabulary in realistic fiction and mysteries.

You’ll want to teach students that when they come to unfamiliar words in a text, it really helps to pronounce the word as best the reader can, trying it out one way and then another to see if any pronunciation sounds familiar. Then ideally, the reader reads on past that word for just a bit before pausing to reread the section, thinking, “What might this word mean?” The good reader substitutes a reasonable synonym—thus, the ominous clouds become the rainy clouds—and reads on. Some teachers tape an index card to each student’s desk and the student collects a few such words throughout the day, with page numbers for references. The students and teacher should try and use these same words in conversations with each other and the class.

There will also be times for a teacher to lead the whole class into word inquiries, and that work will certainly involve the class exploring prefixes and suffixes, and using these to alter the meaning of a base word. The key word is *explore*. Word study will be vastly more helpful if it is engaging to youngsters.

Unit 1 – Crafting An Independent Reading Life: Teaching Adolescents to Read With Passion, Rigor, and Intent in Fiction and Nonfiction

Sept.

Years ago, Peters and Waterman studied successful American companies and wrote a book that became a classic on leadership. In the preface to *In Search of Excellence*, they wrote advice which is as important to teachers as it is to school leaders: “Let us suppose we were asked for one all-purpose bit of advice—one truth that we were able to distill from all the excellent companies research. We might be tempted to say, ‘Figure out your value system. Decide what your company stands for... Clarifying the value system and breathing life into it are the greatest contributions a leader can make.’” Peters and Waterman go on to say, “The real difference between success and failure of an institution can be traced to the question of how well that organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people. What does it do to help people find common cause with each other?”

Rally Your Students Around This Year’s New Goals

You are the leader of your class, and leadership advice from Peters and Waterman pertains to you. Before your year begins, you need to decide how *you* will tap your students’ talents and energies, rallying them to a common cause. Each year, every teacher launches a reading workshop and a writing workshop. You will want *this* year, *this* reading workshop and *this* writing workshop, to be full of new hope and promise. How will you do this?

This will be one of the things you think about across the summer as you plan for the year ahead. For now, we have a proposal we’d like to put forward. In the year ahead, the Project plans to put a new spotlight on each student composing his or her very own independent reading life, a life that is contoured according to that particular reader. We also hope to begin the year with renewed emphasis on students turning around on their own traces to study themselves as readers. If a student lists five beloved books he or she has read (or heard read aloud), then the student can look back on that list and think, “So what does this list of favorite books reveal about me as a reader? What do I feel passionate about as a reader?” If a student reads and collects post-its or jottings in a reader’s notebook, then that student can look back on what he or she has written, thinking, “So what sort of thinking do I tend to do as I read? How am I unique, among all these other readers?” Students are accustomed to doing author studies; we hope that at the start of the year, you might consider asking students to engage in *reader* studies.

The purpose of this would be to bring out the uniqueness of each reader, with the idea that you will then build upon each reader’s strengths, inclinations and passions. If a student tends to do lots of predicting when he or she makes post-its or jots in a reading notebook, perhaps that student wants to do really strong work on predictions. Which are her very best predictions? What makes a great prediction anyway? This particular student could push herself in that sort of thinking about reading, and could become the class expert on prediction, showing other students why some predictions are more powerful than others. Similarly, the student who loves mysteries can help decide on new mysteries to buy for the class, and can do book-promotion talks about mysteries.

In part, this emphasis on reflecting on one’s own skills, strategies and passions and developing one’s own individual identity as a reader is meant to muffle the effect of the reading assessment work which puts focus on a student’s reading level. But this is also meant to help students develop a sense of personal agency in reading.

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It is a small step to go from bringing out individualism within a reading class to helping support an interdependent, interpersonal community in which students with particular knowledge and skills teach others. The teacher's role, then, can partly become developing local experts, but it soon also includes orchestrating classroom life so those local experts' talents become distributed. This might sound like: "Let's all see if we can study what Brian does when he predicts, and see if we can learn from what he does."

If you decide to emphasize the fact that each of us is unique as a reader, and to stress the importance of looking back on what we do and think when we read so that we come to understand ourselves, you may want to bring out reading tools which accompany this emphasis. The most obvious would be a reading portfolio—a place where readers' *stuff* accumulates. In this portfolio, readers would certainly keep their reading logs—their records of titles, levels, pages, minutes. You'd also want to keep occasional stop-and-jots in this portfolio. For example, at the start of a string of minilessons on determining importance, you might want to ask readers to stop-and-jot at three intervals during the read aloud, recording what they regard as especially important. And that day, you may ask each student to collect three "determining importance" post-its. You would definitely want to collect the work each student did that day (with the student's name on the work) and to sort it out. Who is particularly strong at this—and what do those students do, exactly? Who seems to struggle with this—and what do those students tend to do when asked to determine importance? You'll no doubt want students to look between their work and the work of their classmates, asking similar questions. Perhaps you'll want to repeat the read aloud, asking students to try again to determine what's important, but this time doing a stop-and-jot under the influence of their comparative study. In any case, this sort of work needs to accumulate in a student's reading portfolio and to be juxtaposed by similar work done several weeks later.

As you lead students to talk about their reading histories and hopes, you will have lots of occasions to talk up goals you know will be important in the year ahead. Perhaps the students will sketch a picture of one time or one book which really mattered to them, and then you will ask them to write or talk about this: "What was it about that one reading time that made reading work for you?" and "How can we be sure that reading is just as magical in the year ahead?" You'll want to channel these discussions so that you end up highlighting whatever it is you plan to emphasize during this first month of your year.

For example, if you plan to emphasize that readers lose themselves in books, you can set up this work by asking students to talk about times when they've read ravenously or asking them about characters who became so real they felt like friends. During the first few days of September, rally the class around the goals you plan to adopt for the next few months.

The Logistics of the Workshop: Establishing Routines and Expectations

Reading is a skill that requires practice. Just as a student learns to swim by swimming, and to play the piano by playing the piano, students need to read in order to get better as readers. In every classroom, teachers will probably want to spend a bit of time at the start of the year stressing the importance of stamina and encouraging students to read for longer stretches of time, both in school and at home. Just as runners have goals to reach, readers also have goals. Students may learn that when they begin to lose stamina in their books, they can reread or rest their eyes for a moment before continuing. Readers can take brief breaks and then continue reading. They can set goals for themselves, as runners do. If students worked last year to develop stamina, you may make student

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testimonials central to your teaching; you may stress not only stamina, but also finding stolen moments throughout the day, and carrying books with you always so as to steal those moments.

During the first few days of school, you will want to establish routines and expectations. You'll want to remind (or teach) students to gather quickly and efficiently for whole-class instruction, teaching this bit of management in a way that upholds the joy of reading. "We won't want to waste one precious moment of reading time, so this year, let's get really good at gathering efficiently for the minilesson." Similarly, if you want to emphasize the importance of students listening (and not constantly interrupting) during the minilesson, you could say, "This year, I want to be sure you have lots and lots of time to read the incredible books we have in this room, so let's try to keep our minilessons efficient. How about if you save your questions until the minilesson is over?"

This is a good time, too, for you to consider whether your minilessons are usurping too much of students' reading time. In general, most teachers use the strategy of demonstration and more specifically, of thinking aloud, in reading minilessons. If you do this, try to make the reading and thinking feel like *reading*, which usually means holding the book in your lap, reading aloud from the book not from the overhead projector. Certainly you will want your thinking-aloud to be very brief—no more than three sentences usually—and you'll typically want to do no more than two demonstrations in any one minilesson.

You will also want to clarify the tools that you hope students bring each day to the meeting area. These tools will probably include the books students are reading, post-its and/or a reading notebook (this may be the final section of your students' writers' notebooks) and a pencil or pen. You may be working with a touchstone text and want students to bring copies of it to the meeting area during minilessons each day.

Teach students to expect that although the minilesson will be an occasion for them to learn a new reading skill or strategy, during any one day's reading time, they will hopefully draw on *all* the skills and strategies they have been taught up to and including that day.

Writing about Reading

Clarify also that each day readers will be doing some on-the-run writing, either on post-its, charts, or in a reading notebook. This writing will then be brought to the partner conversations. This writing work (brief though it must be) and the partner conversations (which will again be brief) are absolutely essential elements of a reading workshop.

Post-its help us assess what readers are doing. They help us move easily into conferences. They help readers prepare for partnership talk. They force students to think as they read, to have their minds turned on, to pause and reflect in a concrete fashion. Later, probably in October, you can introduce reading notebooks. At this busy start of the year, when some students need every moment to read, post-its are an effective tool.

On the first day, have students notice how many pages they read during workshop. To illustrate this, have them put a post-it on how far they expect to read that night in half an hour. If a student read ten pages, for instance, in twenty minutes, he or she would put a post-it at the chapter closest to fifteen pages ahead. Then teach them to bring home a blank post-it to put on the part of the text they'd most like to talk about with their partner the next day—any part that made them feel, think

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or wonder something. Show them how they can write a sentence on it like, “I notice...” or “I wonder here...” or “I think that...”

Reading Partners

You can and will want to establish long-term partners as soon as you have matched readers to books, ideally by the end of day one in the reading workshop! Usually classrooms do not have enough duplicate books for partners to read in sync all the time; but even a little of this is tremendously helpful. If partners can't read the same books, they can, and should, *swap* books. These structures need to be in place by the end of the first week. You definitely don't have time to institute these structures gradually! It is often helpful for students to sit beside their partners during the reading workshop so the transition from reading to talking doesn't usurp valuable reading time (although sometimes this leads students to talk/read/talk/read throughout the reading workshop, which is not what you have in mind).

Partners can support each other in a variety of ways. During reading, they can use post-its to mark confusing words, then, during partner time, they can return to these places to word-solve together. They can use post-its to mark places where they have strong reactions to the text, then one partner can read one of those sections aloud with strong feelings (good for fluency) and then they can talk about what happened in that section and why they reacted so strongly. Partners can listen to each other retell, asking questions to clarify and dig deeper into the story. You might want to teach your students the kinds of questions that could help them do this work. For example, it's helpful to ask questions about the main characters: “What kind of person is Percy Jackson?” It's helpful to ask questions about the reasons why events happened: “Why did he agree to search for Zeus' stolen thunder bolt?” It's helpful to ask questions that encourage prediction: “What do you think will happen next? Why do you think that?” These kinds of questions encourage a reader to not only explain what's happening in the story, but also to think more deeply about *why* those events are happening. In addition, these questions are ones students need to ask themselves as they read.

In nonfiction, it's useful to ask questions that clarify the main idea, like “What is this book *Oceans* saying about oceans?” and questions that push to find examples or other supporting information, like “What does this chapter about coral reefs tell us about the changing ecosystems of the ocean?” These kinds of questions encourage a reader to explain to his or her partner what's most important about the text, and to think more deeply about these parts, revisiting the book for answers. Eventually these questions will become the ones students ask themselves as they read.

Supporting Your ELLs

Your ELLs who need support should probably spend fifteen minutes reading in their native language (if they can do so) before reading easier books in English. If you have matched-language partners for your ELLs in early stages of language acquisition, put one of these students in a triad comprised of two native speakers. The ELL student will profit from strong English language models.

Matching Readers to Just-Right Books

Establish routines right from the start. The rhythm of reading, jotting a bit, then talking, need not wait past day two. On day two, students will gather for the minilessons, then disperse to read, post-it, and to eventually talk off their post-its with another person. But reading won't amount to much until students are choosing just-right books. Unless students are reading books they can read with

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95% accuracy, fluency and strong comprehension, it is superfluous to worry about minilessons that teach strategies for identifying with characters or developing theories!

As mentioned earlier, ideally you will place students 1-3 levels easier than the levels at which they were reading at the end of the previous year and bypass the phase in which students read from shared bins at the center of a table. If none of your students have yet been assessed and matched to books, and if you do not have records from the previous year to draw upon, you may need to put a bin of random, easy, high interest books at the center of each table. You can move among students, assessing them as they read.

Once you've determined books that are just-right for a particular reader, give that student a personal expandable file or bag in which he or she can keep a few just-right books. It helps to get the student started enjoying these books if you rave about a few you believe will be perfect for that reader.

The books a student keeps in his or her folder/knapsack will all be equivalent in level, save for two instances. First, an English language learner who is literate in his or her first language will read difficult books in the native language and easier books in English. Second, when a student is transitioning to a new book level, that student's book-bin will contain books at both the comfort level and the new instructional level. Ideally, the latter will be books the teacher has introduced to the student; this works especially well if these are two or three books in a series, and the teacher introduces, and even reads aloud a bit, from the first of those books. This is an important time to be sure that the student's partner (if he or she is also moving up a level) is reading the same slightly more challenging book, so the two partners can support each other.

Reading Logs

You will also want to teach students procedures for keeping track of the volume of reading they do. Earlier we described the cumulative reading log, which we believe is absolutely essential. You will need to make sure these logs become integral to the reading workshop. Every day during reading time, each student needs to get his or her log out along with his book. Many September conferences will reference these logs. You might say, "I notice you've been reading faster. Has it been hard to hold on to the story as you read faster?" If a student's pace has slowed, you might ask, "What's slowing you down? I notice you read less today. What got in the way?" The log will also influence your observations. If you see from a glance at a student's log that the student is making slow progress through book, observe the student as she reads silently, checking if there are any noticeable reading behaviors that might be slowing the student down. Does the student move her lips while reading, move her head from side to side, point at words as she reads, use a bookmark to hold her place as she reads, or read aloud to herself? If the student does any of these things, you will want to intervene. Tell the student that he or she has graduated and no longer needs to do those behaviors.

It's helpful to know how many pages a student can actually get through in half an hour of reading time. If, for example, we know that a student can read 20 pages of a 120-page *Joe Sherlock* book in half an hour of reading time, then we'd expect that student to read that much at home each night. At this rate, the student should finish this book after three days and nights of reading. If our knowledge of the expected reading rate of a student who is reading this level of text suggests that this student is reading too slowly, we'd want to egg her on, setting goals for reading faster and working with her to make those goals into realities.

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There are few things that matter more in teaching reading than that students progress through books. To encourage slow readers, a teacher might walk around at the beginning of the reading workshop, putting down starting page numbers, then walk back around in the middle of the workshop and jot down how many pages students have read, leaning in and encouraging students to push themselves by saying something like, “Push your eyes across the page faster,” or “I love the way you read seven pages. See if you can read eight more.”

Usually teachers design systems for a take-home reading. If nothing else, each student has a take-home book baggie. The important thing is that the student needs to read the *same* book in home and at school, carrying the book between places. Often teachers suggest that in a partnership discussion, students give themselves assignments in school, as in: “Let’s read to page 75.”

Once you have assessed your readers and matched them all to books, you’ll no doubt know that some students are going to need extra help. If you have students in the transitional stages of reading (reading level H-M), be sure you begin now to devote more time to these students. It will be especially important to be sure they are reading with fluency (smoothly, not haltingly) with comprehension as well as with 95% accuracy. Get them reading words and loads of just right books-and then help them progress along the gradient of difficulty- as soon as possible. For additional support with the work needed by transitional readers, you might want to consult *The Continuum of Literacy Learning, Grades K-2*, by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. This book explains the features of texts at levels A-N and offers support for guided reading sessions at each of these levels. You’ll also want to look at Kylee Beer’s *When Kids Can’t Read*, and Lucy Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Reading*. While it’s for younger readers, Kathy Collin’s *Growing Readers* really teaches how to support these transitional readers.

Essential Reading Skills: Reading with Stamina and Engagement, Decoding, Monitoring for Sense, Envisionment, Determining Importance, Synthesis, and Prediction

The sub-title above suggests that this one unit teaches the whole shebang, and that’s pretty much the truth. Readers need to draw on everything they know and can do in order to read with engagement. Then, as the year progresses, there can be an instructional spotlight on one skill or another. But at the start of the year, we need to be sure that readers are engaged in all the most essential reading skills.

In middle school, we are recommending that students read both fiction and non-fiction texts during this unit. We are taking a quick tour of the entire spectrum of reading skills and students will hop on board quickly if they are eager to engage with their texts. Some of our students will gravitate naturally toward urban fiction, fantasy and adventure stories, while others will be eager to delve into books about extreme sports, biographies, sharks and the music industry. Our lessons will show students how to use their reading strategies in both fiction and non-fiction texts.

You will probably find that our students need to build a relationship to reading, to experience the essence of reading fiction and nonfiction. This means they need to envision enough to make movies in their minds as they read, to predict and empathize, sitting on the edge of their seats as they anticipate the story or information they are about to learn, as they hold tight to the importance of story-line and informational texts, determining importance and synthesizing as they go.

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Meanwhile, these students will also need to read with accuracy, using decoding and other skills to word-solve and to monitor for comprehension, so when the meaning of a text breaks down, they say, “Huh?” and engage in problem-solving strategies to regain a hold on the text—or to locate a more appropriate text.

These are tall orders—especially considering that we are just getting to know the students! The important thing is that teachers can use reading aloud, book talks, partnerships, writing about reading, independent reading, conferring and small groups to support these larger agendas.

Empathy and Prediction

The first step toward helping students build their relationship to reading is to make sure that every student is reading with engagement. It is invaluable to steer students towards high-interest books and to talk up those books. When books are exciting, kids pick them up, start reading, and stay with them. Of course, part of this task also includes teaching kids when to put books down. If a student finds that reading a particular book feels like a chore, then he needs to recognize that something is wrong.

Engagement needs to translate into identifiable reading skills. No reader can read imaginative fiction with engagement without envisioning the drama and without predicting what will happen next. It is essential in reading imaginative literature, as fiction is called, that the story ignite a vital sort of imagination, one which allows readers to piece together and live inside the world of the story. In nonfiction reading, we must picture clearly any descriptions and situations that the text offers, and use our imaginations to make statistics and facts jump off the page and feel real.

The easiest way to guide students into this “lost in a book” feeling of being caught up in the story is to read aloud an absorbing short story or very short chapter book, helping students imagine the world of the story and identify with the main character. (This “lost in the story” sense can then be transferred to independent reading.) It is crucial to demonstrate and support lost-in-the-book work at the start of the year. In order to encourage empathy with characters, look up from the read-aloud and say things like, “She must be so sad,” or “I was thinking about her all night... I’m so worried about her.” You can help students care about characters by modeling how to talk and think about the characters as if they are real people. Encourage students to turn-and-talk in ways that promote identification with the character. For example, you might say, “How do you think he’s feeling right now? Turn and talk.” Or, “I’m worried about her. Aren’t you? Turn and tell your partner about your worries.”

Teach students that readers fill in the gaps in a story by drawing on all they see in the text and all they’ve experienced in their lives. If you decide to angle your read-aloud work so as to encourage readers to put themselves in characters’ shoes, and you may decide to suggest kids speak in the voices of characters. “Partner A, pretend you are Opal. Tell your father why you need this dog. Talk to Partner B as if that’s your dad.” Then, after a few minutes, you could say, “Partner B, you are the dad. You are looking at that stray dog. What are you thinking? Say your thoughts aloud....”

In a non-fiction text you might ask the students to take on the role of the subject of the story. “Partner A, you could pretend you are the dolphin. Tell the fisherman how the nets are affecting you. Talk to Partner B as if she is one of the tuna fishermen who has cast a net into your ocean.” Then, after a few minutes, you could say, “Partner B, you are the fisherman. You have a family to

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take care of and more and more fishermen competing with you. What are you thinking? Say your thoughts aloud...”

You could also have partners predict together what may happen next, based on what they know about their characters so far. Of course, this needn't involve one partner being one character and one the other. You might say, “Your right finger puppet is Opal. Opal, tell your father (he's your left finger-puppet) why you need to adopt this dog! And fathers (you could hold up your left hand to indicate that finger-puppet), get ready to talk back to your daughter.”

This work could lead to little bits of fast-writing: “Pretend you are Opal. You are standing outside that trailer, getting ready to talk to your father. Winn Dixie is right beside you. What are you thinking right now? Stop and jot.”

Another way for partners to role-play is to say the unsaid things they infer a character is probably thinking. If you are reading a part of a book where there is no dialogue, you can help students to imagine the talk that was probably going on. For example, if students are reading the passage in *Number the Stars* (by Lois Lowry) in which Annemarie's family, who is hiding Ellen from the Nazis in their apartment, is awakened by a pounding on the door in the middle of the night, students could pretend to be Annemarie and Ellen and add dialogue to the scene. Pause after you read this:

It was hours later, but still dark, when she was awakened abruptly by the pounding on the apartment door.

Ask partners to tell each other the missing dialogue, so that, for example, one might pretend to be Ellen and say, “Annemarie, did you hear that noise? Do you think the soldiers are coming for me?” The other, pretending to be Annemarie, might respond, “Wait a minute. Let me go see.” You could then read the next couple lines of text.

Of course, the next step would be to urge each student to listen as if he or she were one of the characters. “Show me on your faces what Annemarie is feeling *now*, ” you might say. Or, a bit later, “Use your body to show me what's happening to Annemarie now.”

Envisioning

Envisioning is a big part of reading with engagement. The act of making mental pictures is strongly linked to comprehension. In order to envision, readers need to read closely enough to draw on textual clues that inform meaning, and they need to draw on all they've experienced themselves in order to add more to the text than what's explicitly detailed. As you read aloud, pause to look up from the text and say, “I'm trying to imagine in my mind what this looks like. I've never been to this school but I'm kind of picturing it is like our school—red brick, three stories tall—I'll read on and see....” (If you have ELLs in your class, as you envision aloud you might quickly sketch what you imagine on a white board.) As you read on in the story about the school, it's likely that new information in the text will lead you to revise your initial mental pictures. “Oh, now I realize it's a *white clapboard* schoolhouse! And I'm getting the idea it's much smaller than our school, because....” Be sure to point out explicitly the ways in which close reading informs your mental pictures, helping you continually revise those pictures in light of new information.

If it's a nonfiction text about bullying, you also need to demonstrate how to envision. You might stop after a part of the text that says, 'eight out of ten students feel bullied every day,' and you pause, and say something like, "I'm imagining that, I'm thinking of ten of us, including myself, and I'm thinking about what being bullied feels like, the fear, and the anxiety, and the desperate hope that it will stop, and I'm picturing real bullying scenes that I've seen in school. Now it's making me wonder why more of us don't try to put a stop to this." Envisioning, in fiction and nonfiction, helps readers *imagine and care about* what they are reading.

You might return to some of the role-playing work to support envisioning in non-fiction. You might say, "Your right hand is the shark and your left hand is the surfer. Listen closely as I read and be ready to show your partner what happens with the shark mistakes the surfer for a seal." This work can be of tremendous support to you and your readers. Having students role-play the action just read in a read aloud allows you to see a visual representation of their comprehension. If the role play is askew, you might say, "Readers, your shark hands are doing something quite different than the shark in this text. I'm going to reread this passage and I want you to be ready to show what this shark is doing on this page."

You may also show students how to envision in non-fiction by looking at a picture in the text and reading the passage attached. We use our minds to make the picture move. The picture may be of a platapus standing on the bank of a river with a predator in the background. The text might be about the venomous spur on the hind leg of the platapus and how it uses it to defend against predators. We can teach students to start a picture in their mind using the picture in the text, but then to carry on and make the picture move to see the platapus using it's venomous spur to defend itself.

Be sure to point out explicitly the ways close reading and using your imagination informs your mental pictures, helping you continually revise those pictures in light of new information.

Of course, the goal is not only for students to envision and lose themselves in the books that *you* read aloud. The goal is also for students to do this *for themselves* when they read. You'll want to teach students to envision through every means possible. During independent reading and the follow-up partnership times, encourage students to talk about their mental pictures. What do the places in the book look like? What would a video of this book look like? What has the reader seen before that can help him or her picture the character, the character's home, the locale in which the book is situated? You might encourage a reader to quickly sketch a character or a setting as he or she reads, and then in his or her partnership conversation, to talk through the reasons for this particular image.

During independent reading, you'll also want to help students identify with the characters in their books. You may want to show students that if readers pay attention to how a character acts, to punctuation, to dialogue tags, they can ascertain the character's emotions. They can also feel those same emotions, and trace the evolution of them. For example, you might ask students to post-it a character's feelings, and then to try to read on, carrying the character's feelings so they feel what the character is feeling alongside the character. Teach students that readers care enough about the characters in a book to be angered by what a character has or hasn't done. With prompts like "I can't believe....," "I wish she'd....," or "I'm angry that....," students can talk-back to what characters do.

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You will also want to teach nonfiction strategies for envisioning different kinds of information and

putting that information into context. If the student is reading a book about sharks and there is a page that details how large a particular shark is, it will be important for the student to stop and try to imagine in his or her mind how big that shark actually is. You may teach students to always use familiar objects as points of comparison to visualize size, distance or weight. If a student reads that a great white shark can be at least 23 feet long, that student might compare that to how tall he or she is and imagine how many students would have to be lined up side by side to equal the length of the shark.

As students do the beginning work of making connections with their texts, you'll want to push them beyond literal responses like, "I'm a girl and the character is a girl." You may teach students to connect to a character by thinking about a time when they acted or felt similar in a similar situation. Teach students that they can pause in the midst of reading to recall, and perhaps tell their own parallel, small-moment story. Students should think and talk about what this story makes them realize, and what it teaches them about the kinds of people they are. Eventually, they can return to the character(s) and see if the same or similar conclusions can be drawn about them.

By Teaching Readers to Retell and Summarize, We Can Support Word-Solving, Monitoring for Sense and Synthesis

A big word of caution about emphasizing retelling: This very low level of comprehension is *necessary* but absolutely *not sufficient* for success in reading. In New York City, most of the readers who struggle terribly on state tests are ones who read too slowly, and who keep their noses so close to the ground that they can only retell in a very literal, bit by bit fashion (often without even grasping the sequence of the whole storyline.) It will be important, then, that instead of doing this very literal level of retelling, you teach students to read and synthesize the story into a summary that contains the important elements of a story: the characters' traits and motivations, the main events of the plot told in sequence, the big problem and how that problem is eventually resolved (or how the character changes or the lessons the character learns) and so forth.

For a few days, when you are supporting early level comprehension and retelling work, you may expect your readers to post-it whenever they learn something about the main character's traits, or when a new event happens in the story. If a student struggles with comprehension, the student is apt to experience the story as a chain of events, but not to see that in fact the events are linked together causally. Major events don't come out of nowhere! The important point will be that when a new event happens in the story, the student reflects, "How does this new event fit with what has gone before in the story?" Another powerful way to address this is for the student to notice what the main character does, and then to talk with a partner or jot (with just the quickest of sentences) *why* the character does what he or she does. That is, students need to realize that as they read, the sections of a story should go together, with later sections explained and set up by the ones that come before. Readers understand what they read by synthesizing.

In nonfiction reading we will stress jotting what we are learning from the text. If students struggle with comprehension, these jottings may be a series of disjointed or random facts from the text. We will want to teach students to say how the information that they just learned fits with the information that they learned before in the text. We will teach them to say, "This fits with the information before because..." We will then want to help them move into determining importance and developing theories about why this information matters. We will then want to teach them how to say, "This is important because..." or "This is significant to understanding ___ because..."

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Some of your students will skip over (or mumble through) words that cause them difficulty. You'll

want to teach your students to be flexible word solvers, using more than one strategy, and more than one time. Students will also encounter words that they can decode but can not understand. Students who struggle with decoding benefit from rereading; you might have students keep a book in their book baggie which has passages or chapters they read often, practicing with automaticity and fluency. Teach them to figure out a word's meaning from context. You will also want to teach your students that strong readers are curious about words, and that we try our best to understand what words and phrases mean as we read. It's fine for a student to read past a challenging word in order to establish the context in which the word belongs, but once the student has gleaned the word's meaning from context, he or she needs to reread the sentence, inserting a synonym for the unknown word.

You may need to teach students how to ascertain a general feeling for a word's meaning from the context. For example, if a student gets stuck on the word "prized" in an excerpt that reads something like, "Lily finally admitted to her mother that she was playing catch with the neighbor's dog when he ran through and ruined her prized rose bush," teach the student to think about what would make sense, and substitute a word. The student might say, "Hmm, it sounds like it must have been a special rose bush, so maybe it means something like special." Teach them also that they can build up their speaking and writing vocabulary through reading, and that one of the fun jobs for readers is to collect and remember words and their definitions.

As always, we want to remind our students that as they read, they need to attend not only to print, but to reading with their minds on fire at the same time. When we ask students to be involved in informal partner conversations about the various texts they read, the knowledge that they will share their thoughts with another reader tends to drive their reading forward. They read with alertness, knowing they can quickly jot down ideas to share on a post-it, and expect their partner to do the same. So even if a student struggles with word attack, be sure the student has a partner with whom to talk. Partners can support decoding work by putting post-its onto sections of the text in places where they tried to figure out words, then meeting to show off their problem-solving work. The more students see, hear and say words that cause them difficulty, the more apt they'll be to remember these words.

Reading with Fluency

Kylene Beers has reminded us that adolescent readers, especially, need instruction and opportunities to read with what she calls *prosody* – reading the words and punctuation of the text in such a way that you enhance their meaning. Teach students, when they read fiction, to imagine - and even try aloud with a partner - what parts of their books sound like. For a given scene, readers need to rely on their knowledge of what is happening in the story, what they know about the characters – their traits, their mood, what they are responding to now, to the mood of this part of the story, and on the punctuation. These cues will help them to read with greater intonation and meaning. Many of our students need explicit instruction in these cues – simply reading aloud is implicit, but it doesn't teach them how to do what we do with so much pleasure. Show them how to read the text with drama and feeling, and teach them how to synthesize all these cues.

For nonfiction, you want your readers to notice the tone of parts of the text, and infer about whether the author is trying to get you to not only know something new but to care about something. Teach readers to notice how the text starts – if it is a story, read it so it sounds like a

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story. If it is a dramatic question, read it so the question matters. If there are parts that have lots of information, teach them to read slowly, and divide the information into smaller chunks as they go. Teach students to reread so that the text takes on greater meaning, using their word strategies and synthesizing their learning across the page so that they can read with greater fluency.

Across fiction and nonfiction, teach readers to notice when the text is sarcastic or humorous, when it is trying to shock, when it is trying to get you to feel sad or sympathetic. Fiction and nonfiction writers manipulate readers' emotions with their craft – our students need to learn to notice when the tone of the text changes, or when characters are speaking dryly, so they will respond appropriately.

Implications for ELA test preparation:

Reading tests reveal whether students *can read*, and nothing could be more important for that goal than this unit's focus on rallying students to read a lot of just-right books with fluency and comprehension. On the test, students need to read at a good speed, and to sustain long stretches of reading. The number one obstacle to high performance on the ELA is below grade level reading, which influences their vocabulary, stamina and pace. High volumes of reading will move students up so they are successfully reading at levels which are close to the test level. This is crucial.

Students must be able to answer questions on the ELA pertaining to characters. When they can envision characters well, they can identify their traits. In addition, if students are able to determine the main events in a story they will be able to pay closer attention to the parts of the text that connect to the questions. When student are lost in the world of their stories, this means they habitually synthesize and predict, and this will enable them to answer many of the inference and prediction questions on the ELA.

Unit 2 – Becoming Inferential Readers of Literature: A Close Study of Character

October

It is impossible to read a novel well and not think about the characters' traits, motivations, struggles and lessons. This means that a unit of study on character feels somewhat inevitable, and also that you can teach a unit on characters without needing a specialized library. Students can grow ideas about characters when they are reading any fiction book at all! Furthermore, by teaching readers to think about characters, you can support inferential, constructive reading. So when the year is still young, you will probably want to put a spotlight on characters.

Engaging Readers in an Exploration of the Characters We Cherish

As middle school teachers, many of you trained in literature. Now you face lots of adolescents who are not ready yet to read classic literature, instead needing reading instruction. Everything you know about literature is, in fact, crucial to this instruction. The art is to take the work that you do in any given novel, and show them how to do it in the books they are reading. There is also art in layering instruction so students become powerful at a few crucial skills. Then we can help them make their reading more complicated. At this time of year, assessment and differentiated instruction will be important. Some of your readers are good at reading fiction and they can become great. Some struggle, and they need help engaging, getting started, sympathizing, and caring. Remember, the unit is the vehicle for these kids' development.

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Some of your students love novels and speak about characters with insight and empathy. These readers can be nudged now to do more interpretive work with characters – thinking about the role of minor character in the story, for instance, inferring about the pressures that are exerted on characters and where these pressures are visible in the text, talking about how different moments in the text are related in significance to lessons the character learns or character change.

Other students are, perhaps, reluctant novel readers. They need you to help them find novels with characters who seem interesting and sympathetic to them. If one of your readers would prefer to be reading about basketball, a simple link/solution is to find a novel in which the main character plays basketball. However, you also need to talk about the books in the library in such a way that any adolescent can see a possible connection to this text. One way to do this is to highlight the challenges that the characters face, allowing students to identify with the text, thereby helping them gain entrance into the text.

If some of your novel readers were mostly reading nonfiction in the last unit, you may need to help them with the work that fiction readers do before they read the first page. Teach them to look at the front cover, and to read the back cover closely. Using the back cover as a guide, have them write a post it with the characters' names and the problem the main character faces. For instance, from *Tears of a Tiger*, a student may write down: 'Andy Jackson – drove car that killed friends; Girlfriend – name? Andy turning away from girlfriend and family.' As a result of carefully reading the back cover, this student now knows much more about this story before he or she has started reading page one. Then teach students to start reading the story with a critical eye, asking themselves as they read, "Who is telling this story and how does it start?"

You'll have to maneuver between large group and small group instruction in this unit. Sometimes your large group lesson can be an overarching skill, such as figuring out who is telling the story. Then your small groups can be differentiated – some readers may benefit from a lesson that shows them how to figure out if the narrator is reliable, and how to infer more than the character implies about themselves. Others may need a small group lesson on figuring out if the text is in first or third person, and if the main character is telling the story.

Rally Your Students Around This Year's New Goals

There are a couple of major challenges in this unit. First, students will have "studied" characters last year and the year before. So your unit especially needs to be assessment-based. What is the thinking work that your students already do as they read? What don't they do yet? Then, too, there is the challenge of rallying students' enthusiasm for this unit. How will you differentiate this year's work from the work they have done in previous years so that they believe this is new work (even when actually, readers need to get better at the same set of skills year after year.) Will you tell students that last year they studied *characters*, and this year you hope they study *relationships*? *Friendships*? *Struggle*? *The journeys that characters experience, both externally and internally, in a book*? Will you suggest that last year they *studied* characters and this year they will learn to *walk in characters' shoes*? That last year they focused on the *main character* and this year they will think especially about *secondary characters* and their relationships to the main character?

The deeper challenge is this. You need to decide not only how you will sell this unit to your students, but also how you will define it for yourself. "Characters" are crucial in any story, but there is no reading skills called "characters." So you need to approach this unit recognizing that

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although *students* will think this is a unit on characters (or relationships or friendships etc.), *you*, meanwhile, will know this is a unit on whatever skills you decide to highlight.

The unit will be different if you decide to highlight personal response and envisionment, or if you decide to highlight monitoring for sense and prediction. The Project has put a variety of teaching plans for this unit on our web site. Each plan includes teaching points for the month as well as half a dozen suggested minilessons, all of which will have been written by Teachers College graduate students. None of these posted units of study will be perfect, but we hope that they invite you to imagine your own trajectory through this very rich terrain.

Remember that at the start of any new unit, you need to rally students towards the exciting big work ahead. Students shouldn't enter the unit and simply be taught they can post-it when they learn something about the main character. They will feel as if that's the 'same ol', 'same ol' work. So you will want to decide upon a way to hype and describe the novelty of your particular unit.

Remember, also, that although you will rally students to do *new* work, you'll also need to remind them to continue doing all you have already taught. That is, your teaching must be cumulative. On day three or so of this new unit, be sure to put a spotlight on whatever you especially emphasized during last month's unit, and act absolutely baffled if any student in the room is not carrying all that you taught last month with him, with her, throughout this new unit. If you emphasized keeping daily logs, it is crucial that *you* don't forget those logs now! If you emphasized that each student in the class is unique as a reader, and that it is important to learn from each others' ways with texts, you will want to continue to thread that emphasis throughout this upcoming unit. The other important word of caution is this: No matter what, you will want to make sure that the unit does not overwhelm students' reading. Make sure that your students continue to actually read, eyes on print, for 40 minutes each day in school and for close to that same amount of time at home.

Organize the Structures For This New Unit: Partnerships and Whole Class

Conversations As in the first unit, you'll want to be sure students are working in partnerships everyday. Depending on the availability of books in your classroom library, partners can be reading the same books, or different books from the same series, or just different books they swap. If partners have a character in common, the conversation can focus on the shared characters. If you don't have enough series books in your classroom for partners to read within the same series, you'll need to do more work teaching each partner to listen carefully in order to follow the development of characters across their partners' texts. You'll want to coach partners to talk across different books, noticing what's similar and different in the characters. You could also set the class up for a little mini inquiry into ways partners listen and question each other when they are curious about each other's books. Some questions they might discover that are helpful to ask each other are:

- What kind of person is he or she?
- Do you like him or her? Why or why not?
- Why did the character do that?
- How come the character is feeling that way?
- Do you think he/she did the right thing?
- What do you think will happen next?

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To help sustain partner talk, ask students to prepare for conversations with partners by rereading whatever jottings they have made thus far as they read, whether those jottings are in a reader's notebook or on post-its and theory charts. Then one student can get started sharing something provocative and central to the text. Teach partners to listen to and extend each others remarks, perhaps using conversations of prompts such as these:

- “What in the text makes you say that?”
- “I thought that too, because...”
- “Another example of that is...”
- “I thought something different because...”
- “I agree because...”
- “Wait. I’m confused. Are you saying...”
- “Have you found the same thing with the character in your story?”
- “Can you say more about that?”
- “Can you show me the part in the story where you got that idea?”

Whole-class conversations are also a wonderful way to support students’ partner conversations. You can provide high amounts of scaffolding, and with this help, students can grow a conversation by sticking to an idea or two. This means that when you finish reading aloud a short story or chapter in a very short chapter book, you may want to ask, “Can someone get us started in a conversation about this story/chapter?” Teach readers that great book talks begin with ideas which are central to the text and provocative enough to merit conversation. Once a student makes a comment, give everyone time to mull over that comment for a moment, and even to look at the text or jot notes. Then you might ask, “Who can talk back to this idea?” Students can then try sticking to that idea, using evidence from the text to support their thinking. Coach them to listen and then talk back to each other. You can do this by saying things like, “So Nieyajaha just said x; let’s all stop and think about that. Does anyone think that fits with what you were saying in your T & T conversation?” or “Oh, interesting! Kozmo thinks that Maniac Magee shouldn’t have reacted that way. Think and then talk with your partner about where you stand on that. Let’s add on.”

Below is one possible trajectory for this unit. Afterwards, We’ll outline another possible trajectory. It may be that one grade level in your school will follow the first, another grade level will follow the second. Before reading these, however, be sure that you have the basics in place in your classroom because all the great teaching in the world amounts to very little if readers aren’t reading with volume and engagement. Are students who are reading in the lower levels (L, M, N) progressing through several books in a week? Are those who are reading longer books reading at least on a week? Are books (and logs recording volume and time) going between home and school? Have you re-assessed students to see if there are some who can be moved up a level, especially students who may have been rusty at the start of the year but have, by now, recovered from summer loss?

One Possible Emphasis: Teach Students to Follow Characters Through a Text, Noticing Their Changes and Lessons

In order to read fiction with engagement—and to do well on standardized tests—students need to attend to the protagonist’s traits, motivations, problems, changes and lessons. It is easy to list those items, but helping students to actually do the thinking work involved is not easy. From the start, you’ll want to teach students that good readers read with attentiveness, alert to detail. Readers especially pay attention to details about characters, notice how characters talk, what they do and do

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not do, how they treat each other, and notice the choices a character does and does not make. By attending to details about character, readers learn to consider the implications of details, looking for patterns that tell what kind of person a character is.

Teach Envisionment And Empathy

The work you will be doing with character this month needs to build on and vitalize the work you did in September around envisionment and empathy. This month, you may want to show students that writing can be a tool to help us experience a story deeply. By all means start by using the read-aloud to help students experience the power of writing as a way to walk in the shoes of a character, to experience the world of a story. Read aloud, then say something like, “I can just see him (referring to the protagonist). Can’t you? Pretend you are him, right now. Look around. What do you see? What do you notice? Look more closely. Exactly what do you see? Make it up out of everything you know and everything you can guess. Right now, jot what you see. Start, ‘I see....’” After students jot for a bit, you may intervene and say, “What is your character thinking as he sees this? Start by writing, ‘So and so is probably thinking...’” After students jot for a few minutes, continue to read. After five more minutes of reading, set them up for a similar stop-and-jot. After you finish the reading, you can ask students to draw on this writing as they participate in a whole-class grand conversation.

Once students have read a few chapters, you can teach them to look back to an important event, seeing this as a window to the character. What does the character’s response to this event say about the character? “When a character does one thing (and not another), what might this suggest about that character as a person?” You’ll need to teach your students that they can construct ideas not explicitly stated in the text—to infer by saying, “It says... this makes me think ...”

The work with character, including the work of coming to know and understand the protagonist, can gain depth if you use experiences within your classrooms to teach students to observe astutely, and to make and revise theories about characters. For example, you might point out in one day’s minilessons that in life as well as in books, we watch how people act, noticing especially how they respond to events. From this we formulate tentative theories about them. You might say something like, “I noticed the way you all pulled together the other day when Jeremy was hurt. I saw Randalio making a band-aid out of a paper towel, and from his actions I got the idea that he is quick-thinking and resourceful. And I watched the way Leo kept out of everyone’s way and then found quiet ways to help, and I thought, ‘That’s just the way Leo acts during morning jobs, too.’ I saw a pattern! So I thought, ‘This gives me the idea that Leo is observant, and that his quietness helps him be especially thoughtful.’” Then debrief by saying something like, “Do you see how I made theories about Leo and Randalio based on their actions? Readers do that too.” You can tell students that just as we grow theories about people around us, we can also grow theories about characters in books.

Be sure that your class doesn’t get into the habit of expecting you to dole out the day’s work in the day’s minilesson. That is, if on Monday you teach students that they can think about the decisions a character makes and infer what this reveals about the character, and on Tuesday you teach that they can pay attention to character’s relationships, it is absolutely crucial that when you confer with readers on Tuesday, you remind them to draw on Monday as well as Tuesday’s minilessons (and on the minilessons from previous weeks!) If every student in the class is engaged in the same work with texts, this is a sure sign that the teacher is not helping kids draw from a repertoire of skills and strategies. We cannot stress enough the importance of students developing a cumulative

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repertoire of possibilities, and learning that the text will guide them to draw on one or another if these strategies at any given time.

Improvisational drama can be another support for our students' work with character in both Read Aloud and partner work. For example, you might pause in your reading to say something like, "It says that Opal walked into the trailer to talk to her dad. How does she walk in? Pretend you're Opal, how would you open the door? What would you be doing? Thinking?" Students will, of course, point out that the text does not *say* how Opal got from the doorway to her father's side, so you'll want to help them understand that readers are always filling in the gaps of a text as we read, by drawing on all we learn from this book, from other books, and from our lives.

Teach Inference And Synthesis

You may want to emphasize that readers pay attention not only to what a character does but also to *how* the character does these things. Does the text give any clues about the character's gestures? About the way a character walks or sits or closes the door? If the text says that a character slumps in the chair, then the reader needs to ask, "Why does she sit like that? Is she tired? Bored? What's going on?" Readers also pay attention to the way characters talk: the words they choose, their tone of voice, the emotional cues the author adds with dialogue. All of these give hints about what kind of people live in the world of a story. Sometimes the author offers windows into a character's mind: passages of thinking, or an explanation of a character's motives.

You will want to notice the struggles your students encounter trying to do this work, and then to invent teaching in response to what they show you. For example, many students need to be taught that readers glean information about a character not only from passages pertaining directly to that character but also from many other passages—those telling about the character's home, for example, or the character's family. "Let's read this story together and think, 'Which part tells me something about Robert,'" the teacher might say, and then proceed to show that passages describing Robert's home provide windows onto his character.

Students also need to be taught that the story will tell specifics, and that readers can infer generalizations. If the story says that Robert started his essay five times, each time crumpling his discarded lead into a wad, then the author is expecting the reader will supply the generalizations that name the sort of person this character seems to be. The reader won't find those words in the text but must instead bring those words to the text. Many students will reach first for generic terms: a character is nice, mean, or good. You may want to create a literary word-chart to help students realize that a "nice" character might be "generous" or "encouraging" or "loyal" or "patient." A mean character might be "intolerant" or "snide" or "jealous" or even "malicious." Some teachers suggest kids rate the synonyms for "nice" along a gradient of niceness in order for students to begin to grasp the nuances of each word. A student who has marked passages in a story that reveal the character's traits can profit from being invited to reach for the precisely true word that captures the character's personality. Starting this word work early in the year will help you tremendously when you start thinking about the sophisticated words for character traits that students will encounter on the state tests.

Of course, once a student has read, attending to specifics in the story, and using those specifics to help spark insights about the character, that student will need to be taught that characters are complicated, they are not just one way. Then too, characters change. Either way, a reader will need to read on in the text, thinking, "Do these new sections of the text confirm or challenge my ideas

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about the character?" You may want to teach students to think between two or three related sections of a text—say, a passage at the start, one at the middle, and one at the end, in order to talk and think very specifically about a character's evolution across the storyline. Students tend to rely on sweeping generalizations when talking about the ways a character changes or the lessons a character learns, and you will want to teach students to grow grounded, accountable and especially, precise ideas.

In middle school, you will want to focus significant attention toward thinking about the changes a character goes through. These changes may center around a change in the character's attitude, what the character knows or understands, or the character's wants/desires. As you teach your adolescents to focus their reading lenses on character change, you can teach them that, "At the start of our stories, Readers pay close attention to what our character thinks, believes and wants. We do this because we know these might change over the story and we want to be ready to think about how our character is developing."

You can then teach students that as they move to the middle and end of their stories, it is important to go back and reread their jottings asking themselves, "How has my character changed from the start of the story to the point I'm reading now?" As students identify ways in which their characters have changed, you can push that work up to the next level. It isn't enough for our adolescent readers just to name the way that a character changed; adolescents will want to get onto a line of thinking about what precipitated the change. You can teach them to reread their post-its asking, "What happened to cause the character to change?" You can teach them to look at events that happened to the character, things other characters may have said to the main character and the inner thinking of the character during important events. Often the cause of the change lies in one of these areas.

To continue the work on character change, you might also challenge students to think about how the change the character has gone through effects his/her relationships with the other characters in the story. You can teach your students that, "When readers first notice a moment of change in the main character, we make a prediction about how that will effect his/her relationship with the other characters in the story. We then read on looking for evidence that confirms or makes us revise our predictions."

Finally you might teach students that, "Readers often stop to say what the main character has learned. We know that often what the character has learned is what the author may be expecting the reader to have learned or discovered." This works to help students identify the themes and lessons of texts. Gaining control of finding the theme/message, will be quite helpful on the ELA test in January.

All of this work on character change prepares students for the work they will be doing in books from level N-Z. As they move through more and more sophisticated texts, the character change work becomes more and more central to understanding the text. This is also work that is heavily tested on the ELA, so you will be preparing your students early for that work.

Teach readers to use their knowledge of how-stories-tend-to-go to remind them of what's worth noticing in a story and to inform their thinking about character change. In literature, stories are often built around a central structure in which a main character faces challenges, some explicit and some more nebulous. The character draws on what's inside himself or herself to meet these

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challenges, and often changes in the process, developing new inner resources. Often not only the main character changes in this process, but other characters change as well. This way fluent readers come to realize that events in stories are consequential; the choices made by one character affect others, and single events often have a significant impact on other events.

Ideas become more complex and more specific as one reads on and further develops an initial idea. More complicated ideas are generally conveyed in more words. Teach students to develop their ideas. (Teachers you may want to borrow on information in later sub-sections of this write-up in order to help students do this).

Writing and Talking To Develop Theories

If you decide to teach students to think about the protagonist's traits, motivations, problems (or struggles,) lessons and/or changes, you will probably ask students to keep post-its (and perhaps "theory charts") as they read and to meet for 5 minutes with a partner at the end of every reading workshop in order to "talk off" their post-its. Chapters 17 and 18 of *The Art of Teaching Reading* will help you support wise use of those post-its and theory charts.

You will remind students to prepare for their partner talks by rereading their post-its and selecting one (or several) to talk about in some depth. If your students are accustomed to working with "boxes-and-bullets" (see the essay unit in the writing curricular calendar), you can help them jot main ideas in a boxes-and-bullets-form as they prepare for partner conversations. Either way, once they gather with a partner, encourage them to "talk long" about an idea, using conversational prompts such as, "I agree with you..." or "Another example of that is...." Obviously these partner conversations will be richer if both students are reading about the same character.

Usually when students get almost half way through their books you'll want to teach students to look over their post-its in order to develop bigger theories about their characters. One way students or partners might do this is to take their post-its out of their books and sort them into piles that seem to go together. They might sort them into piles that are about one particular character or another. They might sort them so that those addressing a particular relationship are in one pile. This means that there might be four (or many more) post-its about one character. Students can delve into a stack of post-its (a cluster of related ideas) looking for contrasts and patterns. They can try to develop a new idea out of those post-its. (We tend to call these bigger ideas 'theories'.) Once students have developed a couple of theories, they can revisit earlier parts of the text in light of their theories. They can also read forward, gathering more evidence to support their theories. You may choose to introduce theory charts to your class. If readers are each making individual theory charts, readers can keep these in readers' notebooks. If they're working with a partner, you may want to make a larger chart using construction paper (8 1/2 x 14) that partners can share. Partners can meet and talk about the evidence they found that supports their theories and lay post-its with the page number and support on to their chart. For example:

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Theories	Evidence			
Gilly is mean.	Doesn't Want to touch Mr. R. p. 11	Made Miss Harris a card making fun of her color. p. 56	Stole from Mr. Randolph. p.74	Took Trotter's money. p. 82
Gilly's life is hard.	It's Gilly's 3 rd home in less than 3 years. p. 1	Her mom writes her a postcard that makes Gilly dream of living with her. p.28		

Whenever you teach kids to use a tool, you will want to revisit their work with that tool. You will no doubt want your students to look back on their own post-its and each other's post-its, thinking about them. You can ask students to notice that some simply say what is occurring in the text and others actually capture readers' ideas about the text. Ask students to star the post-its that carry ideas, and to use these as Mentor Post-its. They can together choose one which seems especially thoughtful. They can study that one Mentor Post-it and try to articulate the qualities that make that one post-it so thoughtful. Then the students can continue to read, this time with the goal of producing equally thoughtful post-its.

Once students have developed a theory or multiple theories, teach them to read on, expecting their theories will become more complex (which generally means longer, with qualifiers added), or they will change. It's crucial to teach students to revise their initial ideas in light of new information. A student might start off with a theory that "Gilly is mean" and then learn first to open up the word 'mean' by using more specific ways to talk and think about Gilly. Then the reader can read on, focusing on more parts of the book and thinking about how those parts fit or don't fit with the theory. Such a student could end up thinking not, "Gilly is mean" but "Gilly hurts others so they don't get close to her and don't matter to her, and so they, like her mother, don't hurt her."

Students can also notice that although they are all thinking about characters, they all do this differently. Students can compare and contrast what they do with what a partner does when thinking about character. Some look for reasons why characters act as they do, others may worry about their characters as they'd worry about their friends. Students may, with your nudging, decide to take-on another person's ways of thinking.

Another Possible Emphasis: Teach Students to Grow Their Own Ideas: Talking and Writing With Minds on Fire

You may decide to angle this unit so as to especially help readers develop, elaborate upon, test and revise their own wonderful ideas as they read. Too many students read and generate ideas that are actually facts one could find in the text. Their post-its say, "He bought bread," or "He is the older brother." If we introduce students to the best of literature and they come away from it thinking only, "He went to the store and bought bread," something is wrong! This trajectory through the character-unit, then, especially focuses on the importance of students developing theories as they read.

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In this imagined unit, your emphasis might be on the fact that readers talk and write in order to grow ideas. Most students are already talking thoughtfully, but it is likely that the students in your classroom have never really experienced the power of writing-as-a-tool-for-thinking. You may decide that in your particular version of the character unit, you will help your students grow a new relationship with writing about reading.

Help students Develop Ownership Over The Writing They Do As Readers

If you decide to help students develop a new relationship to writing about reading, *you* need to do the same. So first of all, we strongly encourage you and your colleagues to purchase small notebooks for yourselves, to get yourself a wonderful book (it can be students' literature if you like—try *Home of the Brave*, by Katherine Applegate if you aren't sure of a worthwhile book—but better yet, read an adult book such as *The Kite Runner*.) Then read this book while keeping your own reader's response notebook. Your rule of thumb must be this. Write for real. Write in response to reading often, but don't allow yourself to write in one way or another simply because that is the way you've told kids they were supposed to write. Try to write for real, in ways that mirror your mind work as a reader and do try to think *as* you write, letting the pen take your mind to places you haven't gone. Write an idea and then stay with it, writing a phrase such as "This is important because..." or "So I am saying...." And then say and think more.

If you enter this unit keeping a reading notebook, trying hard to write about reading with authenticity and in ways that make your reading smarter, you'll be better able to use your own personal experiences to help students re-create their relationships to reading notebooks. Draw on your own reading and writing life in order to help your students understand that reading notebooks needn't be a place for them to produce the assignment of the day; they can instead be places in which readers record whatever we truly think during reading. Ideally, the notebooks will capture students' true thoughts—quickly, in fragments—as they read.

If you want to help each student to develop his or her own, new, true relationship with writing about reading, you might point out to them that for too long, the writing students have done about reading has always been for someone else. The writing has been like a serf's wages, paid to a noble. It has been part of a system of bondage. If you want to set students free as readers and writers-about-reading, ask them to invent their very own ways to think and write as they read. Tell them that the writing and thinking they do as they read needs to reflect their personalities and their thoughts just as handprints do.

Keep clear in your mind that the goal of this sort of writing about reading is not little miniature literary essays—you certainly do *not* expect a student to write with a thesis statement and to provide evidence. That is the sort of writing you may want a student to do at another time, for another purpose, but the writing one does in the midst of reading needs to reflect the reader's mind on fire. The goal is insightful, deep, probing, thoughtful scraps of language. And the goal is for readers to have more vital relationships to books.

By all means, invite students to personalize their reading notebooks. Students in one class decided to use Scholastic book orders and catalogs as sources for little replicas of book jackets. They selected book covers that said "This is me" and laminated them onto the covers of their reading notebooks.

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If you have told students that their reading notebooks will be *theirs*, you won't want to contradict this with little daily tasks in which you ask them, for example, to write in a double entry format, or to write about the book's setting or a minor character. Be very clear that your minilessons provide you with a vehicle for *suggesting possibilities* but that readers have ownership of their own reading notebooks. You can, however, ratchet up the level of their writing, thinking and reading both through class inquiries and through conferences. In class inquiries, invite students to engage in Readers Studies (like Author Studies.) "Let's look back on our entries and think about the kinds of thinking work each of us tends to do as a reader," you might say. "Do you notice that above all, as a reader, you ask questions? Or do you see yourself gathering facts, accumulating information?" Of course, once a student has noticed what he or she tends to do as a reader, you can help that particular student take her ways-with-texts farther, becoming particularly adept at that sort of thinking. A reader who responds personally to characters can be encouraged to pursue that sort of work (see the chapter on Personal Response in *The Art of Teaching Reading*) and then this student can mentor others in this sort of thinking. Similarly, students can star sections in their reading notebooks where they thought they were really thinking in deep and insightful ways, and they can try to name what it was they did in those instances that they could try to do in another instance. The earlier section of this write-up can provide more details for this sort of work. In these and other ways, students can use their own and each others best work as mentor texts, aiming to do more work like that.

Meanwhile in conferences, you can leaf through six or seven pages of a student's reading notebook, saying, "Will you walk me through the journey of thinking you've been on lately?" As the student gives you a guided tour of the thinking he or she has been doing in the midst of reading, focus not on the quality of *writing* but on the *thinking* the student is doing. Notice qualities of thinking that apply to many entries and texts. Then say, "What I noticed that you tend to do a lot as a reader is..." and from there, you can help lift the level of that work. Resist the impulse to see and name what a student *has* done, and then to respond by suggesting the student to do something different, randomly selected by you. This is, avoid saying things like this: "I noticed that in lots of your entrees you predict. That's great! Why don't you start using entrees on a time to also (instead) notice the writer's craft (or anything else.)"

Give Students a Repertoire of Ways to Write, Think and Talk about Reading

Meanwhile, of course, you will want to teach in a way that gives students a repertoire of strategies to draw upon when they think about characters. You probably selected this path—this emphasis on writing as a text for growing ideas about characters—because students have already learned to read, thinking about character traits. You probably still want to revisit the work described earlier in this unit, this time rallying students to really grow *ideas* (and not just retell information) about the main character, but if students have been thinking about the main character for years now, you'll want to suggest new lines of thought. Perhaps, for example, you'll stress the importance of thinking about the *secondary* characters or, more importantly, the *relationships* among characters...or perhaps you'll emphasize that characters go on journeys (both external and internal ones). Readers can read, thinking about those journeys.

Whatever your trajectory, you should probably weave in more attentiveness to secondary characters. A strong reading of a story can never take into account only the protagonist. Perhaps one student in a partnership can pay attention to one secondary character and another student in the partnership to another. You will want them to think especially about the relationships among characters. How does one character's actions make another character feel? Encourage readers to

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talk about the different motivations that seem to drive different characters and about the way those motivations intersect.

Often the real action—the truly provocative drama—happens in the relationships *between* characters, especially between the protagonist and the secondary characters. You might suggest students ask themselves, “What relationships are important to the characters in this book?” These may be friendships, parent-student relationships, even oppositional relationships. What do the individuals in these relationships get and what do they need from each other? Are there groups—cliques, gangs, teams—within the book? How do individuals fit in (or not fit in) to these groups?

It is sometimes helpful for students to realize that just as stories unfold in predictable ways, with a character wanting something and then running into trouble... .so, too, there are predictable roles that characters can play in books. In many stories, for example, a character encounters a surprising teacher. Perhaps the teacher is a younger student, or an animal, or a very old person. In many stories, the main character has a sidekick. These sidekicks can play predictable roles. Many stories contain a villain.

It will be important to remind students that both people and characters are complicated. It’s all too easy to pigeon-hole people in our lives as being one way or another, and it’s easy to pigeon-hole characters as well. But none are all-one-way. We can teach students to live on and read on, giving characters and people the opportunity to become three dimensional, and giving ourselves a chance to develop more complex notions of the people we meet in life and in books.

Implications for ELA test preparations:

This unit will have immediate payoff for your students when answering multiple choice questions. In order to answer these questions, readers need to pay attention to characters’ traits, motivations, and problems, which is the heart of this unit. It is also important that readers glean a sense for how stories “go.” Use the wall chart to help students become accustomed to speaking well about character traits. A character is not just good—she is something more specific: Generous? Resourceful? Sociable? Also, teach students that when they read short stories, there is work one does at the start of the story (looking for character traits and motivation) and at the middle of the story (what is the character struggling with?). This sets them up to know what to do at the beginning, middle and end of any narrative text.

November

Unit 3 – Deepening Reading Habits: Reading Nonfiction With Purpose and Comprehension, While Sustaining a Thoughtful Independent Reading Life

Overview

This unit involves three main strands of work: Students will read narrative nonfiction texts, they will read expository nonfiction, and they will keep up independent reading lives as readers of chapter books, including fiction, biographies, or true stories. You’ll want students to read, and learn to read, a diverse range of nonfiction texts. Some will be informational texts, organized with headings and sub-headings. Some will be nonfiction narrative. And some of the nonfiction will contain mixed text structures.

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This unit is laden with important challenges. Above all, your plans need to take into account the resources on which you can and cannot draw, and the reading abilities of your students. Several reading studies have recently reinforced what most teachers already know: If a student is reading P books in fiction, you should probably expect that student to be reading N books in nonfiction. (However, it is also true that students who are reading nonfiction material of which they have *considerable* prior knowledge can typically read at their fiction reading level.) The TCRWP has a new tool for tracking students' abilities to read leveled, nonfiction texts and you can learn about this on our website: <http://rwproject.tc.columbia.edu/>

Guard against asking students to read nonfiction texts that are too difficult or else, inevitably, very few students will spend long stretches of time engaged in nonfiction reading. A study known as the "Sawtooth Study" showed that the reading levels of low-income students in a Northeastern district dip down several notches every summer simply because those students are spending two months not reading. We cannot afford to have a similar dip every November due to the fact that students are holding nonfiction books they cannot read with fluency and comprehension! This is especially important for New York State teachers since this unit is followed by test prep, when students will again spend time working with challenging texts. It is essential, therefore, that students work with nonfiction texts they can read easily. They also need to continue reading narrative texts (fiction, biographies, true stories, etc.), to keep up their stamina and reading rate. Some students read nonfiction very slowly. In half an hour, they may read an article of only one or two pages. This is not even close to enough reading to sustain their continued growth.

Organizing the Unit: Study Your Library and Devise a Plan

As you and your students emerge from the last reading unit, you should see them reading books with eagerness, and you should have seen them reading with greater depth of understanding. Many of your students have been in partnerships, reading series, hopefully with high volume and intensity. As you go into this nonfiction unit, you want to keep them reading with that same high volume, engagement, and comprehension. This needs to be true for nonfiction as well as fiction! Your students will be reading many expository nonfiction texts in this unit, and they will also be keeping up their independent reading life, at school and home, with either biographies or fiction (we'll talk about that in a moment). Very few classrooms have enough accessible and interesting nonfiction texts for them to go home each night, and also we need students to keep up their reading of narrative so they maintain all the independence, volume, and rigor they learned over the last month.

Let's start with the nonfiction reading they'll be doing in school. You want your students to read nonfiction with the same intensity and volume they were reading fiction. Therefore, the nonfiction in your classroom needs to be high interest, and there need to be lots of texts that students can read from cover to cover (not simply stare at the picture, they need to be able to read the words). They'll get the most traction as nonfiction readers if they learn to read deeply in a subject – so you'll want baskets of texts that are organized by subject, trying always to include as many texts as possible that students can read the whole text. You may have baskets on: Our bodies; the undersea world; extreme sports; beauty and health; family issues; peer pressure; planets and space; endangered animals, etc. If you need some help ordering books, there are some lists on our website at <http://rwproject.tc.columbia.edu>.

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Rather than ‘dipping in,’ you want a student to pick up a nonfiction book such as *Oh Rats*, by Albert Marrin, and read it from front to back, which will probably take about half an hour. The next day, you hope she can pick from her basket another text on rats, so she can read for new information. Or perhaps she is in a basket of texts on ‘Misunderstood Animals,’ and she can compare the experiences of different animals that most people find repellent. Or perhaps her basket is ‘Rescues and Disasters,’ and she is comparing events (macabre but high interest). Thus, for the portion of the day that students are reading nonfiction, they will be reading in baskets of texts that are organized by high-interest nonfiction subjects (such as gross things, our bodies, sports, unsolved mysteries, extreme weather, etc.). Your students will be in reading partnerships, of course, so that they can compare every day the information they have learned and the ideas they have – partners will read in the same basket.

Preparing your library in baskets of high interest texts means that students can rotate through some of these baskets, learning to start with a text they can read easily, and gradually adding in more texts as they build knowledge. Not all students will read all the books in each basket, nor does every partnership need to study each basket. You may have a basket that is more appropriate for your more emergent readers, and one that is more appropriate for your strongest. *If you need some help with your book orders, we have posted on our website a list of nonfiction books from level J-Z, organized by interest, such as ‘undersea animals, sports, our bodies.’* If you start early, you can poll your students for subjects, and then gather all possible texts from other rooms in the school, from the school and local library, and perhaps from families. Sort through these and take out the books that are too difficult, organize your baskets, and rotate them across classes if you need to. If you are a New York City teacher, we have one of the best public libraries in the world, and if you go to the Donnell branch or a branch you really like, you’re bound to find enough books to get you started. Remember, Dick Allington has shown that your kids’ reading will develop in direct relationship to how fascinating they find the books, so get book orders in or get to the library if you want your kids to become avid and powerful nonfiction readers.

The first strand of your work, therefore, will be the nonfiction reading, by subject, that students do during the nonfiction reading time. You’ll be teaching a variety of nonfiction reading lessons, which are described below. Many teachers last year devoted half an hour a day to this nonfiction reading work. In addition, they had half an hour devoted to students’ independent reading of stories, which could be biographies, true stories, or fiction, depending on your resources and your students’ needs. Other teachers of middle school decided to split their days across the week, devoting a certain number of reading workshop days to nonfiction, and a certain number to fiction reading. Half this unit centers around supporting students’ independent reading lives as readers of stories. Be sure students continue to maintain their reading logs. Monitor that they’re reading the proper number of chapter books each week; probably anywhere from two to four, in addition to the informational nonfiction texts they will read.

If you have a reluctant reader who has finally become fascinated with fantasy books, and he is reading *The Fire Within* series with high volume and passion, and he is dismayed at the thought of reading biography, be careful about forcing him for his independent and home reading into books he doesn’t want to read! You have to think, always, “what will sustain this student’s reading growth the most right now – what books will get him to read with engagement and intensity?!” You may decide that your students can continue their partner reading from the last unit, and they can keep reading in series books that they adore, to keep up their independent reading life. On the other hand, if you have available many high interest biographies, and you do some good book

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talks, many students may willingly embark on a biography study as part of this unit. All the work they did in their character study in October will pay off here, as they read about characters who really lived. There is a list of biographies on our website if you need help browsing books. You could also open up the narrative work to “true stories,” which means you can include biographies, memoirs, and also series such as *Facts Meet Fiction*, which are engaging stories of survival.

To support independent reading, we especially recommend you set students up to read with a partner across a series of books. You’ll need to devote some teaching time each week to support these partnerships (encouraging them to use post-its to prepare to talk to their partners, helping them to make (and follow) quick and rigorous reading plans, using partners to deepen comprehension by comparing retellings, thoughts, questions and interpretations). You’ll also want to remind students of goals and strategies to draw upon when reading fiction. They can be reminded to pay attention to characters and story structure, for example.

Before you begin the nonfiction portion of this unit, you need to decide whether you will start with your students reading narrative nonfiction or expository nonfiction. If you decide to begin with narrative nonfiction, you will then need to decide how long you will teach this type of nonfiction before switching to expository texts. We suggest that you spend 3-5 days transferring and applying what your students have learned about reading narratives from units 1 and 2 to their reading of narrative nonfiction.

After a bit of time working with narrative nonfiction, you can introduce the class to expository texts. When your study of expository texts begins, you may then encourage students to read narrative nonfiction, as well as narratives, during independent reading time. To support your students’ independent search for engaging, just-right narrative nonfiction, you may want to set up a section of your library that features leveled biographies and narrative non-fiction.

Introducing Readers to *Narrative* Nonfiction Through Biographies

If you are launching this unit with narrative nonfiction, you might choose for your entire class to start off by reading biographies together. If you start with biographies, teach your students that when readers approach *any* kind of text, we ask ourselves, “How does this kind of text usually go? What do I expect of this genre?” Then, teach students that some nonfiction books, including most biography, will be written as stories, and when this is the case, readers should rely upon what they know about stories to read that nonfiction text.

How does the genre of biographies usually work? If readers look across several biographies, they will probably discover that these texts usually tell about an accomplished person, starting with studenthood and highlighting the early beginnings of the person’s later claim to fame. Because biographies tend to unfold in ways which resemble fictional stories, they often reveal struggles that define the person, challenges he or she had to meet, and ways in which the person drew on his or her own resources to meet those challenges.

Readers of biographies (and stories) will want to develop theories about the characters they meet in these texts. Readers of stories already know that it is helpful to pay attention to the important events and decisions in a character’s life; they are quick to recognize that a character’s response to those events often reveals his or her traits. Readers of *fiction* pay attention to the details of characters—and so must readers of *biographies*. Readers of *fiction* learn to grow ideas—and so must readers of *biographies*.

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Then, too, biography readers, like fiction readers, may want to consider secondary characters. Secondary characters influence the main character in any story. This concept takes on new life when the character is a historical figure, and the secondary character is that person's mother, teacher, or student. By teaching readers to notice the relationships between people in biographies, we can teach them to think about cause and effect as they read any text.

Although in many ways, students need to learn that reading biographies is very much like reading fiction, in other ways, this sort of reading can draw students towards the world of nonfiction reading. Biographies, like most nonfiction texts, are best read cumulatively. A single biography is interesting, but that book takes on exponentially more meaning when it is laid beside a second biography about the same person or even a second biography about a different person who was, in some ways, similar. Partnerships (or even small clubs) may then read across biographies. They might read the biographies of several freedom fighters—of both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. In doing so, readers can begin to formulate big ideas (interpretations) about what it means to be a freedom fighter, and what challenges these very real heroes face. Alternatively, members of a club may read more than one biography about the same person.

When readers put two books alongside each other that seem similar, help them to talk, think and read across the texts. For example, students might notice that one biography highlighted different events in the person's life than does the other biography. In one book, the author may write about events in such a way so as to portray Martin Luther King Jr. as a hero to the civil rights movement; in another book, the author may portray King as a victim of ignorance and hate. Clubs can draw theories based on noticing the important events some authors include and others leave out. What does each author want us to see in the person? These conversations help students see the characters of biographies as multifaceted and not one-dimensional.

Introducing Readers to *Narrative Nonfiction Other Than Biographies*

In middle school, we can teach students that narrative nonfiction tells a story that teaches both information and ideas. For instance, a book about the history of hip hop will probably tell the reader an engaging story about a character who faces interesting challenges, it will teach the reader some of the intricacies of this style of music, and it will probably teach the story of how hip hop became such an important musical form. It will do all that explicitly. The reader will have to infer what he or she could learn from the founders of hip hop; it might be ways to layer sound, but it's more likely to be lessons about determination and innovation or how people help each other succeed.

When students transition from reading biographies to reading other sorts of *narrative nonfiction* texts, teach them that just as they read fiction, making almost a mental timeline, so too, they'll want to chunk these narrative nonfiction texts. The chunks may reflect a progression of time (although they may not). In any case, students can monitor for comprehension by retelling parts, one at a time. Usually, if the student is reading a book, these chunks will be chapter chunks. If the student is reading an article, the chunks may be set apart with sub-headings. For each chunk or chapter, readers need to say, "So far, what has happened is this... and what I've learned is..." Students will be more accustomed to retelling the text as a story than as an accumulation of ideas and information; teach them that narrative nonfiction tells a story, and that story teaches the reader both big ideas and specific information. For instance, in the story of Alex the parrot we learn how a parrot can communicate in sophisticated ways with humans and we also discover how similar we

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might be to many animals in surprising ways. It also teaches the reader the method for teaching a parrot to learn words. (“The Parrot Who Says He’s Sorry,” *Dogs Have the Strangest Friends*, by Jeffrey Masson, also on the ELA last year!)

Remind nonfiction readers to choose books with which they can be successful. To determine this, teach them to reread the first part to themselves as a way to check their comprehension. They should also think about what they already know about this subject; if it’s a sports biography about a basketball player, they’ll need to think, “What do I already know about basketball that will help me read this book?” If it’s the story of a famous dog, like Balto, they’ll access their prior knowledge about dogs, and possibly even about this sled dog in Alaska. With nonfiction texts, as compared to fiction, students need to get ready to read by expecting that a given book will teach them something new about this subject.

As students read a variety of narrative nonfiction, teach them to notice that most narrative nonfiction tells the story of people and their achievements. The structure is similar in fiction. Characters interact with each other and their environments, face challenges or obstacles that the story highlights, and usually overcome these obstacles. In narrative nonfiction, the overcoming of obstacles is usually a story of why a famous person is famous, what he or she achieved, and why these achievements matter. Give students some shorter narrative nonfiction as well, including some articles, so they get used to reading texts in which the narrative unfolds swiftly. Some narrative nonfiction tells the story of animals; teach students to unpack ways in which the structure of many of these texts is the same. The text will tell the story of the way these animals interact with each other and their environment, what they want and need, what gets in their way or poses dangers, and how they overcome these dangers. The stories of famous discoveries or changes in science or history may not have a main character; the object or discovery might be the main character: “The tomb of King Tut lay quiet, waiting to be opened...it had been abandoned long ago, and now no one knew it was there....”

Students can use post-its to keep track of what they’re learning as the narrative progresses and to get ready to talk to a partner about this by rereading their post-its - to say what happened in the story *and* what the story has taught them so far.

We can teach students that narrative nonfiction tells a story that teaches both information and ideas. For instance, a sports biography about a famous basketball player will tell the reader an engaging story about a character who faces interesting challenges, it will teach the reader some of the intricacies of basketball, and it will probably teach the reader why this particular basketball player is famous. It will do all that explicitly. The reader will have to infer what he or she could learn from this famous basketball player; it might be some tricky basketball moves, but it’s more likely to be ‘big idea’ lessons such as the importance of determination or the need for people to help each other succeed.

If students struggle to infer from narrative nonfiction, teach them to look at important moments in the story (they know how to do this from reading fiction), looking especially at the moments in which they learn something new about a character, the moments when a character faces an obstacle, and at moments of crisis, choice, or discovery. Ask them to think hard at each of those points about what they learn; mostly, readers learn from the examples people set. To practice moving from retelling to inferring, teach them to retell the text by saying, “This text (or this part of a text) is mostly about...”, and then to make a more inferential retelling by adding, “And the big

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new thing it teaches me is....” Alternatively, the reader could say, “And the big way this adds to what I already knew about this subject is....”

Teaching Students to Read Non-Narrative or Expository Nonfiction

Decide on the expository nonfiction reading your students will do by looking, above all, at your texts. If you have enough appropriately leveled texts that cluster around a single topic, there are lots of advantages to inviting students into a deep study of a whole-class topic. Students learn to be stronger nonfiction readers when they read deeply in one subject area; they can begin by reading easier books on a topic and then gradually build expertise that lets them tackle harder texts successfully. If you’re teaching students who don’t have many opportunities to study social studies and/or science, and especially if those students are English language learners, you might want to merge this unit with your work around a content-area theme. (This could be a high-interest social studies topic, or it could be any subject around which you have lots of books and lots of student interest. For example, you could study endangered animals or immigration.) The advantages to teaching nonfiction reading by involving students in a deep study of a theme are *especially* important in classrooms filled with ELLs and struggling readers who benefit from whole-class support (including field trips, films, class discussions) for vocabulary and concepts. But all nonfiction readers should be encouraged to read several texts about a topic and to interrelate what they learn with online information, museum visits, travel experiences, conversations, and observations.

If you don’t have enough appropriately leveled texts on a single subject, you may have at least a few texts at a level about lots of subjects, so individual students or partnerships can choose to study a subject of interest. You’ll find, for example, that some students are fascinated by extreme sports, others by weather disasters, or animals. Students learn to be stronger nonfiction readers when they read deeply in one subject area; they begin by reading easier books on a topic and then gradually build expertise that lets them tackle harder texts successfully. Each day, they should make post-its that help them get ready to say to their partner: what did I learn today that reinforced what I already knew? (Such as, rats eat almost anything) What did I learn today that was new information? (Such as, rats can compress their bodies to within a quarter of an inch) What ideas do I have about what I’m learning? (Such as, I think that rats are incredibly resourceful and adaptable).

Finally, if you do not have enough texts on any given subject to allow students to study one topic from a variety of texts, you may organize your nonfiction library, and the unit, by types of texts and levels; There may be level L-M expository texts in one bin, and level N-O expository texts in another bin, etc. You may not have enough expository texts at your students’ levels for them to be able to keep a few of these books in personal book baggies; each student may need to read a text and then put it back in the bin, looking across texts more for how they’re organized than for content overlap.

No matter how you decide to organize your nonfiction library, you’ll want to allow students to browse the library and the books themselves, noticing how expository nonfiction texts are organized and designed. Expect enthusiasm and be ready to channel it so that students notice how nonfiction books are crafted to entice readers. Teach the difference between recreational nonfiction reading or browsing (reading the way someone standing in a grocery checkout line might read) and reading to learn. In the latter instance, readers choose a nonfiction text wisely, commit to it, and read the whole text.

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Once your nonfiction readers select a text, their first task will be to figure out the topic of the expository text. Teach them to look at the title, the cover, the table of contents, and the introduction. Very often an adolescent will say, “This is about gymnastics.” Reading on, that student will add to and revise this by saying, “This section is about how demanding and difficult it is to become a gymnast.” We need to help students elaborate. For example, even after narrowing the topic this far, the adolescent will ideally read on, asking, “What is the author saying about how hard it is to become a gymnast?”

As you teach your students to preview the text as a whole and the specific page that they will read, teach them not only to identify the subject but also to locate clues that will reveal how they can best read the text. If the text has a section heading that is a question, such as, “What was a storm front?” the reader should know that one way to understand this section is to read looking for an answer. If in a book about a sports team the section heading is “State Champions” teach readers to turn the heading into a question and read for the answer, such as, “How did the team become state champions?” If the heading indicates an idea with multiple supports, such as, “Causes of the Conflict,” then the reader knows to read searching for cause number 1, 2, 3... If the heading is “Comparing Uniforms,” then the reader knows his or her job is to read finding the similarities and differences between Union and Confederate uniforms.

You will want to spend a good amount of time helping students determine the main idea of a passage. New York State teachers already know there are many main-idea questions on the 6th-8th grade ELA. Teachers can count on the fact that students need help doing this work. Teach students to read the first sentence of a paragraph and ask, “What is this saying?” Then they can read on, sentence by sentence, asking, “How does this fit with what’s been said so far?” Students will often notice that three of the four sentences will be about one main thing, and then another sentence—or a whole section—will be tangential. Readers need to expect that nonfiction texts often tuck in bits of “cool” but extraneous and distracting details. To find the main idea, readers need to take the sentences they’ve read and say what they learned in one short statement, not a question. Teach students to chunk the text using the subheadings or section headings. At the end of each chunk, they’ll profit from covering the text and saying (or writing on a post-it), “This part teaches me...” and then, “It teaches me by giving examples or evidence such as....”

We can support our students in determining the main idea by also teaching them to identify the “Who” and the “What” of the paragraph or section. This helps readers identify the subject and the central action as they read. To find the main idea, readers need to figure out the relationship between the “Who” and the “What.” For example, “Who” might be gorillas and “What” could be the fact that they intimidate intruders by beating their chests. The student might say, “The main idea of this paragraph is... when gorillas want to scare off intruders, they beat their chests to make them go away.” As readers progress, they needn’t always stop their reading to think, “What is this part teaching me?” Sometimes it is helpful for them to simply look for the “pop out sentence” as they read, knowing that often one sentence seems to summarize the content of a paragraph or a passage. We teach students that this topic sentence is often the first or last sentence—but not always!

Readers can move from finding the main idea of a section to figuring out the overarching idea of a selection by noticing as they read from one paragraph to another whether the two paragraphs continue to build on one main idea. Does the second paragraph turn a bend, laying out yet another

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idea? Nonfiction texts can be tricky because section dividers are often invisible; readers need to be vigilant, reading in such a way that they notice when the text has gone through a transition and saying, “Oh, this is about a new sub-topic.” Of course, once readers can ascertain what a chunk as small as a paragraph is mostly about, they’ll benefit from looking back on the whole page or the whole chapter and saying, “*This* whole text is mostly about. . .” At this point you’re essentially asking students to reproduce the same boxes-and-bullets work in reading that they’re doing in writing. To help readers understand what it might look like to jot down thoughts about a text’s main idea, show them a post-it on which the reader has done this, and one on which the reader did *not* do this, and ask them to compare them. For example, after reading aloud a section called “Rats are Disease Carriers” you can put on the overhead these two post-its:

Rats can squeeze through incredibly tight spots.

1st Post-it

Rats Are Disease Carriers.
-they often live in places where disease festers
-they can migrate to entirely different habitats easily

2nd Post-it

Students should be able to see that the second post-it contains the overarching idea of the section with two supporting specifics, while the first post-it has just one specific detail.

A word of caution: this instruction is geared toward teaching students to ascertain the main idea and to recall the support an author has provided for that main idea. The emphasis is not on collecting tiny intriguing facts. Usually when teachers encourage students to attend to little facts, this is part of a bigger emphasis on note-taking. This unit may not be the best time to stress note-taking; nonfiction reading is slow and hard enough as is. This *is*, however, a good time to ask students to post-it main ideas and talk about them, retelling the nonfiction texts in a manner which is both similar to and different from what they do when they read fictional texts. If you decide to encourage your students to note-take, instead of asking them record tiny facts, ask them to jot ever-so-quick versions of boxes-and-bullets, of main ideas and supporting information. Eventually, students will do this in their minds and won’t need to stop and jot the main idea and supports for every page they encounter.

Essentially you’ll be asking students to read in such a way that they can take the sort of notes you might take at a lecture. The notes will look like very rough outlines. You may want to teach students to retell their texts to partners, using these notes in ways that reconstruct the author’s main ideas and supporting information.

Readers need to know that as they read, they’re sectioning the text into meaning-chunks. They’ll profit from consistently pausing at the end of a chunk of text to make sure they understand what the author has said. It’s helpful for a reader to paraphrase at the end of a chunk, pausing to name the gist of what she just read, and to do so in ways that build on what she learned from previous sections. The student will want to add her own thinking to the paraphrase so that, for example, she

mullets over what she's just read, saying something like, "That's so interesting! I never knew that elephants' skin wrinkles when they don't have water in them."

As students read across a book you may want to teach them how to look across the main ideas of sections to see bigger boxes and bullets. Readers can do this by reading across several pages and asking: "How does this all fit together?" and "What could I name this huge section?" We can look back over our "files" to try to answer these questions. For example, a student may have learned in a book that owls differ from most birds because they don't flap their wings. Instead, their wings glide. Then, later in the book, the student learns that owls' eyes are not in the typical place for birds; birds' eyes are on the side of their heads, but owls' eyes are in front like humans'. So now this reader can reorganize the text into larger boxes by saying that owls are different from most birds, and the student can cite evidence from across the book to provide support.

When reading nonfiction, readers will naturally question the information they are reading. For example, "How come male Emperor Penguins stay alone, keeping the egg warm on its feet for two months, with nothing to eat, while the female leaves to fish in the ocean?" Too often, however, our students' nonfiction books are filled with questions without an answer in sight. We teach our readers to not only read on seeking out answers, but also to think back over everything they've read so far and everything they already know. For example, a student might answer, "Maybe the male Emperor Penguin keeps the egg warm instead of the mother because on page 12 it says he has that big flap of fat that she doesn't have" or "Maybe the Emperor Penguin is like the sea horse and the males are the ones who are responsible for the babies until they are born."

Another way to teach students to grow thinking about the information they're reading is to encourage kids to read while commenting on the text: "That's weird," "That's cool," "That's interesting," or "That's gross." Teach students to value those places in the text that draw them in, first to say in their own words what they have read, then to ask themselves a question and try to answer it by saying, "I think..." For example, if the text says, "Rats can chew through almost anything. Concrete, even iron cabinets are no match for their inch long teeth," a student might say in his own words, "Rats' teeth are really strong. They can chew through really hard materials." Then he might ask, "Why do they need to chew through everything?" which might be answered this way: "I think rats chew through iron and concrete so that they can get to food that is hidden, and maybe to find other safe places to nest."

You can also teach readers to push their thinking by looking at what the information is telling them but not saying – inferring. For example, in response to the text, "The whale has to come up for air," a student might say, "The thought I had is a whale can't breathe under water."

When reading books on unfamiliar subjects, as is often the case with nonfiction texts, students will encounter many new words. Be prepared to help your students handle this new vocabulary. Often, after an author uses a word a reader doesn't know, she provides clues about the meaning of the word. Sometimes students simply need to substitute the synonym and then read on. Always, after a student speculates over what a word means and reads on, he needs to think, "Is this making sense?" and to be prepared to deal with confusion over active meaning-making strategies. Teachers can help by encouraging students to use key vocabulary from the text. This is helpful even if a reader is shaky on word pronunciation and correct use. Ideally, the student who is learning about elephants will look up from the text and say, "I never knew that an elephant's skin wrinkles when the elephant gets *dehydration*."

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Students will also profit from learning how to use text features to make sense of the text. Students need explicit instruction in order to learn to “read” illustrative portions of the text carefully (e.g. photographs, quotes, timelines, charts, and maps). Teach them to ask, “How does this diagram fit with the main ideas I’m learning?” and to look across pictures to compare, gather information, and grow ideas.

Somewhere near the end of the unit, show students that some texts are a mixture of non-narrative and narrative structure. These texts present an idea, supported by facts, and then may tell a story that relates to or illustrates the idea. Some texts like this begin with a story, a letter, a diary entry or a mini biography, and then move into expository text structures. Because texts structured in this way often can’t be broken down into boxes and bullets, we can teach students to instead treat them like photographs and quotes, asking, “What is this letter or story teaching me?” and “How does it fit with what I have been learning?” Teach students to synthesize all the information on a page or in a section by determining how all the parts of the text fit together. It is essential then to teach your students to assess a text using what they now know about expository and narrative text structures, then to use appropriate strategies for each part of the text, as well as to synthesize the whole. We can also teach readers to stop at the end of a text they’ve read and to reflect on what they have learned. We can teach them to try to answer these questions: “What do I know now that I didn’t know before reading this book/text?” and/or “How is my thinking different from reading this text?”

As students become flexible with the strategies to use on various forms of nonfiction, and as they keep reading across texts on similar subject matter, we will want to teach our adolescents to have an interpretive and sometimes critical eye on the texts that they are reading. We will want to teach them that nonfiction does not necessarily mean it is the truth, or at least not the whole truth, about that topic. In our Read Alouds we can show how as we read we might notice the word choice the author uses to describe their topic, and we can teach that this close reading can help us to determine what the author wants us to think feel or believe about the subject matter he is writing about. Going further, we can show how by choosing what facts to include and which stories to tell the author also might expose his bias. As readers we can look for what is missing in our nonfiction texts as well as read closely what is there. In a book about rats, for example, an author might underplay the remarkable qualities of rats, or might omit the facts about our intertwined relationship with rats (i.e. they eat our trash), and in noticing this omission a reader might interpret that the author wants us to think negatively about rats. After reading across a few texts, we now can come to our own interpretations of our subject matters, instead of following one or two author’s opinions as the final word on the subject.

Carrying all of our hard work from across the unit, some teachers take their students out into the very present nonfiction that exists in their world – to magazines and newspapers and television news programs – and ask students to apply their close reading and critical thinking skills on these vitally important texts.

Partnership Work for All Grades

Be sure your readers have a chance to explain to their partners what they’ve learned each day. Students need opportunities to synthesize what they read by talking about their reading. Nonfiction readers read to learn; they need regular opportunities to synthesize this learning by teaching someone else. This expectation creates accountability to the text for nonfiction readers; they know

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they will have to explain the big ideas of the text to someone else. You may want to teach students ways to explain what they’ve learned to their partners. Students can be taught how to prepare for

partner talk by rehearsing how they'll explain important information by using the text's pictures and charts, by using their explaining voice and explaining finger, and by using gestures. When partners meet, instead of just saying what they have learned, they can point out the details in the pictures or diagrams that highlight what they're saying. They can link previous learning to the new information that they just encountered by flipping back and forth to show pictures that build off of each other and by explaining how those pictures go together. They can add gestures to their explanations and use their voice to emphasize what's important. They can also act out what they learned and invite their partner to join in. For example, if one partner is explaining to his partner that owls don't flap their wings like most birds, but rather they glide, he could have his partner put out his arms and flap his arms like wings. Then, he could instruct his partner to sway his body and keep his arms out and still in order to illustrate the difference between gliding and flapping.

By coaching nonfiction reading partnerships, you can teach students how to help each other navigate, synthesize and get through the difficult parts of nonfiction texts. Because readers are always reading nonfiction texts in order to become authorities on a topic, it's very powerful for them to have the opportunity to teach others what they've learned from the text. The most important daily work of nonfiction reading partners is for one student to get ready to explain to another, "Today, I learned..."

This reading work will work best if two students in a partnership are reading and talking about a shared topic. If you're worried about partners sharing a topic because you don't have duplicates of your books, rest assured that the only thing required is several texts on a topic; partners don't need to read the same text. There will be great excitement when one book contradicts another, and this will provide opportunities for you to teach about author perspective and bias. Students will also be pleased when one text fills the gaps left by another. This is a perfect time to remind students that their own lives and areas of expertise function as yet another sort of text. If the reader is knowledgeable about a topic, his own information can contradict, add to, or elaborate on the information found in texts.

At the end of the unit, partners or individual students who have read many books on a topic can come together and plan a presentation that they'll make to the rest of the class, or to another class, on the shared topic they studied. Students, who are in partnerships, might each take one part of their studied topic and teach that part to others. They may set up an experiment. Students who are skilled in technology may put together a power point presentation. These presentations are meant to be simple and quick but can help solidify what students have learned and add interest and investment to the topic studied.

Read-Aloud

During the nonfiction unit of study, you will want to read aloud a variety of nonfiction texts, so you can provide students with opportunities to synthesize, have thoughts off the text, make connections, activate prior knowledge, and so on. Early in the unit, it makes sense to read aloud narrative nonfiction such as biographies or true stories of animals or people. Teach students to turn on their minds to listen for story structure and pay attention to character. Show them how readers of narrative nonfiction expect the text to teach them something, so they can stop and jot after parts of the story about what the story teaches so far. You will need to model this kind of thinking and inferring explicitly, as it may be new for students to listen and narrative structure,

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such as the DK Reader, *Shark Attack*. Here you can model how readers learn that "sharks are dangerous," from the story embedded in a text, even though the facts may contradict this. This teaches readers to pay attention to every part of the text—to what it teaches explicitly through clear

statements, and what it gets us to feel, through the power of the story.

You'll also want to show them how nonfiction readers assess a text, make plans for how to read it, and begin by chunking it and moving across the sections and pages, including the pictures and diagrams. In the read-aloud, you'll want to demonstrate how readers learn new words from the context clues and from glossaries, and demonstrate word attack strategies they use as they read nonfiction. As you read aloud, you may want to organize a chart that shows how readers synthesize and retell the text as main ideas and supporting information/examples. So if you're reading a text called *The Parrot Who Says He's Sorry*, you might teach students that they could try to infer the main idea of the text, so far, after reading the first page—and that the system they may use to organize these notes is a boxes-and-bullets one that looks like this:

Parrots can learn to speak with meaning and intention

- They learn the names for things they can see.
- They can consider cause and effect of language by saying “I’m Sorry”.
- They speak out of some kind of emotion.

As you read, you can also use your voice to emphasize the parts where important ideas are suggested, and information is given to support these ideas. This will particularly help fifth-graders get ready to listen to nonfiction texts. You may teach students to stop and jot as they listen, following the structure they know of “I notice...” and “This makes me think...” to lead them from observing to inferring.

When reading non-fiction, readers will encounter specialized vocabulary. This makes it an opportune time to use read aloud to highlight how readers take on new vocabulary and incorporate the words into their conversations. You may find it helpful to chart the most important vocabulary from the sections you will be reading aloud that day. Each day you will add a few more words. When you come to the part where these words are found, you will point to them and run your finger under them as you say them and have students repeat after you. You may want to give individuals or partners a word bank that has the specialized vocabulary on it so they can find the words on their own sheets. When students turn and talk, or during whole class conversation, you will remind them to use their word banks. This way, they are actively using these words not just that day, but across the days that you are reading aloud that book. If you are reading aloud many books on the same topic, the students will have repeated opportunities to use and learn these words.

When reading aloud, you may want to demonstrate acting out the information as you explain the part you just read. Then, give students an opportunity to act out a part as they are explaining the information their partner. You may also have students stop and sketch what you read, adding details to the sketch as you are reading on. This way, the information they are hearing is being put into action, thereby enhancing their comprehension. Another way to help students understand the information they are learning is to give them a picture or two that you have copied from the book, so they can label them as you read. For example, if you are reading about insects' bodies, and students have a picture of a grasshopper and a beetle in front of them, you can stop to have them add labels like exoskeleton, thorax, abdomen and spiracles as you read about those. Then, partners

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can meet and explain to each other what they learned, or during whole class conversations, students can reference their diagrams to help them explain, compare and contrast.

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Unit 4 – Maintaining a Varied and Independent Reading Life, and Getting Ready to Demonstrate Reading Skills on the Reading Tests

How We'll Use Our Time

The new material in this unit is mostly around organizing for test prep. We learned a lot from watching strong coaches and teachers get ready for this unit and from their concise, direct methods of instruction and practice. The first thing to remember as you prepare students for state reading tests is that the tests are, in fact, reading tests. They test the level at which a student can read with strong comprehension, and in most states, including New York, they test the student's rate as well—the pace at which they read with strong comprehension. Students who read at high reading levels with pretty solid reading rates, meaning they read with stamina and fluency, do well. Students who read below grade level, or who read so slowly that they take an unusually long time to finish books and texts, perform poorly on state tests. Thus, the best preparation for state tests is to teach your students to be stronger readers.

Protected reading time helps students become stronger readers. Differentiated, assessment-based large and small group instruction helps them become independent with reading strategies. Access to texts they find fascinating engages them as readers. That's what they need the most. Don't substitute half an hour filling out a worksheet that has 50 words on it, for half an hour where a student may have read 30 pages of a book. They need to keep reading texts they can read. They need to engage with density of print. Ultimately, the test will test their flexibility, knowledge, and stamina as a reader.

Therefore, students need a protected half hour of independent reading every day, where they continue to read the books they choose, if they are to maintain their rate and level of reading. Students who read below grade level continue to need more time than this for independent reading, and will need support in getting this time outside of class - either at home, in extended day, or in intervention programs.

Think carefully about how you will spend your time as well as how you will structure your days. This unit has a number of overlapping purposes, including getting students ready to read and answer questions about a variety of short texts for the test, and helping students sustain a high volume of just-right reading. You need to plan their time carefully to support the independent reading, test prep, and writing-about-reading work that your students need during this unit. One way to do this is to have a *reading/test prep workshop*, in which you teach how to read, talk about, and answer questions about short test-like texts, as well as multiple choice strategies; a *writing workshop*, in which you teach quick purposeful writing, especially writing about reading and writing for the test; and a separate time for *independent reading*, when students continue to read just-right chapter books. To maintain independent reading time and insert something new such as time for test prep demands, something may change in the students' schedules. Some schools protect their reading time during class and do test prep during extended day or after school. Some schools have their independent reading time during a protected block and do test prep in class. Some schools substitute test prep or independent reading for some of their social studies work for the few weeks of this unit. Some schools do 15 minute of test prep a day, followed by 30 minutes of independent reading.

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To begin, be sure to keep up with reading logs and protected reading time. It's too long a time across this unit of study to have students reading only short and often hard texts; this could be very dangerous to adolescent readers. It is often helpful to launch students into partnered reading of series books, if possible, so they can work on their reading with each other, with books they enjoy. It's not enough to say that students will simply read at home. Few students will read for homework unless they start that reading and have some opportunities to talk to a partner in the classroom. Adolescents need to read for long stretches of time, in order to keep up their stamina, reading rate, and fluency. The tests are normed to the reading rate at which students read fiction. Students can only sustain this rate by continuing to develop their skills and pace on narrative texts.

As the whole-class unit of study progresses, be sure to analyze reading logs to make sure students are continuously making time for independent reading outside of the typical school day. It is helpful to look at a reading log and think, "Is this student making time for reading?" and, "Is the time consistent?" If not, be sure to design creative ways to enable them to keep up with their reading. For instance, look at the daily schedule with your class and talk about ways to fit in more reading time across the day.

Getting Ready: Assembling Materials for Test Prep

It's getting easier to assemble test prep material (short texts that have questions that you may or may not use) as you have more years of the state test available. You can now take your texts from prior state tests, which look *and are* just like the state test, rather than from other places. On our website we have three years of state tests as well as the sample test, all written by the same company. That gives you four sample texts for every type of short text at each grade level.

You'll undoubtedly want to use these materials to make a packet of actual test texts. One way you can successfully organize texts for this unit is to decide on the order in which you are going to be reviewing the kinds of texts students would encounter on the test so that you could use these to teach or reinforce the reading strategies, predictable questions, languages, and strategies for answering multiple choice. For instance, you might decide to first do some work with realistic fiction, then historical fiction, then allegories or fables. From there you might move to nonfiction that is narrative, then nonfiction that is informational, and then do some poetry. For each of these, you might assemble texts from the last three years of state tests, using texts from prior grades. Middle school teachers have access to tests from grades 3-8 on the state's website nysed.gov and on our website. Depending where your students are, you might choose to take tests from just one or two grades below yours. Or you might choose to start with several grades below. The trick here is to be sure that your students are successful! The first day you review with kids, use the easiest text. Then you can assess student success and either move to a harder text, stay with the easier, or differentiate by groups. (A word of caution: While it might be tempting to think that strugglers need lots of practice reading too-hard texts, the evidence is overwhelming that they can't and don't read these. The last thing these readers need is to spend the month prior to the ELA working with texts they can't read!)

As you design these packets, keep in mind that the tests often include:

- narrative non-fiction, such as biography.
- an historical and a scientific text
- some kind of feature article or all-about text.
- fiction that is usually moralistic; often one of these selections will be a fable, folktale, allegory, or other story with a clear moral lesson.

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- realistic or historical fiction -- The realistic fiction usually has unfamiliar characters, setting or problem – in some cases it’s been combinations of these. Don’t expect stories of teens dealing with bullying. Let your students know that they should expect stories like: a young girl leading her family’s camel herd through a sand storm.
- usually a poem.
- sometimes a memoir is included.

Look at last year’s state test first, and then look to the year before, to make sure you are making an accurate assessment of the genres students will encounter on the state test. Here’s our latest assessment of common possible texts for NYS ELA. If you are a New York State School the NYS ELA we recommend you visit their website is <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/ela.html>

Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
Feature article (science) Poem How-to Fiction (realistic fiction) Biography	Feature Article (science) Fiction (realistic fiction, historical fiction) Poem Non fiction text (excerpt from book) Allegory (fable, folk tale, legend)	Fiction (realistic fiction, historical fiction) Article (science, history) Poem Biography
Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Article (science, history, human interest/success story) Fiction (historical fiction, realistic fiction) Biography Poem Fable/Folktale	Article (science, history, human interest/success story) Fiction (historical fiction, realistic fiction, excerpt from novels) Biography Poem Fable/Folktale	Article (science, history, human interest/success story) Fiction (realistic fiction, historical fiction, and excerpt form novels) Biography Poem Allegory (fable, legend, folk tales)

Once the packets are formed, you can take the first text, and do a prompted read aloud with it, prompting the students for predictable things to be thinking and talking about with a partner as they read. At the end of the read aloud, the students can answer the multiple choice questions, in partnerships or independently. By doing this, you are teaching them to be alert as they read – practicing first together by reading the text aloud and prompting them. You’ll probably do this read-aloud, prompted work across one or two more days, moving up the levels of text as appropriate. Then, you’ll teach them to read the text silently and do the same work. You can also be observing and coaching them as they work, on any specific kind of question which causes them trouble.

If you need extra materials for extended day or small groups, you can take a text such as a short story, article, or poem, and make a series of test-like questions to go with the text. Good sources for these texts are *Highlights*, *Cricket*, *Cobblestone*, *Read and Rise*, *Story Works* and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. You might put these questions in the same order for each text so the first question is main idea question, the second is vocabulary in context, the third is about mood/emotion/tone, and the fourth is a genre question, etc. Next, make the same kinds of questions for a variety of levels of texts—for instance, a story at a J-K level, a story at an M-N level, a story at a P-Q level. Thus, you can track how a student is doing on particular kinds of reading work at each level. This helps you because it may not be that a student can’t answer main idea questions, it may be that he can only answer them successfully until the text is over level N. Then you know both what level of texts to teach him to practice on, and that over that level, he

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doesn't need main idea help, he needs some strategies for reading too-hard texts, such as skimming, summarizing, underlining, jotting, using the pictures and headings if there are any. You can teach him those, as well as sharpen his main idea strategies, try him again on the texts, and see if he's doing better with main idea and with that level.

Getting Started on Accessible Texts

You might find that you could do a lot of your test preparation—in which you introduce the kinds of questions that will be asked, and teach students how to infer the answers from the texts—on short texts with which students are already familiar. When you are sure students are familiar with the story, this gives you a window into assessing if it is the language of the questions that they may struggle with, and you can do some small group instruction on common test language.

In all grades, you may wish to introduce this work with short fiction, move to close reading of informational or non-narrative nonfiction, which is usually easier, and then move to narrative nonfiction such as short biographies, memoirs, success stories, as well as other kinds of narratives such as fables, allegories, and folktales. Then you may introduce some poetry. In this way, you can teach students that the strategies of close reading, which include paying attention to character, detail, imagery, and structure, reading for meaning and ideas, building an understanding of what the text says explicitly and inferring what it suggests as bigger meanings or lessons, are the same across genres.

You will want to teach your students two main approaches to test prep to get ready for their daily learning and practice. The first is that they have to be alert as they read – they should have expectations of how the text will go based on their understanding of this genre. For example, they will read, thinking about what challenge the main character faces and how he or she resolves this problem, when the text is a fictional story. As part of this alertness, you'll teach them some of the predictable questions, such as the lesson a text teaches, or the big or main idea of a text.

Secondly, you'll teach them to read the question stem and predict the answer before looking at the answer choices, so that they do smart reading work and aren't seduced by the distracters. In fact, the first few times you may choose to not give them the answer choices and simply have them write in the answer, and/or circle in the text the part that supports their answer. Students are easily confused by multiple choice answers (that's the point of the distracters) therefore it's important to teach them to construct a text-based response first, before revealing the possible answers. For a day or two, you could teach them to write answers to questions without showing them any answers; then teach them to cover the answers, go back to the text and predict the answer based on their understanding, then match their prediction to the answer choices.

Now, begin the work with a prompted read-aloud of one text with partner talk, and then have them immediately answer the multiple choice questions. You'll probably start with realistic fiction. Start with the easiest text you have chosen. Assess their success. Decide if you need to teach your students anything about what the test is looking for with certain kinds of questions such as the vocabulary always being in context, or the main idea or theme being a big lesson the character learns or teaches us. Do it again the next day, probably with a prompted read-aloud, or if you think they're ready, with silent partner reading and partner talk as they go. Then do a third day on the same genre, with silent reading and independent work, and, if you need it, some small group work – though you may be mostly coaching during this time, and doing some small group work in extended day.

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Students benefit from doing this work first in partnerships on accessible texts. It's helpful if they are allowed to write on their texts as they will on the ELA: to annotate them by underlining important places where they learn something about the character, jotting in the margins the problems characters face, where the character changes, or the big ideas of sections of articles. It's also helpful if students spend a day or two underlining or starring the part of the text where they found or inferred their answer so they can talk to a partner about how they're answering questions, and so you can see what they're doing and coach them. For instance, a student may underline where she found or inferred the answer to question #3, and write a 3 in the margin next to it so you can see what she is doing. This also helps teach students to go back to the text.

After a day or two on accessible short texts, show students how to do the same kind of work on texts that are at the level of the test (with the exception of kids who read way below grade level, who may need to keep practicing on texts that are closer to their level, and moving more slowly towards ones at grade level). You'll then repeat these days across genres, including the kind of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry that will be on the test.

Teaching Students Some Predictable Questions and Language on the Tests

For each genre, teach your students they can use the same strategies of marking the text, predicting, writing the answer and then matching it to the choices, and then gradually just saying the answer in their head and matching it to the choice. To begin to be ready to answer these questions, they need to know what to pay attention to as they read for each genre. You will want to teach your students that they can be guided in their reading by their knowledge of what kind of text is in front of them. If it's a *narrative* text, readers expect to pay attention to and infer about characters: What kind of people characters are, what challenges they face, how they overcome these challenges, how they change, what led to/caused the change, their achievements, the lessons they learn and teach us as readers, and author's craft in structure or language choice. If it's a *non-narrative* text, readers may expect to pay attention to and infer from the structure, headings, and topic sentences what the text teaches us, the big ideas, the evidence it uses to support those big ideas, and author's craft in structure or language choice. If the text is a *poem*, readers may expect to pay attention to what the big meaning of the poem could be, what the poem is mostly about, what it demonstrates or teaches, as well as the imagery and figurative language within the poem. In all texts, for all grades, readers consider the author's purpose, asking themselves, "What does the author want to teach us? What does he or she want us to feel?"

On the ELA, after reading the *fiction and biography or memoir* texts, students will probably be asked to answer questions about who the person is in the story such as, "What kind of person is this? What does he want? What does he accomplish?" Students may also be asked to answer a question about the setting. They may need to infer a lesson from the story. They will probably answer a question about how the character changes, and how that change happens. They may need to infer the character's point of view or perspective.

After reading the expository *non-fiction* text, students will probably be asked to answer questions about the purpose or main idea of the article. They may be asked to provide evidence to support the author's argument, or to differentiate between fact and opinion. They may need to identify the genre, and know where they would expect to find it. For both fiction and non-fiction they will probably be asked the meaning of a vocabulary word in context.

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For poetry selections, students will probably need to answer a question about the overall interpretation or meaning of the poem as well as the meaning or symbolism of a part or line. They may have to answer a question about figurative language such as personification, simile, or metaphor.

In all texts, there may be unfamiliar words, and readers need to envision the subject of the text—what the text teaches or what happens in that part—to get a general sense of the meaning of the word.

It is helpful to teach students to pay attention to signal words such as *and*, *or*, *but*, and *so* as they read nonfiction passages. Many of our dependent readers struggle and skip these words as they read because they are small abstract words. Students' comprehension deteriorates as a result. As teachers, you can make an effort to emphasize these words, and others like them, during read-alouds so students are aware of their meanings.

There are some common skills that help students tackle any text, as well as the ones of the test—including previewing the text to ascertain its subject and structure, making a quick reading plan and breaking the text into manageable chunks, reading across these chunks using strategies to summarize, to synthesize, and to cope with difficulty. There will be a slightly different emphasis on what particular strategies students will use in reading and answering multiple choice questions. For instance, they cannot use the strategy of finding an easier text to help them on the day of the test, nor can they build prior knowledge by reading related tests, nor can they reject texts because they are boring or irrelevant to them. Students can, however, use a bundle of strategies to access schema that will help them move through these texts and the commonly asked questions that follow them. The goal of this unit is to help students realize and sharpen the strategies they know, coach them in making smart decisions about accessing strategies, and increase their familiarity with common text structures and test tasks so that they are flexible and resilient readers on the day of the test.

Teaching Students To Deal with Difficulty

You will certainly want to teach students ways of dealing with difficulty. Even just-right texts pose puzzles. Too often, students create one idea about a text and then read on, continuing to hold to that one idea even when all the upcoming text points to the fact that their initial idea was wrong. Reading is a process of revision. Readers need to realize that as we move forward in a text, we are also constantly going backwards in our minds to realign what we thought the text said with what we are now uncovering. Jotting notes or headings in the margins helps students refer to summaries rather than reread the text, which they won't have time to do. You may worry about these strategies, thinking, "Students will never have time to do this self-correcting when they're in exam conditions." This is true. But, the revision-of-reading work that students do now can influence their first-draft, on-the-run reading as they go forward. If a student realizes she misread because she imagined that an extraneous detail was the main idea, the next time she reads she'll be less apt to do this.

As you approach the test, you will also teach students to skim texts that are very hard for them, to summarize as they go for main idea, to move past hard words unless there are questions that refer to those words, and to only dig into hard parts if they need to in order to answer a question. It's important the students learn to read on, to keep going and to not get demoralized when the text is too hard. They don't need too much practice with this, as it is, in fact, demoralizing. Teach them

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strategies for eliminating answer choices and teach them to move on because they may do better on the next text.

When teaching students to deal with difficulty, you'll want to help them to deal with unknown and scary words. Because this work will occur on the brink of the test, now is probably not the best time to teach readers to persevere over those difficult words to make a stab at pronouncing them. Instead, for now, you will probably want to teach students to substitute a synonym or best-guess understanding and to keep on reading. You may want to encourage them to underline the difficult word also, letting them know that when they reach the end of the passage, they can go back and tackle that word if necessary. The one time students will be most apt to do this is when there is a question on the test which says, "In line 16, what does the word 'blah blah' mean?" Keep in mind that to answer that question, students do not need to pronounce the word. The vocabulary work you will do just prior to the ELA will be more synonym- and contextual-clue-based because of the oncoming test. Most of the words students need to answer questions about can be figured out by thinking about what's happening in that part of the story or article.

As students approach the test, you can also teach them specific multiple-choice strategies such as monitoring time by figuring out how many questions there are and how many minutes they have, and strategies for elimination. You'll also want to teach them how to mark their answer sheet and avoid skipping any questions as they go. Teach them to return to questions they were unsure of if they have time at the end, and to keep going! This kind of teaching and learning is not invigorating and can only be sustained for a few weeks, so do it intensely but briefly.

Read-Aloud

When you read aloud as part of test prep, choose passages that are similar to the ones students will encounter on the test, and that can be read in one sitting. The read aloud will also be different in structure. Focus on getting your students oriented to the text and their job as a reader of such a text rather than thinking aloud. Thus, you will prompt readers for their upcoming listening and thinking work rather than demonstrating this thinking after reading. Start with narratives. Choose the kinds of stories that appear on the test, including realistic and historical fiction, fables, fairy tales, allegorical folktales, and biographies. Your read aloud will support the students' multiple choice work as well as their listening section. You are helping them to read (or listen) as stories unfold swiftly, with their minds alert, ready to answer predictable questions. Start with high interest, short texts, and move only at the end to texts that are actually from the last few years' tests.

For the fiction and fable read alouds, teach students to get ready to listen by thinking about what they know about how stories go, and about their jobs as readers—they are mostly listening for *character, problem, solution*. Prompt them to listen for clues about the setting and the characters. After the first section of the story, encourage partners to turn and talk, and listen for how they may need coaching. Similarly, you might pause in the middle of the story, coaching students to turn and talk about what they've learned about the characters, relationships, and the challenges the characters face. As you get ready to read the end of the story, prompt students to listen for how people change and how problems are solved then give them an opportunity again to turn and talk about these inferences. Finally, coach them to infer possible lessons the story teaches, and to talk about the author's possible purposes. The next time you read aloud, have students talk to a partner beforehand, reviewing what they know about how stories go and what they need to pay attention to as they listen. Continue to interrupt the story for them to turn and talk at appropriate intervals.

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Next time, move them to stop and jot their responses, and finally to jot responses to ELA-like short-answer questions. This way the read-aloud helps prepare students both for the listening selection, in explicitly teaching them to listen with their minds turned on, and to hold a story in their heads, and for the multiple choice, as they listen and come to expect predictable questions.

Because read aloud will help students with both the listening selection and the multiple choice, be sure to read aloud some nonfiction, teaching students to expect that a non-fiction text is going to teach them something. In narrative non-fiction there will be characters in the text so they need to use what they know about story (paying attention to characters, including the obstacles they face, and their achievements) and what they know about non-fiction (looking for the specific idea it teaches, and how the story demonstrates the idea). You'll want your test prep read-aloud to include narrative non-fiction about sports, historical, and scientific figures, for grades that will encounter more of this structure. You'll want to include fiction and narrative non-fiction where the character is an animal. These are common passages on the test.

Similarly, reading poetry aloud supports students' work on the multiple choice section of the test. Teach them to think about what the poem is mostly about, what it teaches, and what the big meaning of the poem could be. Teach them also to notice structure and to recognize and name imagery and figurative language in a poem, and to consider its effect.

Supports for Transitional Readers Who Will Be Taking a State Test at Grade Level

It is helpful to teach the students to read the question and ask, "What does the question mean?" "What is it asking me to do?" Teach them that bold-faced words are very important to pay attention to because they offer guidance about what to look for in the passages. For example, often test questions bold words like '**Before**' and '**After**.' It is wise to teach these students to answer the question before looking at the choices, and then look for the answer choice that best matches theirs. If a student is having trouble answering the question, it is wise to teach him to think back over the story and retell the story to himself. If this does not help, they must return to the story—but not to the beginning. Instead, readers should think about when something happened in the story, in the beginning, middle, or end.

Often when novice test takers have trouble with a question, they pick an answer they remember being in the story, but they don't necessarily pick the answer that best answers the question. It is wise to teach them that most of the answers will be found in the story, but only one answers the question the best.

It is helpful to teach transitional readers the language of the test. We assume that students know what the phrases 'mostly about,' 'most likely' and 'most important' mean. You might find it necessary to make these terms concrete with your students by infusing them into your classroom's daily life. You may even make collages of pictures you cut out of magazines that can be sorted in a few different ways, like clothes, hair accessories, winter accessories. Then you can ask your students what it is they think the collage is mostly about. Students will look and sort and count that there are more clothes than anything else, and they'll say this is mostly about clothes. But students with a more sophisticated sense of sorting into a concept will be able to see that most of the items fit under a broader category, like 'things you wear.'

Sequence words may be used on the middle school test, and so you could weave these words through your daily classroom life. You may ask students to look at today's schedule and find out

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what they will be doing first, right before lunch, and right after reading workshop. You may also ask students to line up for lunch by using sequence words. To help students understand opinion statements, it is helpful to teach them outside of the test. It is really important that students understand what an opinion statement sounds like because a student doesn't have to understand the passage at all to be able to get this question correct. You may support students' understanding of opinion statements by giving them a factual statement, like: 'today is Wednesday and we have PE at 10:00. Next, you could ask students to generate opinion statements about this fact. For example, 'Wednesday is the best day of the week because we have PE.' Bringing test language into our students' lives will demystify it and will help our students gain confidence in their test taking abilities.

You want to study what kinds of questions students are getting wrong and make up practice materials that work specifically on these kinds of questions. You can make up questions that are all on the same skill and have the students practice that during test prep in small groups. To support students on the multiple choice portion of the test, pull all of the students who answered B to come and discuss why they chose B. Ask, "What in the story made you choose B? Do you think it is the BEST answer?" Or, you can pull kids who chose B and C and have them debate: what is the *best* answer? Main ideas and true/false questions are the most useful with this type of small group work.

When answering the short response questions a student needs to ask, "What is the question asking me to do?" Teach your transitional readers to take the question and turn it into the beginning of their response. If they begin the first sentence of their response this way, it ensures they are actually answering the question. For example, if the question asked is, "How does James feel at the end of the day?," students can begin their answer, "At the end of the day, James feels...." Be sure to teach students that their answers must be grounded in details and examples from the story.

Struggling and Emergent Readers—Decoding

Of course, many of our struggling and emergent readers have difficulties decoding and comprehending test passages that tend to be above their independent reading levels. If you notice some of your readers are still having a hard time working through difficult texts, you might need to devote more instructional time to decoding.

When students encounter a hard word to decode or comprehend, they can anticipate what the word should sound like and/or mean and check what they think against what they see. Make sure they understand how to orchestrate the information, and that their word work during reading *looks right* (relying on graphophonic clues), *sounds right* (syntax), and *makes sense* (semantics). Teach them not to pass up tricky words or tricky parts in the short text packets, or their own reading books. Help them learn strategies to be active meaning-makers as they read.

Most importantly, we need to constantly remind our students to be flexible word solvers, using strategies repeatedly, without losing a standard pacing through any one text. Once students figure out a word, they need to be taught to reread, putting the word back into context so its meaning isn't lost. Rereading is indispensable for students who are having decoding issues. On the day of the test, however, it can be problematic for students to reread if it means they risk running out of time to complete the test. Before the test, students might have a book in their baggie from which they reread passages or chapters in order to read with more automaticity and fluency, so that in the crunch of test time, they feel more comfortable with rereading quickly. This book might change

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weekly. The goal of all this, of course, is to have students read through the whole passage with the best possible comprehension the first time.

Vocabulary Enrichment

For many students who are just starting reading texts that are full of literary or book language, the language of the tests poses many challenges. The test values and assesses familiarity with book language. Often a student may understand a question, such as “How is the character feeling in this part?” and she may correctly predict an answer, like, “Nervous.” But she won’t recognize the word given in the answer, which may be “apprehensive” or “anxious.” She’ll know the character is a brave person but won’t recognize “courageous.”

In the weeks before the test, we can’t teach *all* the words that students may encounter, but we can make an effort to enhance students’ familiarity with book language, and broaden the range of words they recognize and use in conversation and in writing. An excellent activity teachers and students did last year was to create word walls of words that described characters. The words were sorted into categories, such as words that describe *happy*, or *sad*, *brave*, *mad*, *scared*, *mean*, *kind*, etc. Underneath these headings, they listed words that meant mostly the same thing, such as *frustrated*, *upset*, and *enraged*, for *mad*. Words can then be sorted from least to most, that is, the words that meant a little mad were put at the top of the list, and the words that meant more mad were put at the bottom. That visual cue helps students understand the graduated meanings of these words. We’re not looking for students to learn dictionary meanings of these words, but to see, and hear, and try using a wider variety of literary words.

You may use these words walls during read aloud as you stop and think aloud for the students. For example, you may pause and say, “I imagine Andrew (*Fly Away Home*) is feeling, let’s see, ‘apprehensive,’ right now.” You may also prompt your students to use these words in their partner conversations during read aloud – they may talk about how the character is feeling, using words from the word wall. When you do this, you’ll find that students prompt for more categories of words, as they seek words that mean “proud,” and “shy,” etc.

Students can also use these words on the post-its they jot about their independent reading books. If they keep occasional post-its that track what a character is feeling, they can revise or add to these post-its, using words from the word wall. When students write about reading either in their readers’ notebooks, or as they learn to write literary essays or in getting ready to write about reading for the test, they can revise this writing using more literary language to describe characters.

Ways to extend this word wall work include keeping word walls in social studies and science, studying words that are related to the units of study, and keeping a word wall of words that describe stories and nonfiction, such as engaging, interesting, fascinating, disturbing, provocative, lively, fast-paced, informative, action-packed, etc.

Unit 5 - Reading with Close Comprehension: Genre-Based Clubs

Feb. There are compelling reasons to follow the sequence of study described up until this point in the year, but from here on, the sequence is more a matter of personal preference. This is a critical time of year for our middle schoolers: some of them may feel a lack of urgency, given that it's halfway through the year and, if they're in New York State, the test is now behind them. This first unit after the exam is our chance to hook them into authentic reading and writing work for the rest of the year. This is an opportunity to open the curriculum to genres that your students love to read (and will therefore love to write), and to work with the social nature of our adolescents, rather than against it. Given a chance to choose the genre and their reading companions, engagement in reading workshop takes care of itself. For these reasons, we strongly recommend that students are now given the opportunity to work in book clubs rather than simply in partnerships. Genre-based clubs are easy to lead and are almost always successful if kids have a choice of the genres they read and with whom they'll read. You'll need to select your genres that you make available with an eye towards students' book levels, and also with thought about the writing you hope your students are doing. We recommend that students' reading and writing be aligned, so if your students read historical fiction, consider inviting them also to write historical fiction.

If your school is in New York State, and you have been working on test prep during the previous weeks, it's likely that your students have been reading lots of short texts to prepare for the texts they have to read and respond to on the state exam. Now that the test is over, it is absolutely essential that students read *books*, not yet more short texts (they will have had too many of those in the preceding month). It is also essential that they are reading a vast quantity, so be sure that whatever you teach, your teaching and your students' book club conversations do not combine to overwhelm time for actual reading.

Students' abilities to talk about books may have grown rusty over the past few weeks, and even their stamina could need some shoring up. If it seems difficult to make the transition from reading tests to book clubs overnight, you might begin this unit with a week in which you emphasize that readers need to resume their independent reading lives. Then, while you fire up independent reading you can also launch clubs in a staggered fashion, with first one club starting, then another, another. Just don't wait long before starting clubs; the sooner students get into clubs, the better they become at reading and talking together to make more of their books.

Overview of Book Clubs

In a book club, members usually read duplicate copies of the same books, progressing through the texts in sync with each other. This means that members of any club need to be fairly well-matched by reading level. The groups profit if members are diverse by gender, ethnicity, and ability to engage in book talks. Usually teachers combine several partnerships to form a club, with four and occasionally six members. Sometimes, however, for one reason or another, a group of students has a hard time working together or staying in sync as readers, and it's not unheard of for a club of four readers to become two clubs of two readers. Some clubs are twosomes from the start.

Book clubs provide us with another opportunity to push our readers to read more. Book clubs rely on members having read to the same point in their texts. This means that members of a club need to make and keep deadlines, saying, "By Wednesday, let's read up to Chapter Six." Teachers, you will want to check to see if your students' self-imposed deadlines are aligned with Dick Allington's research. Are students who read levels M and N reading at least three or four books a

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week? If students are reading level T texts, are they finishing at least one of these in a week? Are students who are reading at levels X-Z finishing in one or at most two weeks, depending on the number of pages in the book? If not, then be aware that your reading curriculum may be getting in the way of your kids' reading development. Be sure students carry books between home and school, devoting time most evenings to reading. It's not uncommon for book clubs to jettison reading, so this is a time when reading logs are especially important.

Book clubs rely upon students being able to develop an idea while reading the book at home, jotting the idea down, then bringing it to school the next day, to the conversation. If your students have not yet become accustomed to writing as a way to capture their own ideas, if they're not holding on to their ideas in this fashion, you'll want to help students use writing as a way to think about reading. You may institute a ritual of giving readers a bit of time after they've read and before they talk to look over the text and review their notes in order to "get ready for their talk."

How Read-Aloud Can Support Talk During Book Clubs (and Partnerships)

We hope that all year long, you've read aloud and you've involved students in interactive book talks afterwards. If you haven't done a lot of work with whole-class conversations around the read-aloud book, highlight these now. Our Unit 2 write-up can help you get these started.

The read-aloud work you do in this unit will probably revolve around 2-3 read-aloud texts of varied lengths in the genre the class is studying. Usually we first read aloud a picture book or a very short chapter book, then progress to longer texts.

If you're moving your students into clubs right away in this unit, you may ask students to sit with their book club members during read-aloud time. When they turn and talk in response to the read-aloud, they can now do so with their club members, getting yet another opportunity during the day to talk with each other. This also gives you another chance to coach them as they talk within their club. We often feel constricted in our book club conferences when we aren't familiar with the texts students are reading—the fact that we know the read-aloud book under discussion helps us feel more effective in our coaching. Encourage students to extend each other's ideas with conversational prompts such as, "I agree with...", "Another example is...", or "To add on..." They should value debate and be able to question each other's claims, asking, "Where do you see evidence of that?" and saying, "On the other hand..."

After students talk in their clubs about the excerpt you've just read aloud, you'll convene a whole-class conversation. It's not hard to teach students to stay with and elaborate on each other's ideas after they are in a whole-class conversation. Try transcribing parts of their talk and then using the transcript as a teaching tool. During a minilesson, you can ask students to learn from a particular strength in the transcript, and a particular need as well. Of course, as students become more skilled at talking about the read-aloud, you'll want to be sure they're talking in similar ways in their book club conversations.

It's really important that in the book clubs in your class, students are accumulating information within and across their shared texts. Encourage club members to ask, "How does my knowledge of this character build from one page to the next, one chapter to the next? What other texts have I read in my life that can help me understand these texts?"

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You may also encourage students to use clubs as a time to explore vocabulary that they do not understand. Researcher Harvey Daniels suggests bookclub members keep club word-lists, with students collaborating to develop definitions for the words they collect, then trying to thread those same words through their book talks. Certainly, you'll encourage the class to draw on the word chart described earlier, containing specific words for character traits.

Launching Clubs

Once you launch clubs, you'll need to decide how to divide up the reading workshop time. One system that works well is for clubs to meet for the second half (or third) of the reading workshop and to meet on two or three days a week, with the miniles son supporting the reading work and the mid-workshop teaching point supporting the talk work students do in their book clubs. You'll also need to decide how much time to give to talk versus reading. If students are reading forty-five minutes each night, you can devote as much as 30% of the reading workshop to talk. If they aren't reading that much at home, you'll need to reserve more class time for reading. Then, too, you'll need to decide whether all the clubs will meet at the same time, with other times set aside for quiet reading, or will you stagger the clubs? If all students are talking at the same time and all are reading at the same time, this lessens your chances to support their talking, but helps with noise.

The Genre Study

Your first decision will be the genres you and the students will explore. Your class could read, in small groups, mystery, realistic fiction, historical fiction, or fantasy, or you could launch an all class study of one of these, followed by independent club studies. Your next decision is content. What is it you aim to teach? That is, if you invite your whole class to spend the month engaged in a shared study of a genre, keep in mind that although *the students* will think the focus on the unit is on a kind of text—say, mysteries—you will know that your real goal is to promote the reading skills, strategies and habits that will help students whenever they read anything. That is, a unit on mysteries gives you a wonderful chance to teach readers to read closely, collecting and synthesizing clues... and this is how a reader reads any book, not just a mystery. A unit on historical fiction gives you a chance to teach readers to synthesize elements of story, thinking not just about the setting but about how the setting effects the characters and the plot... and this work is universally important for all readers of stories. Before your genre-based work begins, then, you need to decide on the reading skills you plan to highlight within the unit of study.

Historical Fiction – Envisionment, Synthesis, Interpretation

Goals for the Unit

If your students are preparing to write Historical Fiction, then you will want to engage in a whole class study in which your students are reading within the genre as well. Alternatively, you can have small groups of students reading and writing historical fiction while others read and write other genres. A study focused on reading Historical Fiction can be a wonderful opportunity for readers to fine tune their envisionment skills. Historical Fiction invites readers to pay close attention to the setting – the time and place – of a story and to work towards envisioning the world the characters inhabited. When reading the beginning chapters of almost any historical fiction book, a reader needs to envision the world in which the story takes place. Invite students to envision and then to revise what they envision as the author provides more and more clues. You may find it helpful to show a short film clip, such as the opening three minutes of *Mulan* (the Walt Disney feature animation), to demonstrate to readers how much information is usually given at the start of a historical fiction text. Right away, readers are given information about the important characters, their world and way of life—and the challenges and conflicts associated with these.

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Some struggling readers find that talking about a film clip raises their engagement and their ability to pay attention to detail, and they can bring this engagement then to their books. As readers experience the way these details are tucked into the story, they will be primed to write in this way as they revise their own leads later in the writing unit.

Historical fiction also invites readers to empathize with characters who are inherently different than the reader. We want to teach young readers to see themselves in others, to break apart the boundaries that seem to separate us, in the hope that the students in our classrooms will grow into a global imagination. In that way, the work reading students do in historical fiction can parallel some of the work they do in social issues book clubs – a kind of reading to foster social justice. They can learn with you to raise burning questions in their book clubs about why history unfolds the way it does, how individual stories bear witness to suffering and courage, and what lessons we can take from characters’ experiences. Their jottings and conversations will grow as you coach into this synthesis work, helping them place two ideas next to each other in order to form a new, more nuanced idea.

Gathering Resources Before the Unit Begins

Before beginning this unit of study, the most important question is this: do you have enough Historical Fiction books so that students can read books at the appropriate level, and make choices about what they read? All our studies, and those by Richard Allington, show that students need to be reading with high volume and high interest all of the time—and we know that interest and choice go hand-in-hand. This means that within the unit, you’ll need enough books at your students’ just-right levels so that they can still choose books they want to read. Don’t put a reader in books that he or she cannot read or doesn’t want to read just so that the reader can ‘be in the unit.’ Be particularly thoughtful of the needs of your struggling readers, who need to be reading a lot. More than others, these students need to read books that they find fascinating. So first, look at your book choice and do everything possible to gather many titles at various levels. You will also need to do some good ‘book talks’ about the books that you have available so you can lure your students to them.

In the corresponding writing unit, students will be collecting as many new insights as possible about the time period they will ultimately write about. Therefore, you might choose to align your social studies instruction with your historical fiction reading and writing work so students have multiple opportunities to explore this time period. For example, in *social studies* your students might be learning about the Civil War through discussions, trips, film clips, and primary documents—all the while collecting jottings about what they are learning about the period, spending time talking in partnerships and clubs, and creating whole class word walls and charts gathering current understandings. Simultaneously, in *reading* workshop your students might need to be reading historical fiction from *various* time periods (so that you can keep everyone “in books.”) During read-aloud time, you’ll highlight books set within the Civil War. Just because you are studying the Civil War doesn’t mean that your students couldn’t be in book clubs around stories of “war” or “oppression” or “change” - when students read one historical fiction text and then another - this provides an excellent opportunity for them to compare the texts. This kind of inter-textual reading work supports a richer understanding of historical fiction in general.

In both your content study and your reading workshop you may use word charts, timelines, visuals, and maps to record class understandings of the concepts, events, places and vocabulary. You may also decide to make a variety of nonfiction texts available so that students can supplement their

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reading of historical fiction with informational texts. It's helpful to have nonfiction texts with lots of images so that students can use these as references while they envision. If there are any crucial historical events in the stories, try to include some texts that explain these events or give some background information on them. Include maps as well, so students get an idea where the stories they are reading are taking place. Clearly, it takes some work to gather these resources. You may find that you need to visit your local library, or that teachers on a grade level want to rotate baskets of materials in order to share resources. Remember that many students read nonfiction at lower levels than they read fiction, so try to accumulate easier texts. If students are reading nonfiction texts, they may need to be reminded to read nonfiction texts looking for the main idea.

Launch the Unit

You'll probably start by reminding students to draw on what they already know about reading fiction. That is, historical fiction is, above all, fiction, and your students already know a lot about reading stories. Remind them, for instance, that fiction is generally constructed around a character who faces a challenge. So readers can start by being alert to all the information that is given about a character at the start of the story, and they can prepare to talk about what strengths that character has, and what challenges he or she faces. Remind them to pay attention to relationships, and be prepared to talk about how these relationships support or challenge a character.

Make sure students are reading the blurbs of the books on the back cover, and looking at the pictures of the front cover first, to orient themselves to this new time period. Often it is helpful to have them make a post-it that lists the big historical struggle and the names of the main characters, from the back blurb, and put that in front of them as they read. As they read, teach them to pay attention to how, in Historical Fiction, there are typically two stories taking place—one story about how the character grows and changes and one story about how the time period is changing. Teach them to figure out the main character's relationship to this conflict and to also notice other characters' relationships to the conflict. Teach readers that most historical fiction opens with either the historical tension or the personal tension. They can look for and talk about tension in the opening scenes of their stories. Then they can make new post-its every time they find out something new about the main character or the historical struggle. Of course, keep your eye on students who don't seem well-matched and double check them with a quick assessment of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. Your readers need to be holding books they can read independently, not just with support!

As the Unit Unfolds

As they read historical fiction, students will encounter a greater amount than usual of unfamiliar words and concepts. Hence, students may need some supplemental support with vocabulary and decoding. You'll probably teach a minilesson and lead some small groups to help your students figure out the meaning of new words in context. For example, if students read a line of text like "I sashay my bow across the violin strings the way a mosquito skims a summer pond," from *The Bat Boy and His Violin* by Gavin Curtis, they could decode the word sashay but still need coaching in using the rest of the sentence to figure out a meaning that makes sense within the context of the sentence. That is, although you *will* need to teach them to look carefully at the new or unfamiliar words they encounter in texts so as to pronounce the words, you'll also need to go one step further and teach them how to figure out the possible meaning of those words within the context of the story. You can help students figure out these words by envisioning what's happening in that part of the story and by using that to help them find a synonym for the challenging term. The difficult

words will reappear repeatedly across the story and this repetition will help readers construct meanings that make sense and absorb new words into their own vocabularies.

One of the most important aspects of historical fiction, of course, is the setting. In historical fiction, readers need to pay attention to every detail to construct the world of the story. Readers can do the work described in Units 1 and 2 and imagine the places, people, and events of the story. They can read, picturing what this place looks like, including what people are wearing, what buildings look like and what they know about the environment. Teach your readers that the setting is crucial to the plot and character development within any historical fiction text. Teach them to use and practice all their envisionment skills, describing to each other the details of this place, including how it is different from places they live in or have read about. Teach them to use scenes from films, stories, their memories, and their imaginations to fill in the unfamiliar parts. Most of all, teach them to pay close attention to the author's descriptions and to use them to revise their own envisionment. In a Read Aloud you might comment, "Oh! I was picturing that they were *driving* to their neighbors, but I just read 'the horses hooves clacked loudly against the packed earth,' so I have to revise that picture. I'm picturing now that they are in up in one of those carriages like I've seen in Cinderella, but not so fancy, and it must be really windy, I see their hats tied tightly to their heads and..." This work can be revisited again as students draft and revise their own stories, being conscious of the way writers slowly unfold their stories tucking historical details throughout.

Teach your readers to notice new details, and to accumulate these so that gradually they can talk about the way of life in this place, and how people interact with their environment. This *synthesis* work means that readers are going back to earlier details in the text and putting together different parts of the book as they read. Teach your students to use post-its and their notebooks to accumulate detail. This may lead to some descriptive writing in both their Reader's Notebook, as well as some powerful rehearsal work in their Writer's notebooks. The physical setting is important in historical fiction, but so, too, is the *historical* setting. Teach them to talk about the setting as a place of historical conflict – thus, not just as a physical place, but as a different time, with different issues. Teach them to pay attention to and discuss in their clubs how their character is tangled up in the historical conflict. Is he or she a bystander? A hero? An unwilling hero?

In the context in which *Freedom Summer* is set, for instance, it is perhaps not surprising that John Henry Waddell's older brother Will Rogers doesn't speak in the whole of the story, not even when he is ordered to drain the town pool and to cover it up with blacktop so that people of color can't swim in it. You may want to teach students to think about ways in which an understanding of the story setting can help them supply reasons for Will not speaking, or for other events, other reactions. While a student may at first say, "Oh, I would never have done that. I would have put my shovel down. I would have tried to stop it from happening," you can help them walk in Will's shoes. You can help them look again at the historical conflict and realize that the consequence of Will protesting would have been that he would have been fired, arrested or hung.

You can deepen this *interpretive* work by showing your students that readers often think about issues of power among groups and between characters. With the lens of power, readers can ask: who has power in this story? How do they keep power? In historical fiction, another way of approaching issues of power is by looking at instances of resistance. Usually, where there are inequities of power, historically there is also resistance, and many historical fiction novels are about personal resistance or community resistance. Teach your students to look for and talk about

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who has power, and how you uncover issues of power in the book. For example, you might show

how, in *Freedom Summer*, the narrator's parents employ someone who cooks and cleans for them, which is one sign of power. Then, you could teach them the more subtle interpretive work, such as helping them see that they, as readers, can come to see things the character doesn't even see yet. For instance, you could show how troubled you are when *Freedom Summer*'s narrator is eating dinner in the dining room, and John Henry and his mother are in the kitchen, even though the narrator doesn't seem to notice anything odd about not eating in the same room as his "best friend." It's tremendously powerful for young readers to realize that they have insights at which even the main character has not yet arrived. And then they can track when the character begins to develop the same ideas they have! This lends itself well to small group work with your Historical Fiction writers as well, showing some writers how they can reveal troubling truths about their time period with which the main character may not even be aware.

Use Your Read-Aloud to Support the Unit

Plan to use your read-alouds to anchor this unit. For instance, the class read aloud may focus on World War II, in which case the teacher may read aloud *Baseball Saved Us*, *The Yellow Star*, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, or *Number the Stars*. The read aloud would then include both picture books and chapter books of varied lengths, all about World War II. If the students were to read books from a variety of time periods, the class read aloud could also switch time periods.

In turn-and-talk you might say something like:

- "So the main character is facing a big problem. Turn and talk to your club, how do you think she may try to solve it?" (prediction, interpretation, intertextuality)
- "Hmm, I'm thinking that if I were this character in this situation, I might have done something different. Stop and jot what you would do, keep in mind what we know about that time." (interpretation, envisionment, accumulating the text)
- "So far we've gathered a lot of details about the setting! Stop and jot, how do you think the setting is affecting the main character?" (determining importance, interpretation)
- "How do you think what just happened will affect the character? Turn and tell your partner." (prediction)
- "How does this situation compare to other experiences or situations we've read about?" (intertextuality)

Fantasy: Envisionment, Monitoring for Sense, Identification with Characters, Synthesis

You may choose to study fantasy, as a class or in small group studies. In choosing to study fantasy with your class, you are inviting students to journey to other lands. You are inviting students to travel to worlds that authors have created and to create their own fantasy worlds in writing workshop. For some of our middle school students, nothing could be more freeing for them than to be able to leave this world, with its tests and cyber-bullies and acne, far behind. Whether it's stretching their powers of imagination by envisioning strange creatures in strange landscapes, or deepening their understanding of characterization by studying heroes and their nemeses, every challenge that fantasy poses will push your readers and writers to find new ways of seeing, new ways of interpreting, and new ways of expressing themselves.

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Establish Goals and Plan the Content of Your Teaching

Begin by thinking of your goals. You no doubt want students to understand that lots of readers of fantasy books carry those books with them always, reading them in stolen moments all day long, reading vastly more in a day than they have ever read. Lots of times, fantasy readers are series readers. We often read the books in sequence (largely because we are always waiting for the next to be released, and when it is we rush to get hold of it).

Then you need to decide which reading skills you want to develop in this unit, and to be sure that you assess those skills several times in the unit so that your teaching is deliberately designed to support skill development. Of course, you can teach envisionment within this unit. If you wish to assess your kids' abilities to envision prior to the unit, you may want to acquire the Higher Level Comprehension Assessments the Project has developed (check our website). That is, dozens of teachers have helped the TCRWP take three stories (at Levels K, R, and V) and insert questions into them which lead readers to do bits of writing-to-reveal-their-envisioning. We have created a continuum of proficiency and extrapolated specific skills which need to be developed in order for a reader to envision well. Above all, students need to go from literal to inferential envisioning. They need to not only see whatever the words of the story explicitly *say*, but to also see what those words *suggest*. This involves bringing their own experiences to bear, filling in the gaps of the text. If you are clear that most of your students are reading in a literal fashion, then you may decide that in this unit, you will be helping them develop more inferential envisionment. To do this, you will need to teach them to draw on prior knowledge (which could be extra challenging when reading fantasy books because they have NOT been in places like these). You need to teach them to read between the lines, letting bits of precise information convey more than meets the eye. If the text says, "The sun was peeking over the horizon as I..." then the proficient reader not only sees the sun, this reader also knows it is morning and hears the morning sounds. Students may be hesitant to fill in the gaps as they read fantasy stories because these worlds and characters are products of the author's imagination, but you can help them to realize their will be internal consistencies within the text. If the boys all have flatheads and a new character—a male—appears on the scene, the skilled reader gives that male character the requisite flathead.

This work will carry over into their writing as well. If your students start out by writing in their notebooks about their imagined lands, they may work in partners or in their book clubs during writing workshop time to read each other's work, using envisioning skills in reading to support descriptive writing and work with "show and tell." If there is not enough detail in a writer's draft for a reader to envision a full picture, the writer may revise to fill in the missing pieces. If a notebook entry building the world of the story reads, "The dragon lived at the end of a long road in a dark cave," partners may add to this by saying, "I'm picturing a twisty, thin road with weeds growing alongside it."

Of course, you may decide to focus on reading skills other than envisionment. For example, you can use this unit as an opportunity to revisit the content you taught in October's unit on character, only this time doing so in a fashion which helps readers integrate and synthesize all the elements of the story in order to understand the reasons *why* characters act as they do. That is, you could spotlight the fact that, as good readers, we know our characters and the worlds they live in so well that we understand why characters act as they do, even if we do not always agree with their decisions. Such a unit could support the skills of inference, synthesis and prediction (if we understand why our characters act as they do, inferring causes and effects, then we can use this to help us make truly informed predictions). The unit would be challenging because readers of

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fantasy can't simply rely on our own personal responses and on empathy in order to understand why characters act as they do—the characters in a fantasy story live by the rules and values of another world. To understand the character's decisions, a reader needs to ask, "What rules do these characters live by? How are the 'rules' of this culture different than (and similar) to those of my culture?" Readers might want to ask, "Who has power in this world?" We can teach them to pay attention to any legends or folklore that might be mentioned early in the book as a way to know more about the belief systems of the characters. This work can flourish especially if students are reading across a series.

You could, of course, forward entirely different skills. You could use this as a time to teach readers to respond personally to the stories they read, and to use personal responses as the starting point towards reading with empathy and towards prediction. If you made this choice, you would help readers understand that although the worlds in their stories are different than our worlds, there are lots of ways in which characters are similar to us. Even though the world of the story is fantastic, students can still discuss how they identify with the characters' traits, problems, and motivations. You can teach them to notice that even heroes have more than one side to them, and even heroes have internal conflicts. While the situations and settings of fantasy are not within the students' lived experience, the inner lives of the characters should resonate.

Launching the Unit

You may wish to launch this unit with a short film clip from the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, or another fantasy film that immediately immerses the viewer in a new world. Another possibility would be to ask students to draw images from an imagined world that they know well through either film or reading. The point is to start this unit by taking students out of this world right away and letting them feel the power of fantasy to transport us to places that exist only in our collective imaginations.

Presumably, early on in the unit you'll forward the goals you have selected. You may also want to help readers bring their knowledge of this genre to bear on their reading. Often, in fantasy books, the hero of the book will embark on a quest, which is introduced early and resolved in part or in whole by the end of the book. You can teach students to pay close attention to the introduction of the quest, to the obstacles that tend to mount as the hero starts out, and to what helps her make it through in spite of all that stood in her way. In read aloud or in coaching into clubs, you will want to show how we can read quest narratives metaphorically; we don't know what it's like to have to fight a dragon, but we do know what it's like to have to face up to a bully even when we want to just walk away. We can start to ask ourselves: what are our dragons? What are our quests? This work will greatly support the students in their initial crafting of story lines for their fantasy writing. Once they see that the internal conflicts of the hero are realistic and familiar, they are less likely to create unlikable, unbelievable characters in their stories.

Fantasy stories are often confusing so you'll want to be sure readers monitor for sense. Time travel can be confusing. The use of different perspectives can be confusing. You may want to teach this unit with an emphasis on the importance of reading for sense and of monitoring for confusion. You may want to teach students that they carry with them a tool kit of strategies (such as rereading, talking with other readers, reading on with a question in mind) for responding to confusion.

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No matter how you decide to angle this unit, it will help you to know a bit about fantasy. Just be careful to use this information sparingly, following the ‘Add flour slowly, stirring all the while’ advice. If this is your students’ first experience in a fantasy unit of study, it is probably enough for most of them to know that in fantasy stories, there are good guys and bad guys. On the other hand, if students have studied fantasy before and you want to make it seem like this will be an All-New and Advanced fantasy unit, you may want to sprinkle in an extra dash of terminology.

Reading Aloud to Support Your Unit

Depending on the skills you decide to highlight, your reading aloud might be interspersed with turn-and-talk prompts such as these:

- “The setting in this book is so unusual! I’m trying to get a picture in my mind, but it is confusing. Let me see... .what do I picture? Umm... Turn and tell each other about what picture you have in your mind.”
- “He seems to be our hero, and I’m thinking he might be a good hero. Ummm... Let me think what qualities make me think that... .Ummm... Turn and tell each other what you are thinking?”
- “So we’ve noticed that there’s a battle going on between good and evil. I’m trying to think what’s going to happen pretty soon. Ummm... Turn and tell your partner what you are thinking.”
- “There are a few secondary characters. I know we read to think about the roles they’re playing? Why is X in this story anyway?”
- “This part seems really confusing... turn and talk to your partner about what’s going on? Turn and talk.”

Mystery: Inference, Close Reading, Synthesis, Prediction

If your students are going to be writing mystery in writing workshop, they will benefit from the conversations, the questions, the theorizing, the edge-of-seat suspense of reading in mystery book clubs. This is a wonderful, straightforward unit, and the reason the unit works so well is that it is totally natural for readers of mysteries to be engaged in one gigantic enterprise. That is, it is totally natural for readers of mysteries to try to solve the mystery before the crime solver does. This one sentence is easy to say—but actually accomplishing this goal is as complex as all of reading. To do this, mystery readers need, above all, to be attentive and constructive readers. Mystery readers need to be close readers and need also to be the opposite—that is, we need to be readers who can pull back to think about the details we are accumulating and make something of them—a hunch, a suspicion, a prediction.

One great thing about this unit is that the books themselves provide a through-line for the unit, a trajectory for readers to follow, a rallying cry which can create the momentum in the unit.

There are other advantages. First, in this unit more than in many others, there are lots of books for readers at diverse (and early) levels. Granted, we are not aware of mysteries that are easier than *Nate the Great* and *Cam Jansen*, but there certainly are lots of mysteries for readers at levels M, N, and O....as well as lots of mysteries that you and I love to read.

Then, too, (if you wish to do so) there are lots of television shows that can be used as touchstone texts. You may want to bring in an episode of *Monk*, or any mystery show you that your kids like, and then use that episode as a touchstone, referencing it often in minilessons. Most of the skills

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that you will want to teach readers in this unit are skills that can be illustrated with reference to any episode of *Monk*, for example. Similarly, you may want to purchase the old-fashioned game of *Clue* and to use that as a touchstone. You can teach readers that just as they needed to keep track of all the possible suspects when playing *Clue*, so too, readers of mysteries do this as well. We have little lists going in our mind, and when we learn new facts, we look back on those lists, sometimes eliminating one suspect or another.

You will also find that there are real-life mysteries in any classroom. Where did the hamster go? Where did I leave my glasses? You can use even just the tiniest of mysteries to convey that readers of mysteries first determine what the mystery is, and then we all become detectives, gathering clues and speculating what those clues might suggest. You will certainly not want to delay conveying to students that this is the central work of the unit, and helping them all get on-about this larger enterprise. As they look around them for these potential everyday mysteries, have their writer's notebooks out and ready so they can jot down potential story lines.

Over the course of the unit, you will revisit this concept to provide more detailed help, but don't postpone inviting kids into the central work of the unit.

You are apt to find that your students experienced a mystery unit in preceding years. That means you'll need to invent ways to make your version fresh and new. If your students are recycling through the unit, be sure to clump together stuff they have already learned—don't parse out every little detail if you are simply reviewing what they already learned. The teaching point in these minilessons could be, "Today I want to remind you that whenever we start a book, it helps to think, 'What kind of book is this?' and to remember all we already know about how that kind-of-book tends to go, using this to help us be powerful readers." To give a new spin to this work, you might decide to focus your study on the personality of the detective, the device of red herrings or false leads, or the role of physical evidence in cases. For any of these angles, you would carry the focus over into their writing work by having them consider this issue in their own mysteries. Of course you will not only teach lessons on this chosen focus, but choosing an angle will be a way to go deep into one aspect of mystery reading for those students who are already up and running with the basic strategies.

If you start your mystery unit by reminding students of all that they know about how mysteries tend to go and the ways that mystery readers need to read, you may soon want to remind students that mysteries are also stories, and that they need to draw on everything they know as readers of fiction. Most importantly, they need to grow ideas about characters. This, of course, becomes a way to help mystery readers realize that collecting clues and using these to grow theories is not just what one does to solve a crime....it is what one does to grow ideas about characters, too. When reading any novel, for example, we collect clues in order to think, "What kind of person is this?" and then we devise tentative hunches which we consequentially add to or revise.

You could progress into teaching readers that whether they are collecting 'who-dun-it' clues or clues about the sorts of people these characters are, they use those clues to predict. (In their writing, they will be working on creating characters who offer the reader these kinds of clues.) A weatherman uses clues to predict the weather, a fortune teller reads the lines on a person's hand to predict what that person's life will hold... Readers are like, and also unlike, weathermen and fortune tellers. Readers' predictions, like a weatherman's predictions, are based on detailed facts

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about what has already gone on. But unlike the weatherman, readers don't sum up our predictions

in a single phrase ('cloudy').

Then, too, you could teach students that good readers often entertain more than one possible prediction.

The point here is not to suggest that this is the pathway you must follow in your mystery unit, but only to say that if students have already experienced the unit, you can't devote one minilesson to teaching readers that mysteries contain a crime solver, and one lesson to the idea that mystery readers read suspiciously. If your students have studied mysteries before, your teaching will need to remind them of what they already know, and then your focus will be on whatever reading skills you decide to forward.

Certainly part of this might involve teaching readers to read more closely. You might find yourself thinking that every time you watch *Monk*, you're dazzled by the way he spots details which turn out to be significant. You see the same things he sees, but you just pass by so many significant details. Great detectives are on the alert, seeing more and noticing more than the average person. We can use this to teach students the importance of reading more closely, with more alertness. Clubs can reread closely, trying to spot additional clues they may have missed the first time. Readers may also benefit from timelining the crime, especially if (as is typical in mysteries) the crime took place chronologically before the beginning of the book. This sequencing work will also help them as they start to plan out or storyboard their own mysteries.

Skilled mystery readers not only search for clues, they also make something of those clues and use inference to do so. Phrases such as "I think this means...", "I think this could show..." are the language of prediction and inference. We can teach students to point to particular parts of the mystery, to infer and predict by saying, "Because of this... I think ..." These predictions are based on the inferences that readers accumulate from the text.

Among other things, skilled mystery readers make mental, if not physical, lists of suspects. As they're reading, they're on the lookout for information or behavior that seems out of place, and discrepancies that pose opportunities to ask questions such as, "Why would ...?" or "How could...?"

Of course, this unit also invites instruction on intertextuality. As students read one mystery, and then another, they will develop a sense for how mysteries tend to go, and if they are reading mysteries within a series, they'll get a sense for this particular series. All of this means that students can, within this unit, make lots of progress learning how to see that any one part of a mystery belongs to a whole text. A text a reader can begin to group as a whole. The knowledge of how mysteries tend to go can help students not only reading from chapter to chapter, figuring out how one chapter fits with the ones before it, but also reading from book to book, synthesizing.

In turn-and-talk you might say something like:

- "That's weird! Let's reread, paying close attention to the description of this character." Then, "Turn and tell your partner what's so weird."
- "Oh my gosh—I think that's a clue! Turn and talk— what clue do we have and what might that mean?"

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- “Let’s figure out what’s really going on: Partner A, be Jigsaw and Partner B, be Mila. Act out this scene... Now talk about what’s *really* going on.”
- “This changes everything! Now who do you think did it?”
- “How does this part fit with your theory of who did it?”

Unit 6 - Talking and Writing About Texts to Infer and Interpret: Same-Book Partners or Clubs to Support Deeper Reading

March

This unit has reappeared in various formats over the years. It was once described in Chapter 18 and 23 of *The Art of Teaching Reading*. Similar work informed Unit 3 in the TCRWP’s binder of minilessons, distributed several years ago. Many of these ideas are addressed in Santman’s *Shades of Meaning*. At one point, the teaching described in this unit influenced work with short shared texts, but we’ve since decided that asking students to pore over short texts has less pay-off than encouraging them to read longer and richer books. These old iterations of this work can inform you and your colleagues as you plan this incredibly important unit of study.

The unit’s purpose is to teach readers to compose meaning. It’s all too easy to let our eyes fly past a text, to follow the story-line until the last page, then to put down the text and move on. This unit helps readers read closely and constructively, using the tools of writing and talking to find layers and layers of significance. We hope this unit helps students to pause in their reading and to think, “What is this really, *really* about?”

This work has the potential to powerfully affect middle school students. They are likely, as readers and as people, to jump to conclusions, to cling to first impressions. “She’s mean.” Or “She’s doing this to ruin my life!” This does not serve them well in their reading or in their lives. If we can, little by little, help them step back from their initial judgments and re-evaluate, reconsider, we can perhaps give them opportunities to give their parents, their friends, and even themselves, much-needed second chances.

The Main Work of the Unit

In order for students to understand what it means to interpret, you will probably want to take them back to the time in the writing workshop when you taught them that writers can write about one event in order to highlight different meanings. A youngster could, for example, write about a ride on a Ferris wheel in a way that suggests that even though he’s almost a teenager, he still holds tight to childhood pleasures. Alternatively, he could write about that same ride in ways that show that whenever he’s in a crowd, he looks for ways to be alone. In the writing workshop, students will have learned that in order to highlight a meaning, the writer elaborates on sections of the story that feel essential, and makes sure that the beginning and the ending of the story fit with the real meaning.

Now tables will be turned and students will be reading and thinking, “What is this story *really* about?” Students will want to keep in mind that writers tell a story in a particular way for a reason. It is not an accident that the writer names her characters as she does, begins the story as she does, or places the story in this particular setting. Students will want to read thinking about the relationships between an author’s choices and the text’s real meaning. They’ll ask, “If that’s the real meaning in this story, then why did the author start the story this way? Stretch out this part? Include this section?”

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A word of caution: When you and I were in high school, many of us studied with teachers who believed each story ‘had’ a theme, and that it was the teacher’s job to elicit the correct theme from students. These days, most educators recognize that there is no one theme in a story, and that different readers will construct different understandings of a story’s meaning and significance. These interpretations, however, all need to be grounded in the text. A reader may fruitfully think, “If this *is* a major message in this book, how come the author titles the text this way? Begins it this way? Includes this section?”

Practical Decisions: What to Read?

Whereas other units place specific demands on the nature of the books that students are reading, this unit does not do so. A unit on fantasy book clubs requires that readers read fantasy books. A unit on interpretation and inference, however, does not make such demands. It is, however, important for students to work with shared texts (with all members of the partnership or the club reading the same book in sync with each other.) It is also very helpful (even perhaps crucial) for students to read well-written texts. That is, this unit asks readers to look at the decisions a writer has made as he or she crafts a text, asking, “Why did the author decide to do this?” and “How does this decision help to forward the meaning?” The questions will pay off more if the text is well-written in the first place.

Of course, it will be crucial in this unit, as in all units, for students to read lots of books. You’ll expect students who are reading lower level chapter books to read five a week, and students who are reading denser and more challenging texts to read at least one a week. This rate of progress through books does not, however, allow for a lot of deep discussion. Consequently, you may decide that students should inch through a shared book, talking every few chapters, while they also read other single copies of books independently. As they gallop through their single copies of books, we expect they will be doing the same meaningful interpretation and inference work that is happening in their shared book.

You may want to help students choose books that you believe will especially pay off, and cluster books together in provocative ways. Perhaps one club of students will read “Journey” books, and another, “Life-lessons” or “Surprising teacher books.” Perhaps you want to imagine this unit as author studies, inviting one group of students to read a collection of books by Gary Soto, another, a collection by Jacqueline Woodson. If you do create small text-sets of books that might ignite sparks when rubbed against one another, be sure to suggest that once readers begin this work, they expand on those text-sets, finding their own books that speak to each other. In any case, you will want to encourage readers to see connections between the books they read, carrying all that they have already read as a club to the current book. A prolific reader once said that the mark of a good conversation rests on the number of other books and other book-talks that a conversation references. This may be an overstatement, but it is true that when a richly literate person reads any one book, we often make links to other texts, other conversations, other life issues... and these links keep us from maintaining too narrow a focus. Connections across books can lead readers to develop new insights, to see more possibilities and to revise our thinking. The skill of reading across texts has a name: intertextuality.

Reading, Writing, and Talking to Support Inference and Interpretation

As usual, your work with your read-aloud books will be critical in supporting your students in interpreting the stories they’re reading. You may choose to reread a few of the picture books or short stories, which you read earlier in the year, to begin to entertain bigger ideas and thinking

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about the story as a whole. You could begin by saying to your students, “When we read this story in the fall, some of the thinking we grew was... and now we are going to return to this book and ask ourselves, ‘What else do we think this book is *really* about?’” This will quickly help students get the big picture of what it means to engage in a unit on deeper reading. After revisiting a couple of short, familiar texts, you could then introduce a new, longer read-aloud text. Keep in mind, when choosing between new and “old” read-aloud books, that when we start a new read-aloud, we aren’t able to work so immediately on interpretation, because often readers don’t begin interpreting books until they are well into the text.

Another way we can revisit our previous read-aloud books is to place those various read-alouds into different clubs’ hands. Then, as we read our new read-aloud book, each club is responsible for thinking about how what we are now reading is connected to what we have already read. You can stop and have the clubs turn-and-talk about the connections they see between the books. You can support this work by stopping to think aloud how you see this book fitting with one of the books that a club is reading or has read.

Before you read the next chapter or chapters of the new read-aloud book, give the students some time to talk, as a whole class, about the ways that, so far, they see their previous read-alouds fitting with the new read-aloud. You can also stop during this type of whole class conversation to encourage the clubs to go back into their texts, to read aloud parts from their books that go with parts from the new read-aloud. Supporting students to make these connections during read-alouds and whole class conversations will support them to do this same work in their clubs. It is helpful for the club to bring the “old” read aloud book, for which they are responsible, to their club discussions, so that they can begin the work of connecting texts on their own. Eventually, they will be able to lay the texts, which they have read together, next to one another to develop new insights.

At the start the unit, you might also invite students to read and jot their thoughts as they read. Then show them that we, as teachers, sometimes look back on our own reading and ask, “What sort of thinking do I tend to do as I read?” This sort of reader-study can yield insights about ourselves. Some readers are apt to read, thinking, “I love the way the author wrote that!” Others are apt to read, thinking, “Why did the character do that?” Most of us have a repertoire of ways we respond to texts; that repertoire will be different from one reader to another. One way to enrich our reading is to push ourselves to take on a lens that we don’t often use as we read.

Another way to enrich students’ reading is to teach them that writing can literally be a tool for hands-on-thinking. This requires that students learn to free-write, or to write without having pre-determined what they are going to say. If your students write when they’re reading, it’s likely that they read, have a thought, then hold that thought still for a moment, and then record the “frozen” thought. It is likely that writing, for your readers, is a way for them to record ideas they have already formed. It is extraordinarily powerful to teach students that writing can also be a way to extend ideas; this means that after recording a thought, we continue to write more. It can be fruitful for the writer to finish recording a thought and then to push himself or herself by writing, “Furthermore...”, and then continuing writing and thinking. Sometimes writers will want to shift toward thinking—and writing—in ways that address the question, “So?” or “Why is this important?” Teach students to ask questions as they are writing, and then to take on those questions, as they write brand new dawning ideas, using writing to explore tentative answers.

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You will probably find that when readers read, they have quick, underdeveloped thoughts about their reading. When encouraged to say more, instead of staying longer at the idea level, they will probably elaborate simply by providing examples of the thought. In a unit on inference and interpretation, your goal will be, in part, to teach readers to snowball their thoughts about reading. You will want to teach readers to stay with an idea.

Reread the description about writing-in-response-to-reading which was included in the second half of the October writings. If you did not launch readers' notebooks then, you may want to do so now. In general, once kids are writing really provocative post-its, it can help them to generate theory charts (making their own very informal and quick graphic organizers, tailored to whatever idea the student is exploring.) Once students can carry theory charts with them as they progress through books, and do so in ways that develop (not close down) thinking, they tend to profit from the invitation to keep readers' notebooks—but only if the emphasis is not on *writing* well, but on *reading* well, and *thinking* well while writing quickly.

If students didn't use theory charts in the October character unit, you may choose to launch those charts now via their post-it work. Or, if they have already encountered theory charts as a vehicle for character study, you still might want to deepen their work with the charts. One way to deepen this work is to push your students to carry more theories as they read, so instead of just tracking one or two ideas, the students are now responsible for between three and five theories. This will encourage students to be more interpretative across the text and to include more parts of the text into their thinking.

Or, if students, back in October, only grew theories about the main character, you can now teach them to turn their gaze towards the secondary characters. Readers develop ideas about secondary characters by thinking about how they affect the main character as well as by considering who these characters are and how they exist as their own persons. You can also teach students to grow their thinking about relationships, struggles, genres, and author's purpose. For example, a club reading *Black and White*, by Paul Volponi, might grow the theory that Paul Volponi wrote this book to get readers to think about how race can affect friendship.

Another way to deepen this work is to invite clubs to look over their post-its and theories and be reflective about which ones yielded good conversation and how they can bring that meaningful thinking into the next books that they are reading together. When students carry their ideas from book to book, they are more apt to complicate their views of characters and the worlds in which they live. Readers do this by noticing that, from book to book, some of the problems that characters face are universal, and yet, different characters deal with those same or similar problems in unique ways. Similarly, the same type of conflict or issue does not affect characters in different books in identical ways.

Lastly, students can now develop their theories by standing on the shoulders of the interpretation work they have done together as a club. For example, a club might grow the theory that, in Sherman Alexie's *Diary of a Part Time Indian*, the pressures of the reservation lead teenagers to be cruel to each other, or they might theorize why the main character is so different from his peers on the reservation.

In any case, teach kids to grow ideas as they read, and then to continue to grow ideas as they talk about their hunches and thoughts. When you teach readers to interpret, you are teaching them to

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develop hunches about aspects of the text that may turn out to be important to its larger meaning. You can teach students to keep track of their ideas on post-its, or in entries, and then to examine their notes in search of larger ideas and themes. For example, you may teach students to take their post-its and put them into categories. Then clubs can talk by connecting the ideas on one post-it to the next. Smaller ideas and hunches can lead to big ideas and interpretations. For more ideas, see chapter 18 in *The Art of Teaching Reading*.

You may suggest club members keep post-its that made for good book-club conversations in an envelope (or that they list these on a chart, referencing pages in a reading notebook). Then, after the students read and get deeper into the book, they can take any current conversation and lay that conversation next to an earlier one. Physically, they can do this by simply putting those previous post-its or entries at the center of a new conversation. They can also do this by laying an earlier section of the novel alongside a later one. When students talk between their two sets of insights, they develop new and often more powerful ideas.

Teaching students to interpret the books they are reading is really about showing them ways that help readers to see more in a text. For example, often our students are looking at the text only through the main character's point of view. When this happens, we can help students to see more in a text by asking them take a scene and to name all of the characters who are present in the scene. Then, we can ask them to consider what is happening in the story from each of the various characters' points of view. This is not simply an exercise in saying how each character sees the same situation differently but, instead, a starting point for delving into why individual characters experience their shared world the way they do.

It is helpful to parallel this to the work of the book club, the way each member of the club may have slightly different—or even completely contradictory—views on what is happening in a story. When this happens, we need to walk inside of each other's perspective, just as we are trying to do with our characters. This indicates an important shift away from that place where students just “agree to disagree” or use a string of “On the other hand...” to tack together different ideas that they never unpack. Instead, they are now trying to stay inside each other's thinking and to elaborate on it before moving to their own. It can be helpful to show them how to use writing to push their ideas on how each character sees what is happening and to teach them writing prompts like:

- I see it this way...
- I can see how you could say that because...
- I see it differently because...
- This character sees it this way because....
- Another character sees it differently because...

A way to deepen this work is to carry the characters they have met across the book to scenes, in which they are not involved, and to imagine how these characters would react, think and feel about what is happening. For example, in *Freedom Summer*, when John Henry and Joe enter Mr. Mason's store, how would Annie Mae, Will Rogers, Joe's parents, or Mr. Mason think, react or feel at this moment?

Another way to work on interpretation with your students is to teach them to think about what the author might be trying to get them to think, feel or know. This can be very challenging work because our students are so used of saying what they think, what they have learned, how the book

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makes them feel, or identifying how the character feels. To entertain the notion that the author might have a particular agenda pushes them outside of themselves and makes them think in bigger ways about the book. It can be very helpful to have students write fast and long off of what the author might have wanted them to think, feel and know. You may find that you have to push them to extend their writing by calling out things like, “Keep writing,” and “Don’t pick your pen up,” and “Add an example,” and “Maybe...” or “On the other hand...” Then, have the students reread their writing looking for surprises, new thinking, their best thinking, and asking them to underline those places. You may have them take that line or lines and put it at the top of a clean page in order to write more. When students will go off to clubs that day and they will be bursting with ideas for their talk. Once your students know how to do this, clubs can assign themselves to do this for homework or before a club meets that.

For your stronger readers, or as work that you can do through your read aloud, you may want to do some of the interpretation work that comes from literary theory. This includes demonstrating, usually on a touchstone picture book such as *Freedom Summer*, *The Other Side*, or *Your Move*, first how much readers have to say at the start of a story, when the story is really good. In good stories, details matter. To get ready to interpret, readers need to be good at reading between the lines. Demonstrate how you pay close attention to the words and think not only about what they say, but about what they suggest. Show how you wonder, for instance, if John Henry and the narrator are friends only in the summer, or only at the narrator’s house, but also at school – demonstrate how you notice what is *not* being said, as well as what is being said. In the same way, you might wonder if the “other side” is somehow dangerous, or if the world outside the apartment in *Your Move* is dangerous. Part of interpretation is imagining that every word matters in a story, and carrying their significance with you as you read.

You can teach your readers, as well, to refrain from making quick judgments or assumptions. Good readers make rich interpretations because they can allow for complexity and uncertainty. It would be easy, for instance, to assume at the start of *Your Move* that the father is in jail, or in *The Other Side*, that this is the South before the civil rights era. But interpretation involves also modeling what readers don’t know. Show your readers how to keep track of what you don’t know, and show how good books often don’t resolve all these questions.

You can also demonstrate how to think about *what kind of story is this?* In literary theory, this is called the narrative trajectory. Readers have expectations about stories based on their familiarity with how stories go. We expect traditional fairytales and myths to be cautionary tales—as in, students who wander into the woods get put in ovens. Their narrative trajectory, or story structure, is one of transgression and punishment. Modern fairytale adaptations, on the other hand, tend towards a romantic story structure in which the main character faces some adversity that seems unjust, but overcomes it to achieve happiness. One way to do some interpretation work, therefore, is to think about how the story you are reading matches or breaks with your expectations of how these kinds of stories go. Does it offer new possibilities or does it reinforce your expectations? *Kenny and the Little Kickers*, for instance, starts out as realistic fiction. It starts as a story about an overweight, non-athletic boy who does NOT want to play soccer but whose father and coach insist that he should. He gets out on the field to play and he has no talent or sense of pleasure in the game. Then, Kenny miraculously kicks a goal over everyone’s head, despite his lack of skill, experience, or will. The story starts as realistic fiction and becomes a fairytale. You can model how one thing students can do in interpretation work is to talk about more than one book at a time.

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They can realize how much they may know about how some kinds of books, like fantasy, go, and they can compare the book they are reading to others they have read.

Another way to practice interpretation is to model thinking about how characters in the story face expectations about being male or female in their culture, and what these expectations mean. In *Your Move*, for instance, you can look at the story with the lens of how the main character struggles with different ways of being a young man in his environment – the struggle to be cool and tough, the struggle to be responsible, the struggle to survive... Often this interpretive work leads to very rich conversations, especially as readers learn to compare themselves to characters, and learn lessons from characters in their books.

Additional strategies to support interpretation include sketching an image that stands for the whole book so far; underlining the most important word or phrase in the whole text; and thinking or writing notebook entries about such questions as:

- What is this story *really* about?
- What does this story say about the world?
- What do I think the author is trying to say?
- Whose story is being told?
- What are the big ideas I have been identifying so far?
- What parts of the book do not fit with those ideas?
- If an idea is an umbrella, what parts of the book stick out and get wet?
- What are the ideas that are almost big enough to hold this entire book under them, with nothing sticking out?
- If the author has written his or her point in ten words instead of all these thousands of words, what would it have said?
- What is the lesson from this book that fits not just this story but also lots of other ones? and my life?

If you'd like to show students how to read their texts with a critical lens, and you are not saving this work for another unit (which is likely), you can teach them a few of the questions, listed below:

- Whose voice is heard?
- Whose voice is missing?
- Whose story is it? Who benefits from it being told this way?
- Who has power in the text? Why does he/she have it?
- What social norms do we see in the text?
- What values are upheld in this text?
- What values are challenged in this text?
- What perspective does this text offer on an issue or experience?
- What experience does this text describe which we may be unfamiliar with?

Whether you teach only interpretation or extend this unit and also teach critical reading, you are helping students to think about the lessons characters learn, and that we as readers can learn from texts. If you'd like to extend this, you might ask your readers to think, "How can I live differently because this book has been part of my life?"

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Unit 7 – Content-Area Reading (or, A Return to Genre Clubs)

April

Content Area

In this unit, we imagine that your students will be making a lot of connections across their reading and writing work. They'll be *reading to learn* during reading workshop, and *writing to teach* during writing workshop. In the content writing unit that matches this one, we describe a variety of writing genres through which your students will convey ideas and information. They may, for example, write essays, poetry or nonfiction picture books, to convey the information they've gleaned. In their reading, they'll be reading to gain knowledge and construct ideas. They'll also be reading as writers, looking closely at author's craft and thinking about structures and techniques that they can emulate. You'll need to gather baskets of texts, as you did for the November nonfiction reading unit. The difference here is that, this time, you'll probably have an overarching theme or area of study that the whole class is studying, such as Immigration, the Civil Rights Movement, or Ecosystems, Extreme Weather, etc. As long as you have good texts (some teachers write some of their own to support the unit), the advantages of teaching nonfiction reading by involving students in a deep study of a theme are *especially* important in classrooms filled with ELLs and struggling readers who benefit from whole-class support for vocabulary and concepts. This is an excellent time to partner with a social studies or science teacher if you choose to: you can choose a content that will be supported in that classroom at this time, so that students will have multiple experiences with the ideas, information and vocabulary in this content across their day. For example, students may be creating their own terrarium ecosystems in science class, reading about all different kinds of ecosystems in reading workshop, and choosing one ecosystem to teach others about in writing workshop.

You'll need to decide whether content area reading consumes the entire reading workshop or whether your students maintain independent reading lives alongside this reading. If you are partnering with a content-area teacher, it's possible that some of the reading actually happens in the content-area classroom, so that reading workshop isn't completely dedicated to this work. You would want to plan with the content teacher so that your goals and the strategies you teach are consistent, and you would need to decide on which texts are in which classroom. Of course, your interest in supporting nonfiction and content-related reading cannot jeopardize students' reading lives, so be sure you keep their independent reading work alive if you do not have enough high-interest, just-right texts related to the content under study to keep your students "in books" for the entire month.

It will be important to gather a variety of texts around the shared topic. If you are studying the American Revolution, for instance, you'll want to have a lot of the Rosen Primary Source series, as well as the Jean Fritz books and other engaging short nonfiction texts. You can look at our website for some links to vendors, such as Booksource, who provide texts related to social studies topics. Make baskets in which you group texts that go together. For instance, you might have enough books for a basket on Civil War battles, or Colonial leaders, and one on Great Events. If your study is Immigration, you might have some texts on Building the Railroad or Lower East Side Tenements or Industrialization.

You'll probably start with read aloud of a text that you think will be particularly engaging, and that will introduce the big concepts, vocabulary, and characters of your study. You might read about Paul Revere's Midnight Ride, for instance, to launch your study of the Revolution, or you might begin your study of the Underground Railroad with Nikki Giovanni's poem about Harriet Tubman. You may actually revisit this same text several times throughout the unit, showing students how

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much more they can bring to each reading of that text. Kyleene Beers argues that this repeated reading is incredibly valuable for readers. Harvest key ideas and terms from your read-alouds and start to create timelines, maps, graphs, and charts that will support your readers' content knowledge.

You can also do some oral storytelling yourself. Use—as an alternate way to lecture them on a topic they need to know more about—all your skills at dramatic storytelling. It might sound, for instance, like: “Gather round, as I tell you the story of one of the most daring and famous nights in American history. It happened over two hundred years ago, when we weren't even a nation, or country yet – but there were people who wanted us to become one! On one side, was the British, that's the army and King from England, and on the other side were the Colonists, that's the people who were living here then, at least some of them. There was one man, named Paul Revere. He had a beautiful horse that was a very fast runner—a strong, proud, fierce animal who could run all night. One night, he had to...” In this way, you can create a drama that will launch the students into a story they will remember. You will also help them to start to understand words like British, Colonist, or Nation.

Once your students know *what* you will be studying, give them a chance to browse the library in order to become familiar with texts that are available. If you've put together baskets, let them look at the variety of baskets, and notice the big categories for this study. If you are inviting your students to create their own baskets, then teach students that researchers read for the first day, asking: ‘What is there to know about this subject?’

You can also compromise and form several baskets, but leave a couple empty and a lot of books loose too. Either way, students will first browse a bit, gathering background information such as the big concepts and vocabulary. Keep that word chart in the room and perhaps glossaries in students' notebooks.

To foster their prior knowledge in a content area, it may also be helpful to link concrete experiences with their reading; students who study geology may first observe different kinds of rocks then look them up in books to find out more. They might then spend more time with different kinds of detailed maps, expository articles, and scientific terminology. This is also a good time to practice and reinforce decoding skills with content-specific terminology. In any case, you will want to situate them as learners of a content area by fortifying them with the strategies and muscles they need for reading in that content area. Therefore, it will be important for you to assess in order to determine the strategy work you taught during nonfiction reading that your students still need. Plan this unit so that you concentrate on those non fiction reading strategies.

You'll be emphasizing strategies for reading to learn. Teach your students to choose the easier texts first, in order to build background knowledge. Then they can use this knowledge to approach the next level of text. Dick Allington shows that readers will teach themselves to read nonfiction if they find the subject fascinating and if they have access to texts they can actually read. Do storytelling and book talks with students to help them find your texts fascinating, and model being an avid learner who loves to read to learn. Encourage readers to jot quick on maps, timelines, diagrams, and charts as they read and to use props for partner conversations. This writing can also fuel people's writing project.

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Remind your students to use the strategies they know for monitoring and fixing comprehension. For example, you'll want to spend some time reteaching them that careful non-fiction readers always try to put what they've read into their own words. You can demonstrate by reading a passage from a read-aloud text, then putting the text down and saying, "What the author is saying is that..." Or "What this means is..." It's important that students learn strategies for articulating what they learn in their own words. Not only will it help them retain information longer, it will also encourage them to internalize what they learn.

You may discover that your students need help with determining the main idea of a passage. Teach students to read the first sentence of a paragraph and ask, "What is this saying?" Then they can read on, sentence by sentence, asking, "How does this fit with what's been said so far?" To find the main idea, readers need to take the sentences they've read and say what they learned in one short statement, not a question. Teach students to chunk the text using the subheadings or section headings. At the end of each chunk, they'll profit from covering the text and saying (or writing on a post-it), "This part teaches me..." and then: "It teaches me by giving examples or evidence such as..." We can support our students in determining the main idea by also teaching them to identify the "Who" and the "What" of the paragraph or section. This helps readers identify the subject and the central action as they read. To find the main idea, readers need to figure out the relationship between the "Who" and the "What."

Readers can move from finding the main idea of a section to figuring out the overarching idea of a selection by noticing as they read from one paragraph to another whether the two paragraphs continue to build on one main idea. Does the second paragraph turn a bend, laying out yet another idea? Nonfiction texts can be tricky because section dividers are often invisible; readers need to be vigilant, reading in such a way that they notice when the text has gone through a transition and saying, "Oh, this is about a new sub-topic." Of course, once readers can ascertain what a chunk as small as a paragraph is mostly about, they'll benefit from looking back on the whole page or the whole chapter and saying, "*This* whole text is mostly about. . ."

As your study moves along, it will become increasingly important for students to be able to say not just what a text is about, but the angle that the text is taking on the subject, whether it's a narrative or a non narrative text. Practicing using more words to state what the whole text is mostly about is one way that students can work on finding the angle in a text. For example, instead of saying, this book (*Coolies*, by Yin/Soentpiet) is about Chinese immigrants, a student might say, "This book is mostly about how badly Chinese immigrants were treated even though they were helping to build the railroads. The book is saying that the railroads wouldn't have been built without the Chinese who came here to work, but despite that, they weren't paid well and they were bullied and discriminated against." Their post-its or notes in their notebook should be in sentences, and soon in paragraphs, rather than one-word jots.

You'll also teach some new strategies as you'll have some new kinds of texts. The goal for this study is not just to help students build their knowledge of a particular content area—such as geography or the living environment—but also to help them acquire tools and strategies specific for texts particular to that content area. For example, students engaged in a study of the governments of North and South America may learn strategies for reading primary source documents—for example, constitutional amendments—and build a cache of vocabulary. It may be useful for these students to use Kyrene Beer's technique of taping a primary source text to the

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middle of a piece of chart paper, so that a small group of readers can ‘write around it,’ putting arrows to their own interpretations. This will invite students to conduct written conversation about parts of the shared text. Then they can move to a second group’s chart, and write to that group. Often they come to deeper, collaborative understandings this way, and they learn to use writing to think.

You can also teach readers that focus is a quality not only of good writing but also of good reading. Just as writers ‘zoom in’ on a sub-topic or a narrower subject, so, too, readers often zoom in. Teach students that they read within smaller parts of a subject in order to come to deeper understanding and become experts about something they want to study deeply and teach others about. A reader might at first study ‘the earth’ and later focus on earthquakes and still later, on the causes of earthquakes. Instead of reading about World War II, they can narrow their focus to the plight of the Jews in the Holocaust. To further narrow they may decide to read a lot about what happened to Polish Jews, or to read about German families who hid Jews to protect them from the Nazis. Demonstrate for your students how scientists and social scientists create categories, or folders for their studies, so that they don’t study a little about everything, but instead try to understand some one thing more deeply – get them to focus on reading as many texts from cover to cover within a basket as seems reasonable. Many of your students will be ready to have subcategories for their knowledge. Hang onto ‘boxes and bullets’ as a way for students to organize their notes and their conversations.

You’ll want to help students develop ideas and opinions about the texts they read, understanding that all texts are written from a particular perspective and that it’s okay and often productive to critique content-area texts by thinking, “What is the author trying to get me to think, feel and know about this subject and who benefits from me thinking this way?” For instance, students might be studying a picture of a painting depicting George Washington crossing the Delaware. He is shown standing with his foot up on the bow of the boat as the boat makes its way through treacherous, icy water. His arm rests on his chest and his chin is pointed towards the horizon. The American flag is behind him flapping in the wind as strong, virile soldiers paddle. Students should be able to look at this painting, put it up against what they’ve learned and ask themselves, “Does this painting match what I know about the horrible, freezing conditions at Valley Forge? If not, what did the artist want people to think and learn from this painting or who benefits from this depiction of George Washington crossing the Delaware?”

To help students develop meatier ideas, there will be discussions about how to differentiate relevant and useful sources from those less so. You may have to go back and do more work on finding the main idea. You may teach students to think about essential questions as they are reading to help them pay attention to more relevant information. You might find it necessary to re-teach that non fiction authors use certain words to clue the reader into important information, such as “most,” “never,” “always,” “but,” “on the other hand,” “however,” “in addition,” “therefore,” “few,” “often,” “many,” “instead,” and so on.

You may also want students to engage in some role-playing activities, continuing some of the work you did earlier in the year infusing drama with reading, so they gain a broader picture of the events, issues, and experiences around a topic. Students can write scripts for these activities, using their own words to write the dialogue for important figures, all the while developing an understanding of multiple perspectives so they can compare and contrast them.

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Teach your students to separate fact from opinion, and to learn new strategies in order to negotiate difficult texts. The writing about reading your students do should encourage them to develop their ideas and opinions; the writing may often look messy and disorganized as students explore their thinking about what they read. One way to spark ideas is to suggest readers pay attention to interesting information or quotes, “writing off from” them. What does that statistic, fact, quote *really* mean? Why is it important? What’s interesting about this information?

Meanwhile, you will help to bring out larger conceptual ideas related to the topic, to support students as they draw concepts and ideas from the reading. These concepts may help lead them to synthesize larger over-arching ideas and themes. Here it’s useful to teach students to ask different types of questions to deepen their comprehension of content-area texts, such as “How does this information fit with what I already know about this topic?” or “How can I organize this information so I understand how all the details connect?” Students will not only search out significant and useful information, but also learn to read *critically*, questioning the meaning and importance of information they discover; they’ll compare ideas in one text to those from other texts, learning not only how to make connections across texts but also to find places where they conflict, asking, “Why?” and “From whose perspective?” and “Whose voices are left out?”

You can also teach students how to formulate their own inquiry-based questions that allow them to delve more deeply into text. As students read across books about a topic, they may also begin to make connections between texts and formulate questions about their topics that spur on new purposes for their reading. You’ll want to help them extend their thinking about their topic by having thoughts as they gather information. As a student reads and relates a fact she gleaned from the text, you’ll want to teach her to think about the topic with more depth by saying the fact and adding her own thoughts. For example, after reading a chunk of text, a student might say something like, “Hmm. I learned that plants help to cool the earth and provide oxygen for living creatures.” What you want to teach the student to do is to say what that makes her think. She may add, “That sounds pretty important. I wonder why people don’t take better care of them.” What she has done is take a fact from the text and put her own idea or preconception alongside. Another way of doing this is to stretch the idea from the book. That would sound something like, “Plants cool the earth and provide oxygen. Hmm. That means when we clear-cut forests, we’re not just affecting the lives of the creatures in the forest, we’re affecting the lives of human beings as well.” Throughout the unit, there will be a particular emphasis on helping students talk about their findings and their ideas with partners and members of an inquiry group, and to do so in a systematic, logical manner.

Teach your students to layer texts and to read them against each other, asking each time: “What did I learn in this text that I already knew from another text?” “What did I learn that is new?” “What new questions do I have?” You’ll have to coach your readers, as well, in using writing to hold onto ideas and information. They probably want to keep post-its while they read, and then close the text and write summaries and reflections in their notebooks. They can also do descriptive writing of the visuals.

Somewhere in here, your students will decide what they will be writing about, and their reading can begin to be influenced by this lens. They can read, and reread, gathering material for what they will be teaching. They can also look at the texts they are reading with the lens of mentor texts, asking themselves if there is any craft they want to copy. Teach them to post-it any place in the text where they had a strong reaction of pleasure, surprise, or dismay. Then teach them to look

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at how the writer created that reaction. Teach them to look at how the writers tell stories, or give specific examples, or make comparisons, so they can do this work in their writing.

Unit 8 – Social Issue Clubs

May

This unit focuses readers' attention on the characters in their books and their interactions with social issues. By social issues, we mean issues that are more than personal, as in, issues that a character experiences and others as well. These issues are bigger than us and outside of us. A character may struggle to fit in- and that character is not alone. A lot of people struggle to fit in. Poverty is a social issue, and so is the fear that ones family is falling apart. Homelessness, bullying, homophobia, verbal and physical abuse, racism, issues of body image and peer pressure are also examples of social issues. These are some of the urgent social issues that shape the lives of our students. How beautiful it will be if they learn from books how others deal with these issues. First, this can make students feel less alone. Second, it can give them reasons to read (Alfred Tatum says that particularly for disenfranchised or reluctant readers to keep reading, the curriculum has to answer, every day, the question, "How can I live my life?"). Thirdly, this work helps students bring more to their books and get more from them.

In this iteration of the unit, readers combine the powerful experience of belonging to a book club and the vitally important work of grappling with the various social issues they can identify in their texts. While this unit will certainly allow for students to explore and develop their thinking around the social issues that may have gone unnoticed in their books and in their lives up to this point, as readers, students will bring to bear all they have learned in tracking and interpreting the issues that affect the characters and communities in the books they are reading. Within the small community of their book clubs, readers support one another's efforts to know a text intimately, to live inside a story and extract lessons that extend beyond any one text. In doing so, readers are able to leap nimbly from close reading work to empathy to interpretive thinking. Indeed, it is suggested that a teacher does not begin a social issue book club unit unless she is relatively confident in her students ability to both work well within a book club and in their facility and independence in thinking deeply about the characters in their books. In preparation for this unit, you may want to consult *For A Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*, by Randy and Katherine Bomer. This professional text will help you to think broadly about the kinds of social issues that a unit like this one can address.

What Is A Social Issue, Really?

Social issues are not simply problems a character faces, and your first work in this unit will be to help readers uncover the truly social issues that exist in many, if not all, texts, whether or not the author has clearly intended their books to be an "issues" book. As Katherine and Randy suggest, a social issue is one in which the group that a person belongs to becomes a defining force without consent, and causes, in many cases, a power imbalance, a limiting or expanding of people's opportunities and freedoms, or unjust and unfair actions. So while divorce may be a problem for one of the characters in your books, it is not in an automatic sense a social issue. However, divorce may have much to do with gender, or with how some communities define family, or with how much money someone has, or with being the outsider because you are the new kid in town. Intolerance is a social issue. Powerlessness is a social issue. Poverty, homelessness, verbal and physical abuse are social issues. Then there are the social issues that may be widespread in students' lives but not always visible to others, such as bullying, homophobia, racism, issues of body image, peer pressure, fitting in, family pressures, academic pressure. These are some of the

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urgent social issues that shape the lives of our students. These issues are social issues not because they are challenging, or painful, but because they involve how people in societies and communities treat each other. They often involve biases or assumptions based on what group a character belongs to, and that character may find himself or herself making choices and facing struggles based on his/her membership to those groups.

How beautiful it will be if they learn from books how others deal with these issues. First, it makes students feel less alone. Second, it gives them reasons to read (Alfred Tatum says that particularly for disenfranchised or reluctant readers to keep reading, the curriculum has to answer, every day, the question: how to live your life). Thirdly, this work broadens the repertoire of strategies students bring to their reading; they bring more to their books and they get more from them.

We have found that by narrowing our definition of “social issue” a bit we open up new possibilities for engagement, close reading, and interpretation. While some texts, like *The Other Side*, by Jacqueline Woodson, or *Your Move*, by Eve Bunting, easily open up to some social issues, other issues require a little more coaxing and a lot more close reading, and oftentimes expose work that is deep and relatable to readers. For example, if we were to read *Your Move* because it is a “gang” book, we can move in one direction. But if we were to read with our class this text as a Read Aloud and ask ourselves, “what groups does James belong to?” we will notice that there is so much more to James and his story than simply “gangs.” We can see that James is grappling with gangs, but that he is also dealing with issues of manhood, of single parent homes, of absent fathers, or class. We can see how his gender may be affecting the choices he makes, perhaps because he feels an enormous pressure to be tough as a young man in this culture. Or we can examine the role of class in this story, and reflect upon how because their mother has to work at night, and can’t afford a babysitter, there is no one to watch them night after night, which creates both the opportunity for James to sneak out and the pressure to take his little brother along with him. And, of course, we can look at the very real issues in gang culture and how it romances and affects young people.

Organizing Your Library

Once you have decided to engage your students in social issues book clubs, begin to comb through your library, bookrooms, and files for texts your students will need. As with your preparation for genre book clubs, you will need to organize texts that reflect the range of levels in your classroom. While you might create baskets of books labeled by the overt issue that those texts address, (text sets on “Gangs” or “Bullying” for example), this might, in some ways, get in the way of the deep exploratory work we intend our readers to tackle. In other words, if students already know that this book will be dealing with the issue of divorce, they might be dissuaded from reading the book in any other way. Instead, you might want to broaden the field, collecting a wide range of texts – some of which have their issue practically emblazoned on the front cover, and others where the work might be a bit more subtle, where the character faces personal problems but where the fact of her gender, or the problems her community is facing, plays a direct and insidious role in determining how she reacts to her situation.

For your more emergent readers, if you choose to assign them to an issue, you might look over your library and form baskets of mixed-genre, somewhat leveled texts that could be regarded as making visible an issue. For example, you might have a basket of level J-K books that demonstrate the pressures people feel to fit in, and another basket of M-O books that also address this. For your readers who will be seeking the issues in the books themselves, you may want to create a basket on

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multiple levels that is simply labeled “important issues” and allow a particularly strong club to find and articulate the issues in these texts themselves.

We suggest you deliberately make your collections very small—no more than three books and some short texts—so there’s lots of room for students to add to them. If you don’t classify the books your students know best, it becomes something they can do, and they’ll see how books can show many issues. You might gather the students and give them a pep talk on this unit, showing them some of the baskets you’ve already collected, asking for their advice on others that could be made.

Getting Started

As we begin a social issues book club unit, it is important that we encourage our readers to first focus on what is important in any book – that they connect to the text and see themselves inside of it, that they are paying close attention to the characters and their relationships, struggles and choices, and that in their clubs they are talking deeply about their thinking. Without doing this work, any probing into the potential social issues of a text will prove to skim the surface of both the text and the issue. In this unit, we will move from looking across texts to discover what groups our characters belong to and how their membership in these groups might be defining or affecting their choices, to critically reading scenes and whole texts to infer and interpret both the explicit messages the author brings to these social issues as well as the implicit ideas that live under the surface of the text. We will then teach our clubs to choose the issues they feel the most invested in and knowledgeable about and we will take this work to a new level by proposing that readers adopt a social issue, develop lenses through which they can study that issue, and then carry those lenses across a set of texts.

As you begin this unit, work in your Read Alouds to sort out what problems seem to fit into the “social issue” category and which seem to be more personal - though no less important- challenges. A fourth grade student recently referred to this delicate distinction as the difference between “a bummer and something you can try to change.” If you didn’t develop one during your personal essay unit, or for prior read alouds, it’s very useful at this time to develop a chart in the classroom and in students’ notebooks of social issues that have become visible in read alouds, in students’ personal narratives, and in their book club books so far –as in, you can revisit these texts with the lens of reading for social issues. Many times students will look up at this chart and say, “Wait a minute, having absent parents is an issue in this book too! Let me show you.” They can also open up their writer’s notebooks and write about moments when they have experienced this issue, and then compare their responses with the character’s responses in their books.

Thinking And Talking About Groups

Your read aloud will play a key role in launching and sustaining the work of the social issue book clubs. You might create a chart that tracks some of the groups that we may belong to that could affect us in interesting and problematic ways. For instance, many classes talk openly about race, gender and class, and do not shy away from how important these identities can be to texts, individuals, and communities; however you also will want to look at the many other groups that people can belong to as well. In creating these charts with your class, you can then look to your read aloud and notice which groups your character belongs to. At times this will involve a close read of the character and his or her setting. Many times we need to envision with rich detail in order to get a sense of what kind of community this character lives in, or we must infer that the character is powerfully popular in a school that values popularity. As readers begin to fold this

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work into the repertoire of their book clubs, you will model how we also as readers read closely to see how characters seem to feel and respond to being members of a certain group, or how others seem to react to them as members. You will want to address the assumptions we might slip into when thinking about groups of people. In your read aloud, you can show how we choose some groups and not others, and how this sometimes affects our attitudes. And we can look at how our membership in a group can expand or limit our possibilities in certain situations.

One thing that we might avoid is the idea that any given book is “about” any one thing. To say that *Your Move* is only about gangs might amputate the text and limit a proficient reader. In addition, to say that we can *only* read texts for issues that create dangerous or dramatic situations like abuse or sexism or homelessness also puts limits on the kinds of interpretations our readers can make and connect to in their reading and thinking. Talking about how James feels as a boy and how being a boy affects him may be difficult in some ways, and may be beautiful in others, and we will want to avoid teaching adolescents that talking about gender or race or class automatically means there is an oppressor and a victim. There is value in interpreting and inferring around these identities without necessarily always trying to find the “problem” or “issue”.

Close Reading of Critical Scenes

As clubs begin these conversations, you will find many opportunities to push students to make more connections to the texts they are reading as they realize that their characters share more in common with them than simply the plot line, and that as readers they might be able to compare themselves and their experiences in different ways. But you will want to push your students to do much more than to simply identify what makes up a character’s identity and how it makes them feel. You will want to teach clubs that as we get a general sense of the social issues that might lurk inside the text, we will need to read looking for and talking about critical scenes where these issues are coming out, getting complicated, or being resolved in some way.

In order to find these critical scenes, we might model that readers notice when something is bothering them about the story, or when they notice something unfair happening. We can also take note of emotionally charged moments, and we can especially be aware of scenes that do not feel plausible to us. In *Your Move*, for example, we might notice that it seems unfair that James has to look after Isaac every night, and in our discussion, by asking boldly about the groups that James belongs to, we might realize that this feels like a critical scene for the issue of class in this story. We can then carry that lens of class across the other scenes of the text, staying attuned to other scenes where class seems to come into play. Book clubs can begin then, to keep a short list of the issues that they are staying attuned to, and can in their discussions, bring post its and writing that captures the moments in the text where those issues are being enacted and their thinking about how those issues are limiting or expanding the characters’ power and/or choice.

When discussing critical scenes in book clubs, students will bring to bear all of the rich work they have developed over the last few months, and we will most likely need to reinforce this work. In the scene from *Your Move*, clubs will need to work out exactly what happened in the scene, they will need to envision, they will have to think about how the characters act think and feel, they will have to discuss why the characters act think and feel the way they do. This work cannot be lost or forgotten. It seems that a pattern might emerge as we begin to do this work. The pattern might be this: A club locates a critical scene, by asking which moments are bothersome, or unfair, or unrealistic, or where they notice overtly a character’s groups coming into play. Then the club must do some close reading of that scene, mining the scene for important details about what is

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happening and how the characters are reacting. The club may do this by retelling closely, or by envisioning the expressions, clothing, movement and setting of the scene. They could also work on their fluency and read the scene aloud, imbuing the read with the undercurrents of emotion in the scene. And of course they will infer, digging into the characters' actions thoughts and speech to analyze what is really going on here. In some cases they will look at how the character feels about being a member of a certain group, and how s/he reacts to those feelings, and how these choices bring about certain results. In others, it will be necessary to examine how other people react to them as members of that group, and to question why this is so.

The club must then take this scene outside of the text and ask themselves some question about how this issue is being represented. Some questions include, "Are we okay with how this group is being represented?" "Does this fit with what we have seen in the world?" "Is there something the author seems to want us to know about being a member of that group?" "Does this fit with our lives?" "What kind of community is this?" "What causes people to act this way?" "What would happen if the character's group was "flipped," that is, if a girl character was a boy or a poor character rich?" "Would that change their choices or reactions?" "What does this say about what we believe?"

Ways to Differentiate

If you are teaching more emergent readers, you may have chosen to focus more of this work on characters in stories, including the struggles the characters face, how those struggles may be named as social issues, and how they deal with these struggles. This work helps students move away from sequential retelling, and helps them develop one lens for determining importance in a story. Thus, you could teach your young readers that when we read with a lens, first we read for the story, for what happens, and then we read thinking – what does this story teach us about x (with x being homelessness, or bullying, or losing someone, etc.). Teach your students to get ready to talk by putting post-its on moments when they see their characters first facing x , then struggling with x , then overcoming or not overcoming x .

Next Steps

As our clubs move through one text, and then another, discovering the issues that live inside them and then mining the text for critical scenes, piecing these scenes together to develop interpretations of how this book is positioning itself in the greater discussion of certain issues, you can help each club to decide which of the issues they have discussed feel important and urgent to them. You can then begin the work of teaching students to think and talk across texts. With text sets on different issues in hand, you can teach students to ask how the perspective of one text differs from that of another text. What explains those differences? Do the characters within one text or another have the same perspectives on this issue? Why or why not?

You may decide that after students have read texts around a particular issue for two weeks that it would be good to invite them to imagine ways that they could communicate what they have learned about their issues to a greater audience. You could open up the predictable result of becoming attuned to a social issue – which is social action. Clubs might brainstorm ideas for how to try and change people's minds or reactions to certain groups. At the very least, they might begin to read their lives within the school day with the same insight and empathy that they read their books, and they might continue to find ways to treat their peers with the same reflection and understanding as they treated their fictional characters.

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Unit 9 – Reading Projects: Building a Reading Life or Authoring Your Own Unit

June

Building A Reading Life

Over the past year, students have been given a variety of reading experiences, and they have undoubtedly grown tremendously as readers. This unit gives them time to savor their experiences, notice their growth and use their reflections as a way to create reading projects for themselves independently. It also gives us as teachers a chance to design our own unit of study, by carefully thinking back on the entire year to best ascertain and address students' growth and ever-present needs.

The goal of Independent Reading Projects is that readers will have a sense of purpose behind their reading. No longer will they read by randomly selecting books out of the P basket. They will know themselves as readers, their strengths and weaknesses, their likes and dislikes, and more importantly, they will know the strategies that readers use when initiating a rich, purposeful, independent reading life.

If you decide to guide all your students through Independent Reading Projects you may begin the unit by teaching them to look through their reading logs and reading notebooks to determine the kind of reader they are or have become during the year. Teach them to review these documents; asking themselves questions such as, "What types of books do I tend to read?" "Of the books I've read, which are my favorites?" "What genres do I tend to shy away from?" Your youngsters will begin seeing patterns across their reading work, which might empower them to say, "I'm the kind of reader who loves to read..."

Research shows us that a decline in summer reading has a huge impact on student reading progress. Therefore, you can teach students how to use their logs to assess themselves and set new goals for reading volume and stamina. Teach them to read over their logs for the year, asking themselves questions such as, "What reading levels have I moved through this year?" "How can I describe my reading volume and reading rate?"

Students might also use their reading portfolios to reflect on their reading lives. Looking across the year at their growth in a specific skill, you can teach readers how to notice their progress and set new goals for themselves as readers. Therefore, in addition to finding a collection of books to read, readers will also have new reading skill goals along with a sense of accomplishment in the progress that they have made across the year. They might also set goals for reading habits to work on volume or reading rate.

Another way students can reflect is by recalling significant reading experiences they've had across the year; help them think through the units of study your class has traveled through together. Perhaps they recall a partnership, club or read-aloud conversation in which they developed a huge insight. Or maybe they read a book that touched them so deeply that it changed the way they saw books they'd read previously. You might have students read through their logs and notebooks looking for 'landmark books,' asking the question: "Which books have changed me in some way?" "What about these books changed me?" You want students to use their landmark books to help them name the characteristics that they want to try to find in new books. Readers might discover types of themes or archetypes that appeal to them. A reader may learn that books that contain the "fish out of water" theme really appeal to her.

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Students might also reflect on their learning life across the curriculum. You can teach them to ask themselves, “What units of study in social studies or science or math really stuck with me or intrigued me?” You may want to teach students how our learning lives can serve as catalysts for reading projects. Where the curriculum may only have touched on The Great Wall of China, the reader can go much further with an independent reading project. In addition, you might want to teach that our day-to-day lives can inspire independent reading projects. This year there were a lot of articles and studies publicized about lying in general and lying in memoirs. A student may choose an independent reading project that reads several memoirs thinking about the importance of telling the truth or the project may be more nonfiction based on studies of lying.

As readers reflect, they will begin to notice their reading preferences and strengths as well as areas open for further exploration. This data can become a source for planning a reading project.

After students have had some time to reflect on their reading work, we might offer some possible options for reading projects. Some projects might emerge from their reflection work. Students may want to work on moving from one level to the next over the next five weeks. Others might want to challenge themselves by trying out a genre they haven’t read this year. Others might want to try to work on improving their reading rate, and instead of reading four books in four weeks, move to six books in four weeks.

As another option, however, we may want to use this time to teach our students that many readers in the world create projects out of an interest—a personal interest or a social/historical/world interest. We might ask students the question, “If you could spend the last five weeks of school reading books on a topic or concern in which you have a vested interest, what would that be?” Then, perhaps, we can give possible examples to give our students, modeling first, from our own interests or concerns. Some ideas could be:

- An interest in the collected works of a particular author. A Jacqueline Woodson study, for instance, could include her books as well as the film versions.
- An interest in fantasy books—but how different fantasy writers differ from one another. For example, one student read several J.K. Rowling books alongside Phillip Pullman’s books in order to do a comparison/contrast of their books.
- An interest in a social issue. For example, one student was interested in how girls are portrayed in the media, especially with body image. She decided to a series of “chick lit,” the highly popular books like, *The A List*, *The Clique*, etc., in order to examine how these books perpetuate the myths of body image to girls. You may extend this work to include film and video.
- An interest in what makes a classic book “classic” or in why awards are awarded to certain books and not to others.
- An interest in why some books are censored. For example, one student examined The Banned Book List and chose 4-6 books from the list to read—examining the politics of censorship, interviews with the authors, and her own impressions of the books along the way, putting together *Upstate* and *Catcher in the Rye*.
- An interest in a particular subject or person. For example, one student was really interested in the Mets. He read biographies of players, books about the team and its rivals, he studied current sports pages and made predictions about upcoming games, he kept a ‘Mets journal,’ he studied film clips, and he taught his class how to be engaged and knowledgeable fans and shared his passion.

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- An interest in the difference between “girl books” and “boy books” and if they should have those labels.
- An interest in the social aspect of reading. Students could have a reading partnership with another student, parent, or group to see how they read differently, what they talk about, and what their individual readings say about the kind of people they are.

Teach students to begin by taking everything they have learned about themselves as readers to start gathering books. They might gather books around a favorite author, a nonfiction topic, a genre, an issue or a theme. For example, a student might have loved the class read-aloud, *Skinny Bones* by Barbara Park. He might, therefore, choose to collect other books by this author and create an author study for himself. Or perhaps, during the unit of study on *Social Issue Book Clubs*, a club might have begun reading books about *peer pressure*. For their reading project, some of those students might decide to continue reading more books that focus around this issue. There might be students who have collected lists of books recommended by classmates throughout the year; this is the perfect opportunity for them to gather these books and create a reading project for themselves.

Students may find a different way to focus their projects; they may decide to take on a consideration of their personal reading habits. Some students may decide that they would like to try and lift their reading up a level before the end of the year, to increase their volume from four books a month to six books a month, or to increase their reading rate from 20 pages in 30 minutes to 30 pages in 30 minutes.

We can make space for students to begin collecting reading materials in the classroom library by providing baskets labeled with the students’ projects. This serves as an organizational support for students as well as a vehicle for making projects public: “Who else has a project like mine?” “Who might read with me?” “Who could use this book recommendation?” This will help students form partnerships and clubs around reading projects. After they’ve learned so much about building ideas through conversation, you’ll want to encourage them at this point to continue this work independently.

Now that students have gathered materials (and perhaps other readers), they are well into their reading projects. You’ll want to teach them to plan their reading, and to make deadlines for themselves. You might give them a blank calendar where they can plan the start date and end date of the reading of the books they’ve chosen. Show them how to plan the amount of time they’ll be reading each day in school and at home, and to decide how many pages they’ll be able to read during this time. Remind them what they have learned about themselves as readers from the study of their personal reading data. How many pages do I typically read in thirty minutes? They’ll use this information to set a deadline for their books. Students will also need to plan when they will meet with partners or clubs to discuss their reading. We can teach them to ask themselves (and each other!) questions such as:

- How will my study go?
- What will I do each day? How can I write that on my calendar?
- What will I read? What are my reading goals (skills-based)?
- How will writing support my study?
- When will I spend time reflecting on how my study is going and revise it when needed?
- When will I talk to my classmates about my project and their studies?
- How will I assess my project?

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Help them answer these questions and make plans accordingly, as well as guiding them in ways to keep track of their work across the unit of study.

As you can see, this unit is a time for students to think about the skills and strategies they've learned this year, the progress they've made, and the work they can do to continue to strengthen themselves as readers. You might discuss and name the qualities of good reading studied across the year, and students might use these qualities to reflect on themselves as readers. We could pose questions that help students think about specific reading skills such as: "Do you reread when you meet up with confusion? Do you reread to think more deeply about your reading?" Or something more open-ended like: "How do you tend to develop ideas about the books you read?" Students can use these reflections as a way to make plans then remember to apply particular skills and strategies as they read.

Your conference notes might indicate that there are students in need of work in a particular area; you might pull these students together in small groups to teach strategy lessons that focus on particular reading skills or habits. For example, you may have several students who are working on improving their interpretation skills. They might each bring their reading-project books to the small group and apply the strategy to their independent projects. Students who are all working on increasing their reading rate might come together in a small group with you and practice a strategy on their independent project books.

In the end students are using their self-assessments and what they have learned about being a reader in your curriculum this year, to create their own study.