

WHY ARE MY STUDENTS SNAPCHATTING THEIR WAY THROUGH *THE ODYSSEY*—AND WHAT CAN I OFFER INSTEAD?

Perhaps you have tried to get your kids to fall in love with a big white whale or a little girl named Scout. I have. And I fell flat on my face, or rather right into a group of resistant readers.

The problem Mr. Valentine set out to overcome in the Introduction is one many of us battle every day: how to get our middle and high school students to love to read. But the challenge doesn't end there. Even if we give up on getting our students to love literature and settle for simply getting them to read the assigned classic, we face defeat. Forget appreciating the richness of those books—most students aren't even cracking them open.

Consider what happened in an honors English class I recently visited. The students were on their sixth week of *The Odyssey*, and not into it. This—despite the teacher trying to connect it to their lives, incorporate creative assignments, and break it down in discussion. All that hard work, yet most of the class was checked out, one girl blatantly so.

Perhaps you remember the trick of cutting an inner square out of the pages of a book to hide a pack of cigarettes or contraband candy. This girl taught me a new reason: hiding a phone. She had taken an X-ACTO knife to her copy of *The Odyssey* and was now swiping her way through Snapchat and Instagram during the forty-minute discussion of the text, all while giving the appearance of intently reading. When I asked her why, she said the book was boring. She didn't like listening to her teacher explain it, and it didn't make sense anyway. This A-level student felt that listening in on the discussion was enough to get by, even though she was "listening" while swiping through her phone.

Why We Have to Minimize the Role of, but Not Abandon, the Classics

Imagine if her six-plus weeks not reading *The Odyssey* had been spent immersed in novels of her choice. My work in middle and high school classrooms tells me that many students carry figurative cell phones in their class copies of the text, appearing to be on task but meanwhile absorbing little of what the teacher so desperately wants them to know.

You wouldn't be reading this book if you weren't also discouraged by students who balk at what you hold closest to your teaching heart—a love of books. So many of us struggle with students' lack of engagement and motivation to read. As a lifelong reader, I wonder how some can deny themselves the habit of reading. But it's no mystery to me, as a reader who chooses what she wants to read and is good at reading, why others resist difficult texts that are disconnected from their lives and interests.

I just picked up *The Scarlet Letter* and opened a page at random. Even as an avid reader, I had to reread this passage a few times to "get it," let alone to analyze craft:

It may appear singular, and, indeed, not a little ludicrous, that an affair of this kind, which in later days would have been referred to no higher jurisdiction than that of the select men of the town, should then have been

a question publicly discussed, and on which statesmen of eminence took sides. At that epoch of pristine simplicity, however, matters of even slighter public interest, and of far less intrinsic weight than the welfare of Hester and her child, were strangely mixed up with the deliberations of legislators and acts of state. (Hawthorne, 1850/2003, p. 89)

Whew. How many of us skimmed that?

“Selling” this kind of text to already resistant readers is a huge hurdle. But we don’t want to abandon master authors such as Hawthorne, either. We want to use complex classic texts without resorting to reading them aloud in class, chapter by chapter, or making the film version at the end of the unit the only carrot to get students through.

Most middle and high school English teachers I work with worry about denying their students the texts that, as “literature” lovers, we long to teach. David Denby, author of *Lit Up* (2016), makes an impassioned plea to keep critically praised literature in the canon in today’s middle and high school curricula, and many teachers I work with share this sentiment.

We don’t have the option of dismissing those books anyway. Now we have the added pressure to get our students reading complex literature in order to meet the Common Core State Standards or the state-designed equivalent. The suggested level of texts outlined in Appendix B of the standards is almost shockingly difficult. Most teachers I know would be amazed if their students read and understood works by Cervantes, Chaucer, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Molière, Thoreau, Emerson, and Poe. Yet there they are, serving as models for the level of texts that we are to use with our middle and high schoolers.

The expectations laid out in the standards are meant to minimize the gap between what high school students are asked to do now and what they will be asked to do as college freshmen. This makes sense: when we only use texts at a level that is accessible and palatable to our students, we set them up for a shock on standardized tests and at college.

But if students are SparkNoting and Snapchatting their way through the complex texts we teach, what’s the point? We can’t keep relying on this outdated model of one class novel every six (ahem, sometimes twelve) weeks. Most of our students are not only not reading the classics; they’re simply not reading.

One educator I work with told me how she recently asked a high school senior if he was reading.

“No,” he answered honestly.

When she asked, “Why not?” he shrugged.

Then she asked, “How does that work?”

“Do you really want to know?” he said.

After she nodded, he quickly jotted down a list in his notebook and showed her. It looked something like this:

- Look up and nod every minute or two
- Write song lists or scribbles in the margins of the book so it looks like you’re taking notes
- When the teacher asks a question, flip through pages of the book, then stop at one and look like you’re trying to find something as evidence
- Repeat as needed until someone else answers the question or until class is over

This student managed to pass each year without actually reading any of the assigned texts. He artfully avoided reading in part because the text was hard or impossible to understand, and in the meantime developed a clear series of coping mechanisms.

When I heard this story, I pictured so many of my former students nodding eagerly, then avoiding eye contact. Maybe this wasn’t such a secret list. If only these students were all able, instead, to just as quickly jot down a list of steps they used to navigate, comprehend, and analyze texts, not fake read them.

We do not want our students to be among the numbers of college freshmen (1.7 million every year) who must take remedial classes in literacy, for which they pay and get no credit (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Nor do we want them to be among the nearly 50 percent of students who will drop out of college before graduating. In addition to the high risk of not graduating, our students will run an average debt of almost \$30,000 (Bidwell, 2014). The deck is stacked against our students, and deficient literacy skills impair their slim odds of success.

No pressure, right?

As if it’s not enough to get our students to read right now, and maybe even enjoy it a little, we face the crushing need to get them reading enough so they can

survive the workload in college. It's no wonder some teachers start checking out the health benefits offered at Starbucks or downloading Peace Corps applications when it all starts to feel like too much. But there must be a way to tackle these challenges without drowning under the pressure: how can we turn our students into capable robust readers who also know and appreciate the classics?

And so we're agreed: if schools are to be a place for empowering all students, we need to keep complex texts, including some of the classics we cherish, although we can't limit our curriculum to those potentially alienating books, either. Alfred Tatum (2005) confirms the need to provide a rich variety of texts to get to culturally responsive teaching. When teaching students already disempowered in our society, he says, such as Black adolescent males, we must use texts that reflect students' culture and knowledge, as well as texts that do not. His research shows that the best literacy instruction provides a purposeful blend of texts, those that rely on what is already culturally familiar to our students, along with those that expand their knowledge and value sets into the unknown.

This is smart teaching for any and all students, not only those already facing distinct challenges. If we want all our students to be engaged readers, we cannot remain in the model of only the classics, and if we want them to be empowered in our society, we cannot ignore those complex works, either. But we need to get our students to *be* readers. It's a fine balance.

As English teachers, we're used to working in a pressure cooker. I've never met an English teacher who is scared of hard work—would we take on grading papers if we were? We want to help our students thrive in our classes and beyond. We want to be that changing force that many of our former English teachers were for us, and we're not afraid of working hard to get there. But, we want to feel like those efforts pay off in the form of engaged robust readers, not cell-phone-carrying resisters.

Thankfully, there are ways to be that inspiration, to support our students and boost their reading lives, to keep the dust off our copies of *Walden*, and to remove that cell phone from the pages of their books. And luckily, it doesn't mean working even harder to get there.

Why We Need to Incorporate Choice Reading

Just as Mr. Valentine overcame reluctant resistant readers, so can we. The turnaround in Carlos isn't a blip, a miracle, or a pipe dream. He has become a reader because of the way Mr. Valentine has structured this and every day.

What works is that literacy is no longer limited to the one book in the curriculum that the whole class is supposed to be reading. That book still exists—it's the template to show students powerful ways to read and to acquaint them with the classics. But afterward there are choices for what students want to read, and that element of choice entices them to crack open a book and develop the habit of reading.

Choice reading has been and continues to be the single most powerful move in supporting all students in becoming authentic readers with robust reading skills. After numerous studies, Stephen Krashen (2004a) documented how choice reading led not only to students' greater enjoyment of reading, but to a marked improvement in their grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and writing skills. Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston's (2015) research shows how self-selected reading benefits students' sense of agency as well as their overall intellectual, moral, and personal lives. Penny Kittle (2013), Kelly Gallagher (2009), Stephen Krashen (2004a), Richard Allington (2002), Kylee Beers (2003), Nancie Atwell (2007), Lucy Calkins (2000), and Donalyn Miller (2014) are renowned educators and writers who champion putting choice books into readers' hands. They have been leading countless teachers on this path for decades, and the results are clear. Choice reading, when done right, grows authentic readers. In *The Power of Reading*, Krashen (2004a) reminds us that the single greatest factor in reading ability is how much we read. But how can we expect students to become readers with books they can't, and/or don't, want to read?

We owe it to all of our students, especially those already reading below grade level, to provide the opportunity for prolific reading experiences in books they can read well and want to read. By limiting our instruction to texts that are well above students' reading level, which is the case so often in the schools I work in, we deny students this ability to read well—and to enjoy reading. And, as Allington (2002) reminds us, texts above our students' abilities keep them from growing: "Simply put, students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become independent, proficient readers" (p. 743). One novel every marking period provides anything but.

Mr. Valentine knew a book every couple months wasn't cutting it. He wanted to move his students to do more with their reading, but he also knew they had to be reading in the first place. That's where choice came in, but it wasn't either-or; he could turn them into readers without abandoning the class text. In fact, Mr. Valentine could use the class text as a powerful tool for close reading—excerpting

passages of highly complex literature that students are willing to grapple with and appreciate for a few paragraphs, if not necessarily the entire tome.

First he had to feel comfortable embracing young adult (YA) and nonclassic texts as part of his curriculum, knowing most students wouldn't elect to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but they'd fly through the pages of *Mockingjay*. Indeed, reading popular literature is a proven way to become a strong reader. It was good enough for David Foster Wallace's college students at Illinois State University in 1994. In his English 102 syllabus, Wallace provided a book list that included Stephen King, Larry McMurtry, and Jackie Collins. As he explained to his students, "Don't let any potential lightweightish-looking qualities of the text delude you into thinking that this will be a blow-off-type class. These 'popular' texts will end up being harder than more conventionally 'literary' works to unpack and read critically. English 102 aims to show you some ways to read fiction more deeply, to come up with more interesting insights on how pieces of fiction work, to have informed, intelligent reasons for liking or disliking a piece of fiction" (Harry Ransom Center, 2010). Wallace used so-called commercial fiction to get his students thinking critically about literature.

So choice reading helps reluctant readers actually read, and as Wallace showed in his course, it's not the death of in-depth literary analysis. Text complexity is not so much about the text, then, but about what you do with the text and the interaction(s) between text and reader.

Thanks to work by Kittle (2013), Gallagher (2009), Miller (2014), Atwell (2007), Calkins (2000), Ivey and Johnston (2015), Krashen (2004a), Allington (2002), and many others, we know the impact of letting students choose books they want to read. We can take these researchers' well-documented successes of turning students into readers to our own classrooms. When we allow our students to pick their books, resistance to reading fades. Not only will students read regularly for the first time in years—or ever—but they may even enjoy it! So the habit gets reinforced, again and again.

What the Blended Model Offers

If having our kids read regularly, even if it's not the classics from cover to cover; if having a class that's manageable, even enjoyable, to teach; if getting to know our students through their books has some pull, then this book will show you the way. Here's what can happen for you and your students in this blended model.

STUDENTS READ MORE, AND READING MORE MATTERS

Penny Kittle, renowned high school English teacher and author of *Book Love* (2013), filmed her students openly admitting to reading only the SparkNotes, if anything, for their English classes. A startling image shows her students displaying a total of all of the books they read in three years of high school. Most show between zero and five. Then, students display the number of books read *in one semester* after being able to choose what they want to read. Every student's number jumps considerably, most to double digits.

A great thing about reading more is that it builds on itself, naturally strengthening stamina and fluency, which in turn leads readers to read more. We all enjoy doing things we're good at. The only thing I do as an adult that I'm not good at is karaoke, and that is once a decade. Teens are no different—they're drawn to what they feel competent doing, and they avoid what bruises their already vulnerable egos.

I read much more because I am able to pick books I understand and connect to. Being able to choose has made me look forward to reading whereas before I dreaded it.

-Jolie Sheerin,
high school student

When I do enjoy the book, I can finish it in a matter of days. And sometimes I'll read it over and over again, just to be able to relive my favorite moments in the book.

-Adideb Nag,
high school student

Students choose what they read, and that autonomy creates buy-in to read at high volume. No more assigned marriage of tenth grader to *The Scarlet Letter*. Students still read excerpts of that novel, they're familiar with Hawthorne's language and craft, and they know the plot. But they're not expected to read it from cover to cover, which they weren't doing anyway. They are, however, expected to read a lot and to learn strategies of how to read any book. And they do so in books they choose.

By simply introducing choice reading, I've seen classrooms transformed. Teachers who felt it was impossible to get their kids to read can't wait for me to visit their rooms and see all (yes, all) of their students quietly immersed in books. This didn't mean teachers had to completely overhaul their practice. They got students to read by putting engaging books in the classroom, letting them pick out what they want, and giving them time to read. Lessons still incorporate the novels teachers know and love and provide strategies within those beloved texts.

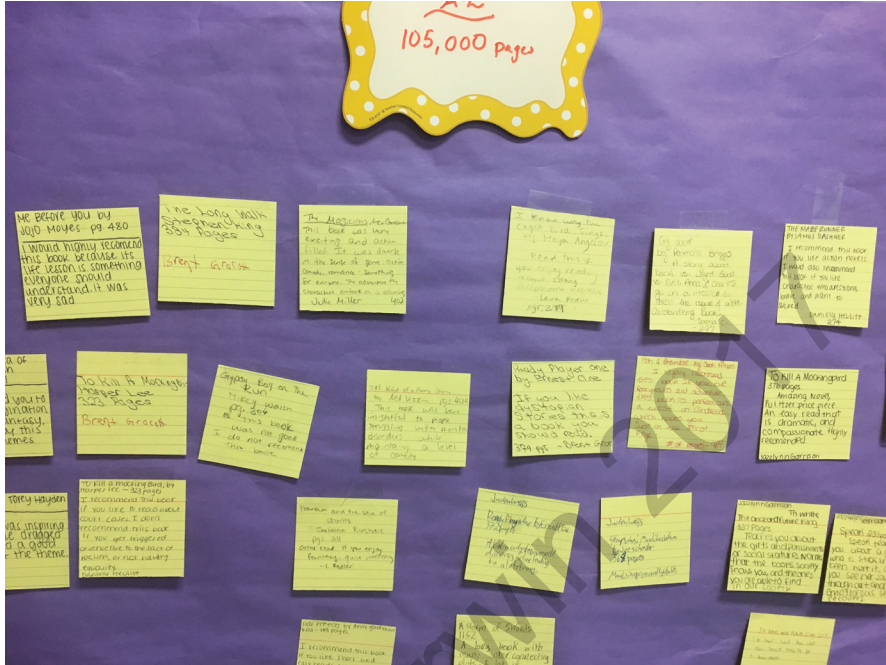
One teacher recently told me how a mom stopped her at the local ShopRite. "I have to tell you the most amazing thing," she told this ninth-grade teacher.

How many books did I read?	1st M.P.	2nd M.P.	3rd M.P.	4th M.P.
Kayla Aguilar	5	10	15	20
Aries Ahumada	5	10	15	20
Keaton Alvarado	5	10	15	20
Justin Arstin	5	10	15	20
Iona Bazelli	5	10	15	20
Joel Brito Diaz	5	10	15	20
Anderson Lanesa	5	10	15	20
Cyrus Castro	5	10	15	20
Nicole Chabira	5	10	15	20
Michael Dabal	5	10	15	20
Josue Diaz	5	10	15	20
Rosario Espinoza	5	10	15	20
Kevin Estrada	5	10	15	20
Juan Fernandez	5	10	15	20
Jordan Idrovo	5	10	15	20
Admir-Kelly	5	10	15	20
Anthony Mantuvo	5	10	15	20
Kevin Ortiz	5	10	15	20
Jiel Pena	5	10	15	20
Joshua Rentas	5	10	15	20
Paquien Whitaker	5	10	15	20
Luke Zunta Torres	5	10	15	20
Nathalia Rentas	5	10	15	20
David On Hin	5	10	15	20
Anthony Suarez	5	10	15	20
Mareen Zaruk	5	10	15	20

- Teens still like getting a sticker for books completed.

7th Grade Literature	BOOKS READ			
Ahmad A.	5	10	15	20
Andrem A.	5	10	15	20
Jalal A.	5	10	15	20
Ralph B.	5	10	15	20
Romana E.	5	10	15	20
Damian G.	5	10	15	20
Hannely G.	5	10	15	20
Liana J.	5	10	15	20
Alaides J.	5	10	15	20
Hristina K.	5	10	15	20
Samantha L.	5	10	15	20
Holly M.	5	10	15	20
Natale M.	5	10	15	20
Jorge M.	5	10	15	20
Kevin N.	5	10	15	20
Andrew O.	5	10	15	20
Janelyn P.	5	10	15	20
Vincenzo P.	5	10	15	20
Jonathan R.	5	10	15	20
Gabriel R.	5	10	15	20
Wesley R.	5	10	15	20
Mona S.	5	10	15	20
Mila S.	5	10	15	20
Alicia S.	5	10	15	20
Adriana U.	5	10	15	20
Jose Valenzuela	5	10	15	20
Gilberto V.	5	10	15	20
Jose Vega	5	10	15	20
Guerrero V.	5	10	15	20
Aleza W.	5	10	15	20
Drillink	5	10	15	20

This section of tenth-grade English collectively read over one hundred thousand pages by early November.



Another way to celebrate students' success as readers: posting lines they love from their independent books.



“My son is reading for the first time since sixth grade. His little brother will play the Wii, and he opts to read.” Other parents expressed delight during conferences that their children included books on birthday and holiday gift lists.

When we offer the choice of books that help students feel confident as readers, versus books that are a struggle to comprehend, we offer a path to a feel-good habit that students want to replicate on their own. Once this confidence is established, using excerpts of challenging texts isn’t painful. Students have the craft and tools to navigate their own reading, which often grows to include increasingly harder and harder texts. Complex excerpts move our readers to think critically as they read any text and to be aware of sophisticated craft.

While we’ll talk about meeting the standards and developing high-level reading skills, reading for volume is a worthwhile goal in and of itself. The more students read, and it doesn’t matter what they read, the better they get at reading (Krashen, 2004b). And it’s not hard to do—we just give students books they can and want to read (Allington, 2013)! Malcolm Gladwell’s (2012) famous statistic tells us that to get good at anything, we need to do it for at least ten thousand hours. Time spent on books that students aren’t reading is a massive loss of opportunity, but we can turn that around.

WE SUPPORT STUDENTS GETTING TO THE HIGHEST LEARNING GOAL: TRANSFER

This book will show two things we can start doing in our classrooms that have significant impact on students:

1. **Provide a focused lesson at the beginning of class, often a close read within a challenging text.** This brief lesson consists of the teacher using an excerpt from the class novel to model his or her thinking as a strong reader with a singular focus (e.g., paying attention to how setting is introduced).
2. **Turn the lesson over to students to try that process with their own books.**

The first instructional method is a think-aloud and is well documented in its ability to empower readers (Wilhelm, 2001). It also provides an opportunity for students to do a close reading of a challenging text with the teacher’s support. The second method supports what Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Hattie

(2016) refer to as the highest level of learning: transfer. Both are essential to high-level literacy instruction.

The think-aloud is how we make our thinking visible to students, revealing the “secret” moves we employ, so students know how to think as readers. Jeffrey Wilhelm (2001) explains, “Think-alouds ensure that the hallmarks of engaged reading don’t remain a big secret to any child in our classrooms” (p. 66). The moves we make as skilled readers are made visible, and students then try these moves on their own while the teacher circulates, scaffolding and guiding as needed. This transition to guided practice and then independent practice is the hallmark of the gradual release of responsibility (Fisher, 2008). It’s what deepens comprehension, helps students to make meaning, and empowers them to approach texts with confidence. Basically, it’s the essential step before asking readers to go try good reading on their own.

This focused lesson also gets to *close reading*, a current buzzword for good reason. Close reading refers to the process of doing in-depth analysis of a text, using a specific lens for examining key details, patterns, and more. Close reading is essential in helping students arrive at deep understandings of author’s craft, underlying meaning, text structures, and all of our literacy standards. Asking students to join us in an intense examination of a passage in a classic text, then apply it anew to a choice text, allows us to incorporate choice reading in a way that is anything but “lite.”

Close reading isn’t meant to be done for an entire novel or nonfiction book—that wouldn’t be realistic or particularly useful. It’s meant to be done within paragraphs, passages, or select pages of text in order to lift our understanding and thinking about how we read. Pulling excerpts of our class texts to do this heavy lifting provides access to challenging literature as well as practice with the habit of close reading. Then, readers try that same careful attention within books of their own.

Transfer is what happens when readers take what we show them and use it in a new way, or in this instance with their own book. Fisher et al.’s (2016) scale of learning sets transfer as the most valuable goal we can aim for when teaching, and yet their research shows it is rare in most instruction.

By asking students to take what we show them in the class novel and apply that reading strategy to their own books, we are teaching them to transfer essential reading understandings. This is what reading workshops, à la Kittle, Miller, Atwell, Calkins, and more, have showcased for decades. We ask students to apply

a strategy to their own work, and see the results. Transfer is where we need to go in our teaching, but it requires that students aren't using skills in the same book that we're teaching; they must try that skill in a new text.

For example, let's look at an excerpt from *The Scarlet Letter* to show students how to pay attention to repeated images. The teacher chose this passage to help students consider author's craft, knowing that images described in detail may stand for a bigger idea in the book.

The teacher read this passage aloud from the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*:

The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the New World. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheeltrack of the street, was a grass plot, much overgrown with burdock, pigweed, and apple peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rosebush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. (pp. 42–43)

After he read, the teacher spoke about why the rosebush seemed to stand for something bigger than just a glimpse of something pretty at the prison door. He talked informally about how the prison seems to stand for Puritan judgment, and how the rosebush's natural beauty counteracts that harshness of the Puritans. As he spoke, he'd go back and point to specifics in the text that drew his attention. He connected his theories to a lesson from the day before in which students learned about Puritanism and the themes of punishment and forgiveness. This all took about eight minutes.

Then, the teacher asked his students to pay attention to images in their books that are repeated or described in detail. Students were asked to question why the author included those descriptions, and to assume the objects are mentioned for a reason. He sent students off to read, and at the end of class, he had them write for a little less than ten minutes about the images they saw in their books and how those images might connect to the way Hawthorne used the rosebush in *The Scarlet Letter*.

After watching the teacher analyze the symbol of the rosebush in *The Scarlet Letter*, this reader considers possible symbols in *Grasshopper Jungle*.

Repeated Images and Symbolism in *Grasshopper Jungle*

Nathaniel Hawthorne focuses on the rose near the prison to show something about Puritanism without just saying it. Andrew Smith does this a lot in *Grasshopper Jungle*, too. Smith repeats images to show things about his characters. Austin keeps mentioning the Xanax that his and Robby's moms take and calls the Xanax kayaks. It seems like he might call them kayaks because their moms are kind of floating on the surface and not really getting involved. They are basically clueless about what their kids do outside the house.

This reader of *Inside Out and Back Again* considers how the main character's choice of a doll to bring to America from Vietnam is more than just a random detail, but stands for something bigger in the story.

Symbolism in *Inside Out and Back Again*

Just like the ~~rose~~ rosebush represents something bigger in *The Scarlet Letter*, Ha's doll means more than just that she brought a doll with her when she leaves Vietnam. She describes the doll as her "one choice." Ha chooses something nonessential but important to her, because she doesn't want to completely leave Saigon. Just like the specific description of the rosebush tells us something important in *The Scarlet Letter*, the description of the doll is important, too. Lai writes that the doll was left outside by a neighbor and has marks from where a mouse bit it. I think this shows that the doll is like Ha, and that it might be left outside or harmed, too. It might not always be safe or kept intact, so we know that her trip to America is probably not going to be all easy. That's why Ha says she loves the doll even more because it has scars. Ha has scars, too, and this makes me think that the author

When students transfer reading skills into a book of their choice, there is also the chance they'll be better able to transfer those skills to their history or science class's readings, not to mention the state tests. If we want our students to be skilled readers in all content areas, on high-stakes tests, in college, and in life, then having them apply and transfer reading skills in our classes means we are getting them ready.

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT AND DIFFERENTIATION HAPPEN NATURALLY

These routines of modeling reading strategies and asking students to transfer them to their own books also allow for authentic assessment. We will see our readers master the strategies. Time spent reading isn't fluff, it's immediate and useful data for us, and it produces results for our students.

Now the guessing work is gone. If students can take a reading strategy we've modeled in *The Scarlet Letter* and use it with a book of their choice, we can be confident they truly "got" that concept. And we don't have to worry that they used SparkNotes to get there.

Carlos didn't, and frankly couldn't, fake meeting standard RL.9–10.3: *Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.* He did this work when reading *Grasshopper Jungle*, and he showed it in his double-entry notes. There's immediate proof. Trying to see if a student mastered a strategy by listening to a comment she makes in class discussion around a common text is much harder. And it makes it more difficult to assess whether or not the student did the reading at all.

Fake reading turns into authentic reading when students do it in class, every day. As teachers, we already work hard to create thoughtful lessons with impact—this is a way to make that expertise and hard work pay off. And, it pays off with all students: nonreaders, fake readers, and even already capable readers.

Every reader is working at his or her own pace and ability. We don't need to differentiate for the range of learners we all teach; differentiation is naturally embedded for interest and level when students apply reading skills to books they want to and can read.

By writing sticky notes and answering questions, I enjoy reading more. I think more about characters and I look deeper into the story, so I have a better understanding.

-Miranda Maley,
high school student

As Carol Ann Tomlinson (2014) reminds us, there is no such thing as a class of homogeneous learners. Differentiating for individual needs and interests is essential to good teaching. By offering up choice reading as a way to demonstrate student learning, we meet our students' needs.

BLENDING THE CLASS NOVEL WITH STUDENTS' NOVELS ISN'T FOR MARTYRS

This blend of excerpts from the class novel to show high-level reading skills mixed with students going off to try it in their own choice books is a game-changing structure. And yet sometimes, as hardworking and devoted professionals, we might hesitate. It's understandable. After years of being "on" during the whole class period, we might feel guilty that we lead the class for a short time, and then students take on the hard work of critical reading while we coach them. It feels too easy! Are we really earning our keep if we aren't doing all the heavy lifting?

But this change in ownership of learning is the idea. First of all, there's still plenty to do in preparing a tight lesson and helping readers, but second, we put the onus on those who most need these strategies: the students! No more hiding behind a cell-phoned copy of *The Odyssey*; students are on task with the important work of critical thinking and reading. And they're actually doing it.

Typically, any hesitation disappears as we see the profound change in students' reading habits, engagement, and motivation. We witness students' joy and confidence surge, without giving up the classics to get there, either. Being less exhausted at the end of the day is just icing on the cake. The biggest reward is seeing the transformation in our students: not just in a few high flyers, but in everyone.

Now all students get in the habit of reading, building up stamina, choosing books they want to read, and passing around hot titles as soon as they finish, all while being exposed to the classics. Students read in the hallways and on bus rides to games, and sometimes put away cell phones in favor of books. They enjoy reading.

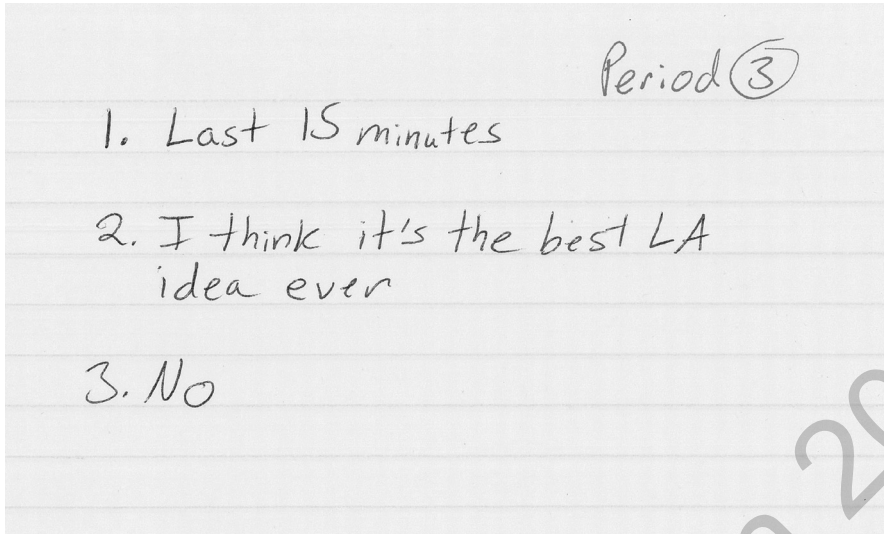
Teachers I work with know this because they're also implementing a research-proven instructional move that fosters achievement: reflecting on what and how they're teaching. Fisher et al.'s (2016) studies show that

I discovered that I'm actually an avid reader. I just need to have a novel that I like to read.

-Suchita Kanala,
high school student

I read more now that I choose an independent book. Now I am more interested in the story. Before I would never be excited to pick up the class book because I wasn't intrigued.

-Miranda Maley,
high school student



- No. 1 is an answer to the question, “When would you like to read your choice book in class?” and No. 2 answers, “What do you think of adding choice reading to the curriculum?” No. 3 answers whether there is anything else the student’s teacher should know.

stopping to consider what is working and what isn’t is transformative. This blended model came about with teachers who tried it, fed off of students’ immediate enthusiasm, and modified it according to the informal and formal data they collected.

A HIGH VOLUME OF READING GETS OUR STUDENTS COLLEGE-READY

The ability to read well is essential in helping students prepare for college. Yet many middle and high schoolers are ill prepared. Most of us as teachers have been forced to let go of the assumption that by middle or high school our students will be solid readers, prepared to tackle literary analysis in the classics. It’s clear we lost this battle awhile ago. Analyzing symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* isn’t what lures these students back. So, instead of pushing them into the class novel and further away from reading, we must teach the habits of intense sustained reading through choice texts.

Developing stamina as readers is essential if students are going to manage the hundreds of pages a week of college reading. We can help them develop stamina with higher degrees of independence so they will be ready for flying solo in college. We can’t expect to nag and threaten and babysit middle and high schoolers into skimming the class novel, and later being able to direct themselves as readers on their own. The time to get students reading a lot on their own is now.

Students will see the reading skills outlined in the standards as you model them with the class novel, and they'll do that same work with their own books. Plus, our love of classic novels and texts will be contagious. Some students might even pick up those classics—by choice.

I've seen students pick up *Go Set a Watchman*, *Invisible Man*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Animal Farm*, all because their teachers used excerpts from these texts in their lessons and inadvertently plugged them as captivating reads. Regardless of what they choose, students are getting fit as readers, ready for the marathon of reading they'll do in college.

We'll also see how the blended model moves beyond a class discussion around one novel, in which typically just a few students take part, toward a seminar-like conversation in which all students use their own books as textual evidence for complex concepts and theories. Reading and talking about choice books in class won't feel elementary because students will be engaging in the meaningful complex analysis they'll be asked to do in college.

Through the blended model, we help all students be capable robust readers. Not only the very few who go on to be English majors, but all of our students, will be able to think critically, identify and discuss literary techniques in a range of works, and feel confident in themselves and their reading skills. In a world in which a college degree is nonnegotiable for professional careers, we must steep our students in the habits they'll need once they get there.

KEEPING THE CLASSICS GIVES OUR STUDENTS CULTURAL CAPITAL

While much good can be done with volume in choice reading, our students get the best of both worlds when we keep the classics, too. By exposing students to summaries and close reading within well-regarded texts that have stood the test of time, we give students much more than the plotline of *Macbeth* or an appreciation for Harper Lee. We also give them the touchstone texts for so many other works, the reference points on which so many contemporary narratives are built. Our students gain the sense that story lines in modern film, TV, and literature were not created in a vacuum.

A familiarity with the classics is cultural capital: it enables our students to navigate and succeed within our world. Students are more likely to understand references to someone's Jekyll and Hyde personality, a Scrooge type, or a Pollyannaish

optimism, and to pick up on allusions to literary texts within contemporary works. When they hear Selena Gomez sing, “The heart wants what it wants,” they might do so with the awareness that Woody Allen said it before her, and Emily Dickinson before that.

Readers can gain a broader view of the world and appreciate how attitudes have changed over time when experiencing Austen, Shakespearean sonnets, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and *Fahrenheit 451*, alongside contemporary lit. Exposure to classics also helps students navigate and understand language in unfamiliar styles and contexts. And again, students might be tempted to pick up those classics because they are becoming more confident as readers.

Reading literary fiction not only helps us understand our world and historical contexts, but it improves our social skills, such as empathy and understanding (Kidd & Castano, 2013)—not to mention it feeds our brains. Reading texts like Jane Austen’s actually activates parts of our brain that popular literature cannot. When students are exposed to complex texts that require high levels of inference, brain activity expands (Goldman, 2012). Complex classics are worth keeping around, even if we’re not holding onto a pipe dream that students will read them from cover to cover.

While keeping the classics is vital, the term *classic* can and should be broadly defined beyond what we may have read as students in English class. If classics worth teaching are deemed to have “outstanding or enduring” qualities (Wheeler, 2017), then our book lists don’t have to be limited to texts written by White men from previous centuries. Having just finished Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad*, I’m itching to use this profound book to showcase characterization, symbolism, text structure, and more. Many high schools use *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson as a class novel, and for good reason. It’s beautifully written, and it was written for young adults, with teen characters, issues, and conflicts. Just because it’s not hard to understand or relate to, or because as teachers we didn’t read this book in school, doesn’t mean this YA classic shouldn’t be an option for teaching students how to read well.

For every *Romeo and Juliet* that we keep, we can model reading strategies with a fresher text that’s equally complex, rich in technique, and relevant to our teen students. I urge teachers to model reading strategies with complex well-written books that include teen characters, issues, and conflicts whenever possible. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Code Name Verity*, *Wonder*, and *Chew On This* over *Animal Farm* in middle school. *The Book Thief*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *I Am Malala* over *Ulysses* and *Great*

Expectations in high school. As middle and high school English teachers, we usually have some choice in what we teach: let's use that choice to pull readers into the classics (broadly defined), not push them out.

No matter what complex, "outstanding" classic literature we choose to teach, we also need to keep the classics in our classrooms because our students deserve access to those texts. Challenging classic literature should not exist solely in rarified environments for highly literate students. We live in a society of polarized classes, where a few have access to privilege and many do not. If we leave the classics out, we risk sending a message that our students can't handle those texts, don't deserve them, or won't need them in the futures where they are headed.

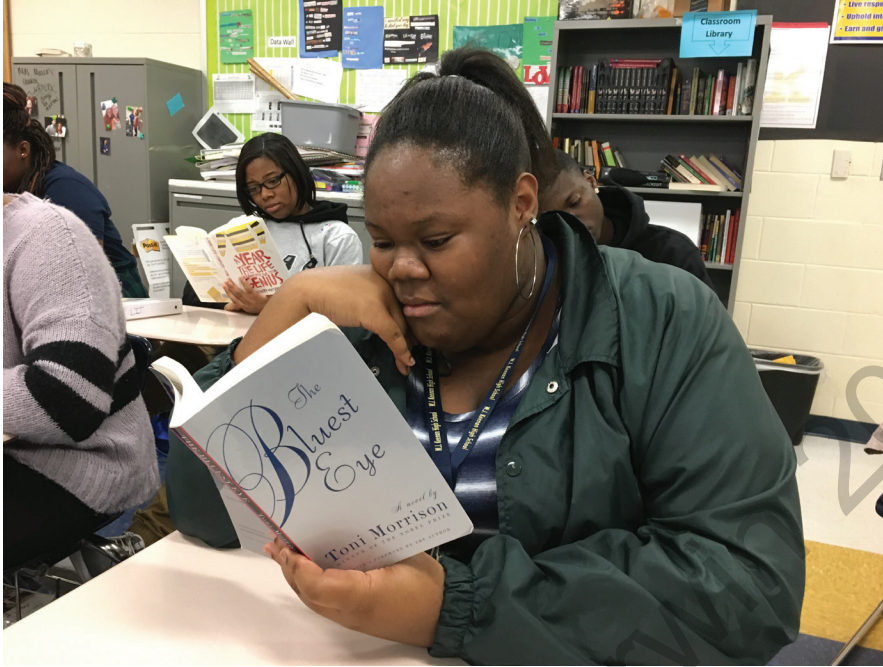
Keeping the classics, while using them in the summarized form, means our students get the message that they deserve access to all texts, at all levels. We subtly reinforce the message that they can be anything they want to be and do anything they want to do because we are not dumbing down our classes or withholding challenging texts. We use complex literature because we know that all of our students, not just the privileged or AP classes, deserve to be taught that way.

WE PREPARE OUR STUDENTS FOR CAREERS

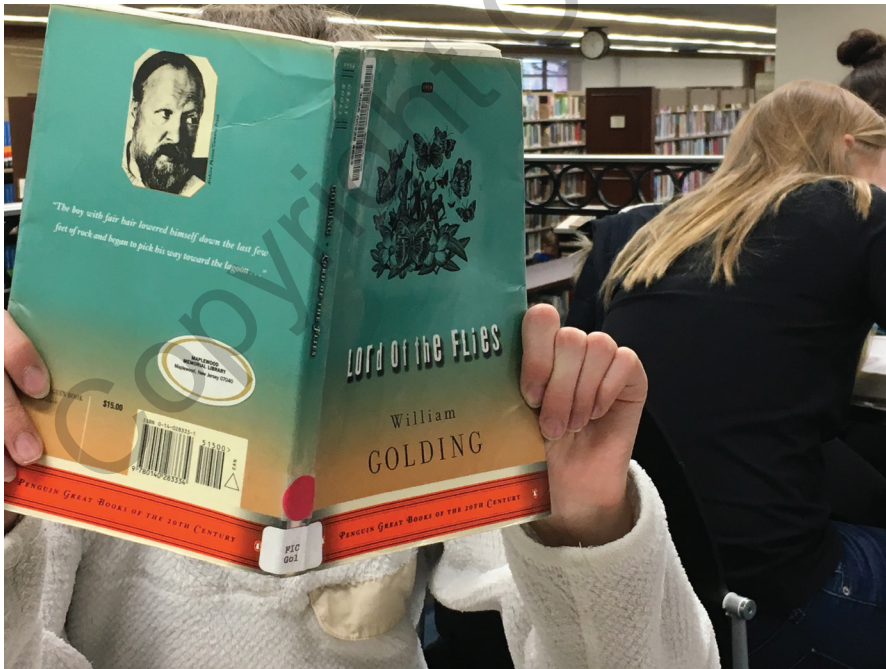
This blended model turns students into engaged readers who can succeed in middle school, high school, and college, and it gets students ready for the literacy demands of their future work lives, too.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) and a survey from company executives, the most important job skill hiring managers look for is the ability to communicate and manage information. Findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey found that only half of the U.S. population between sixteen and sixty-five years of age were proficient in the minimum standards for success in today's labor market (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). We know students will need to read a high volume of information and emails, complex instructions, loan applications, and legal documents; conduct fluent correspondence; and, ideally, still have pleasure reading as a part of their lives. And we know that when they're carrying that cell phone in the pages of *The Odyssey*, it's impossible to get them there. All of us want our students to enter the working world able to showcase their minds and abilities, and by turning them into fluent readers, we're readying them to do so.

Many teachers face the challenge of making this all meaningful to high school juniors and seniors with no interest in or plans to attend college. We need to



These students aren't reading *Lord of the Flies* and *The Bluest Eye* because they were assigned. They picked them up by choice. Not assigning the classics doesn't mean readers won't ever read them. It means they'll get there when they are ready.



remind them that career options, even in what we once thought of as blue-collar jobs or those that require only a high school diploma, will be limited without strong reading skills. Research shows that the need for reading comprehension in factory work and other positions is increasing at a rapid rate. A recent production plant opening in North Carolina was able to accept only 15 percent of job applicants due to the proficiency on a test measuring reading, writing, and math. The head of Siemens Energy declared that there are no longer any jobs on the plant floor for high school graduates, and a director at the John Deere farming machinery company also explained that comprehension skills are a necessity. Our students simply don't have the option of being nonreaders and having strong careers (Selingo, 2017).

Whether we teach students rich in privilege or lacking in resources and opportunity, we want all of our students to head off into their futures equipped with every literacy skill, every advantage, and every ounce of confidence we can supply them with. And we only have forty-five minutes to do that. But this is a doable structure, a method that can work for any combination of ability and need. It will supply our students with what's needed to take on a world steeped in text and information.

We know literate lives aren't a privilege. They are a right and a cornerstone of an informed society, and by getting students to independently manage the work of adept readers, we're also graduating students who can take part in an educated civic body and workplace.

WE DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR STUDENTS—EVERY ONE

Apart from the blended model's benefits that empower our students later on, we also reap rewards in the here and now. A big part of what makes Mr. Valentine's class inviting to kids, and enjoyable for him to teach, is that he's gotten to know his students through books they love. For the majority of class, kids are reading. And during that time, the teacher can rotate through the class, talking to each kid about his or her book, or lead discussions in which students exchange ideas around their personal reading. At a time in their lives when kids most need and seldom have one-on-one time with adults, teachers can get to know their teen students. These conversations also help students solidify their sense of self as a reader.

In the old model of the class novel, there's no time for one-on-one. We're too busy running a class discussion and keeping students on task. Reading in class, essential

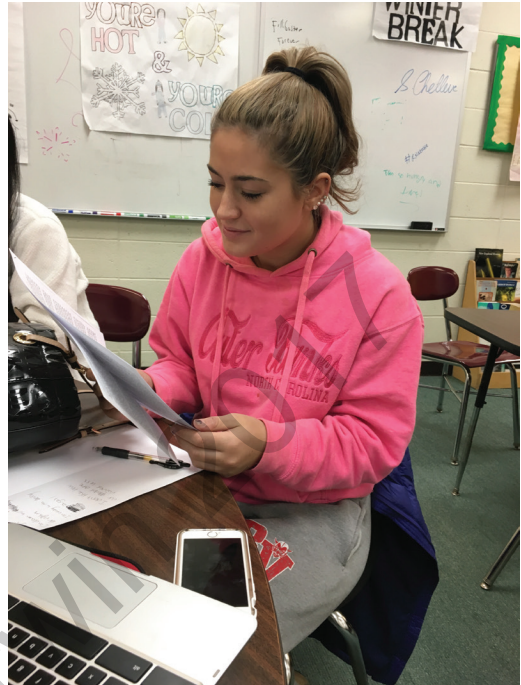
and valuable work, opens up room for other important opportunities, too. We've now created space to talk to students about their ideas, questions, and struggles as they relate to their reading. This is a results-producing powerful time of an adult listening intently to each student. "Bad" students tend to lose their negative labels; quiet students emerge from their shells; superstars slow down and find an authentic way to connect. The time invested is a win-win: the relationships that are fostered by talking about books are enriching for all.

STUDENTS DEVELOP COMPASSION, EMPATHY, AND UNDERSTANDING

The students in classes like Mr. Valentine's are readers, but they're also members of a reading community. That community can see rich growth not just in skills, but in kindness and understanding. This might sound like a fantasy, but compassion flourishes within this new structure.

Peter Johnston and Gay Ivey, educators and authors, discovered in their research that by simply introducing students to a range of YA fiction and telling students to read what they liked, each student read on average forty-two books in the first year (Johnston, 2012). In addition to amassing this tremendous volume, there were a myriad of social benefits: a reduction in behavior problems, an increase in students talking about books, improved maturity, compassion and empathy toward one another, a strengthening of peer and student-teacher relationships, and, quite simply, an increase in happiness. And to prove this was not just a feel-good exercise but one that administrators could invest in without hesitation, Johnston and Ivey also noted that test scores shot up.

As further testimony to the power of reading fiction, former president Barack Obama recently attributed his most essential growth and learning to novels. "When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I've learned I think I've learned from novels," he said. "It has to do with empathy. . . . And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you"



(quoted in Schaub, 2015). In our increasingly global world, what better skill to foster among our students than empathy?

As kids read about characters both like and unlike themselves, as they fall in love with them and follow their journeys, they strengthen core qualities of kindness and understanding. These readers bring that compassion and empathy to their friendships in school and beyond to their families and communities. Reading isn't just academic literacy—it expands our hearts and deepens our consideration of the world.

In case we ever lose faith in the strengths, abilities, and compassion of the coming generations, we can read this student's writing about choice reading and how it pushed her thinking and understanding of the world:

She hated novels. She hated reading. She hated books with small text and thick binds. She hated the smell of it; she hated the look of it. She hated the countless hours spent on reading assignments. She hated the sound of the clock ticking as she read the same words over and over again, turning to the same page over and over again, only to realize that she didn't know what she had just read.

"Pick out two books and read them by January 20," her teacher had said. She groaned. "Time to read another book that will bore me to death," she thought. She walked over to the pile of books laid upon books and more books. Her hands grazed over each and every cover. "Too big," "Too small of a text," or "Looks lame," she thought. But her hands stopped at one and only one book: The Color of Water. She skimmed through the pages, and "Perfect," she thought. "Just one semester, and this is finally over," she sighed.

She sat back down in her seat and read the first few pages. Few pages turned to few chapters, minutes turned to hours, and hours turned to days. She was captivated. She was captivated by the story of Ruth, who was chained to her Jewish traditions all throughout childhood. She was captivated by how Ruth, as a single mother, was able to take care of all her twelve children. Her favorite quote was the one that showed Ruth's lack of support. "My mother knew I was pregnant and in trouble. Looking back, she knew. All she did was sit by the door of the store and fix up the vegetables" (p. 129). She was captivated by James's struggle to find individuality and to finally find a balance with his mixed race. The story of the mother and

the son motivated her to turn the pages and to read. The idea of losing family helped her realize how important they really are. She no longer paid attention to the clock ticking. She was content with the text of the book and the width of the bind. She liked the reading. She loved the book.

—Surabhi Sahay

What's Next: Sparking Joy in Our Classes

These wonderful things can happen in our classrooms, too. They don't require a 180-degree turn from what currently exists. What can look different, however, are the new levels of student engagement with texts. And this book is here to help make this process doable for any teacher.

We'll start by outlining in depth the building blocks for exposing kids to the classics and other complex literature, while also sweetening the pot with choice reading.

First I'll explain how to get ready for independent reading. I'll go through ways to get lots of books, how to set them up in our classrooms, and how to help students find books they won't want to put down. Then, we'll see frameworks for how to make a consistent time for students to dive into their books *and* a time to teach the class novel or nonfiction text.

Next, we'll see the process for figuring out what to teach, using the novels we love and grade-level standards as a foundation. I'll break down this process, providing models, tips, and templates for each step so we see the "how to" clearly. The planning out of a unit will feel doable, not daunting.

We're all aware, sometimes overwhelmingly, that nonfiction needs to be an equal player in our curriculums. In Chapter 4, I'll show how to create units based on nonfiction texts and standards, too. Just as in the previous chapter on fiction texts, the planning process will be illustrated with a sample nonfiction text, model lessons, and more to make the methods easily accessible. I'll also show how to choose excerpts and give summaries of the class text, and anticipate possible challenges and what to do about them. There will be resources so we can take on this process without hesitation.

Once we're comfortable building lessons and units using this structure, I'll explain how to bring those lessons to life in our classrooms. Chapter 5 will help us get a sense of timing for a single class period or block, and a sample script

will help us envision what it all looks like. We'll see how to do read-alouds, what kinds of writing students can do to show their understanding of their reading, and samples of what that all looks like. This chapter will demystify the day-to-day and lay out the teaching moves that can transform a room of reluctant readers to engaged ones.

Once we've covered these building blocks, I'll explain how to foster reading discussion among groups of students and as a class in Chapter 6. Most of us love leading class discussion, and we don't want that talk to disappear! We'll look at ways to encourage discussion around the class text so talking about a shared text still exists. Then we'll also see how students use their expertise in their own books to make pair, group, and whole-class discussion rich and engaging.

And, of course, middle and high school is a high-stakes world of assessment, so we must consider how to come up with a grade when using this structure. Chapter 7 will look at the huge benefits of grading within choice reading and excerpting the class text. Then we'll go over how to create formative and summative assessments. With these strategies, grading tends to be more authentic, useful for both teacher and student, and easier to manage.

Finally, Chapter 8 will show results where they count: in *our* classrooms. As educators, we will see how this process builds relationships among readers in powerful ways. Through talk about books, through modeling ourselves as readers, through getting to know students as readers, meaningful bonds develop. As Fisher et al.'s (2016) research shows, the impact of student-teacher relationships is considerable and worth prioritizing. By nurturing that tie, teachers stand to get about a year and a half of learning for one year of teaching. Not to mention, a healthy relationship and mutual fondness increase the likelihood that teacher and students enjoy time together in school. Win-win.

The lifelong impact of fostering strong readers is clear, but the here and now in the classroom is also a rich pleasurable experience. We will find that individual reading identities emerge, and that crucial communities of readers impact one another in positive and far-reaching ways.

Now, let's get started!