One of my favorite New Yorker cartoons, by Robert Mankoff (1987), is of two men, one a writer, talking at a cocktail party. The caption reads, “We're still pretty far apart. I’m looking for a six-figure advance and they’re refusing to read my manuscript.” It brilliantly captures sky-high expectations that don’t match up to reality.

When I think about the expectations of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reading, it seems to me “we’re pretty far apart.” In saying this, I am not dissenting from the standards’ reading and writing goals, but like many educators, I am concerned that the imminence of the CCSS tests puts pressure on schools that may undermine the goals of the CCSS. Teachers need time. They need time to marry their current practices with those of the Common Core, such as close reading and providing text-based responses. They need quality professional development. The space between many teachers’ abilities to help readers make sufficient progress and the requirements for reading proficiency expected by the Common Core is still pretty vast. To some extent teachers are innocent victims of the pendulum swings in education. For example, before the CCSS was adopted by New Jersey, students had been required to add a personal connection when writing about reading on the state exam. But with the CCSS, personal connections are out and text-dependent comprehension is in; only effective, ongoing professional development can help teachers and students transition to a new way of thinking. Indeed, the best professional development experiences will empower teachers to examine the “what works” of their own teaching, and realize that readers make personal connections as they read, and they can continue to, along with reckoning with the text’s meaning.

Students themselves are far apart from the CCSS requirement that all students read complex grade-level texts by the end of the school year. I recently coached a seventh grade teacher in a middle school close to my home. In September, the range of instructional reading levels among the twenty-eight students was from third to twelfth grade! Like many teachers, the teacher thought she could not deviate from the district requirement that each and every student read the selections in the seventh grade anthology and take the unit tests. To accommodate the sixteen students reading two to four years below grade level, the teacher read aloud the selections to them. Thus, the very students who should be reading more every day—more than proficient and advanced readers in order to move forward, aren’t reading. Compelling all students to read the same text frustrates these struggling students and lowers their self-confidence and self-efficacy (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012). This teacher is a committed, capable teacher—but she needs training and coaching to deepen her expertise in meeting the needs of a vast range of readers.

So our challenge is this: If we are ever to close the achievement gap, either via the CCSS or whatever is next generating change in education, we have to help classroom teachers at all grade levels embrace and “own” their professional development, and allow them to shake off the notion many across the nation express: that with the Common Core in town, everything they’ve been doing is wrong. Teachers need to know of, lean on, and cite the strong research base of instructional and independent reading practices that have worked for their students. However, they need to look at their current practices and be open to improvements that the CCSS has brought to the professional discussion. Students ultimately suffer when educators go along with...
"out with the old, in with the new" swings in pedagogy; so what I advocate here is to marry the old with the new.

In this article, I want to focus on differentiation in reading, and use it as an example of how to stay true to best practices that have a strong research base, and yet bring fresh methods to them in light of the Common Core. As you read about how I change up books and articles and discussing them with colleagues, see the professional development power of an article, and to see that effective professional development can be—and maybe should be—small, measurable forays, such as trying the ideas you come across in professional books and articles and discussing them with colleagues. How do we meet the CCSS? Bird by bird, as writer Ann Lamott's father advised (1994).

So with that in mind, let's focus on differentiation, and how we can use it to meet Common Core State Standards for Reading by staying true to five best practices that need to play a bigger role:

1. **Use anchor texts to teach reading.** An anchor text provides a common read aloud text for instruction, and this enables students to have choices with instructional reading. Later in this article I provide sample anchor text lessons you can use to model making logical inferences, discovering the author's purpose and tone, and what it means to read a text closely. The lessons illustrate that teaching with an anchor text offers the freedom to meet students where they are and have them read and learn at their instructional levels so they can improve their reading skills (Allison, 2009; Robb, 2008, 2013).

2. **Use formative assessments to inform teaching decisions.** Formative assessments place differentiated reading instruction on a rock-solid foundation because they consider the child’s work, behaviors, and attitudes on a daily basis, and thus decisions about learning, placement, and support emerge from performance-based data, and needn’t wait for late-in-the-year standardized tests, when it’s too late for the current teacher to act on the data. If schools revalue formative assessment, they stand a far better chance of meeting end-of-year CCSS benchmarks; formative assessments help teachers become more diagnostic in their teaching day to day, and in turn assure students are making sufficient progress week to week, month to month. When students receive frequent, qualitative feedback through formative assessments (conferences, written conversations in reading notebooks, peer feedback, quizzes, and so on) the benefits to the learner accrue quickly (Serravallo, 2010, 2012).

3. **Amplify writing about reading.** English novelist E.M. Forster wrote: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” Forster’s question captures the point that we can write what we know and understand. Now with the Common Core, there is urgency around students’ writing about reading and I think this is a good thing. I encourage you to read the research of Steve Graham and Michael Hebert (2010) in *Write to Read*, which demonstrates that writing that unveils students understandings of a text, his/her thinking with the ideas of the text, improves comprehension. How do we bring writing about reading out of the shadows in order to deepen students’ reading experience? I recommend students write something daily—even if it’s just a few sentences. In addition, especially beginning in grade three, we can help students to write analytical paragraphs and move to essays in grade five and up.

4. **Recognize that independent reading is the big accelerator.** Students who read voluminously become avid, lifelong readers (Allison, 2009; Allington, 2002, 2011; Krashen, 1993; Miller, 2009; Robb, 2010, 2013). Students want choice in what they read. The more teachers know about fiction and nonfiction books the quicker they can make great text to student suggestions. We need to help teachers rally around independent reading and toward showing students how to choose texts that they can read. We can do that by enhancing teachers’ abilities to: (1) understand text complexity; (2) assess students’ interests, (3) extend discussion of texts, beginning with the routine of book talks, and (4) guide eBook reading at home and at school.

5. **Acquire and select books for instructional reading.** Teachers perceive finding books that meet each student’s instructional needs a challenge because school funding is limited or there are no funds available. Here are suggestions that work! Raid your school’s book room and your class library. Ask your school and local public librarians to select books that link to your unit’s genre or theme and organize them by instructional reading level. Gather enough books to give students choices, and keep the books in your classroom to prevent loss. Offering students choice with instructional books is crucial because if a book doesn’t motivate a student or if the student finds it too difficult, having other books at students’ instructional levels readily available makes changing books easy.

Before delving into best practices in more detail and how they can work in concert, let’s review some basic elements of differentiated instruction.

**What is Differentiated Instruction?**

Differentiation is a method of teaching that asks teachers to know their students so well that they can respond to individual needs and provide tasks and learning experiences that move each student forward. By using formative assessment to observe and understand the differences and similarities among students, teachers...
can use this information to plan instruction. Here are three key principles that form the foundation of differentiating reading instruction.

**Learners reading levels are diverse.** The students in our classes have a wide range of expertise with reading, writing, problem solving, and speaking and require differentiated instruction that takes them where they are and moves them forward (Snow & Biancarosa, 2004). Organizing reading around one textbook or one novel is what Carol Ann Tomlinson calls teaching to the middle (1999). This means that only the group reading at grade level has opportunities to improve their reading skill.

**Formative assessment.** Teachers study and monitor all of students' work and behaviors to determine what students do and don't grasp in order to design scaffolds, reteach, and adjust curriculum.

**Tiered instruction helps students' progress.** This means that the books students read and the assignments they complete match their learning needs and levels of expertise. The learning experience is the same but the level of complexity differs (Tomlinson, 1999; Sousa, 2001). For example, the class will study historical fiction. Instead of one book for all, the teacher has each student read historical fiction at his or her instructional level.

If the task is to plan and write an analytical essay that cites text evidence to argue for or against a claim or position, tiering means all students will work on analytical writing. However, the teacher adjusts the level of complexity of the writing task by considering students' writing skill. ELL students and those who struggle with writing might plan and write an analytical paragraph and confer often with the teacher who scaffolds the task. Proficient and advanced writers might complete a fully developed essay. Tiering allows teachers to adjust the amount of structure and support they offer students through teacher led conferences as well as the time students require to complete the writing (Dodge, 2005; Tomlinson, 1995, 1999; Sousa, 2001; Robb, 2008).

**How the Five Practices Provide New Angles on Differentiating**

Historically, teachers applauded the whole class book and/or grade level anthology because it provided them with a common text for modeling how to infer, pinpoint themes and central ideas, complete journal entries, and study literary elements or nonfiction text structures. One-book-for-all can decelerate the achievement of students who can't read and learn in English language arts and content classes. Instead of progressing, they slowly and steadily slide backwards (Allington, 2002; Robb, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999). Does this mean never read anthology selections together, or a whole class novel or work of nonfiction? Not necessarily, but in the course of the year, it cannot be the sole way teachers address literature and reading.

The five angles of differentiation are the antidote to the same-text-for-all: anchor text, formative assessment, writing about reading, independent reading, and acquiring and selecting books at diverse instructional levels.

**The Anchor Text: Teaching the How-to of Reading**

The anchor text is a common text that the teacher reads aloud modeling how to apply the CCSS. Lessons are brief—three to five minutes. An eighth grade social studies teacher told me: “I use my textbook and newspaper and magazine articles as anchor texts to introduce vocabulary and show students how to identify big ideas and themes.”

A picture book, an excerpt from a novel, informational text, or content textbook, a short story, myth, or legend, or an article from a magazine or newspaper make ideal anchor texts. Match the genre and theme of the anchor text to your reading unit and read aloud one to two paragraphs a day. With this versatile teaching tool, you can make visible how you analyze texts or organize thinking into a journal entry. And because the texts are short and the lessons brief, it's easy to review an anchor text and the lesson in other instructional moments, either while confering with a student or in another small-group setting.

The series of anchor text lessons that follow apply key Common Core standards to reading an excerpt from a memoir by Frederick Douglass, published in 1845: *Memoir, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.*

> I lived with Mr. Covey one year. During the first six months, of that year, scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back. My awkwardness was almost always his excuse for whipping me. We were worked fully up to the point of endurance. Long before day we were up, our horses fed, and by the first approach of day we were off to the field with our hoes and ploughing teams. Mr. Covey gave us enough to eat, but scarce time to eat it. We were often less than five minutes taking our meals. We were often in the field from the first approach of day till its last lingering ray had left us; and at saving-fodder time, midnight often caught us in the field binding blades.

> If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for
Teaching the Anchor Text Lesson
Anchor text lessons open the door to analytical reading for students who see snapshots of your thinking and writing about reading. Flash the anchor text onto a whiteboard or use a document camera to display it. To heighten students’ listening abilities, you might have to read a selection twice or even recap key details for English language learners and developing readers. Bring students into the lessons once you’ve modeled a process.

First day. This lesson shows students how to use specific text details to make logical inferences.
1. I say something like this: Today I will read aloud two paragraphs from Frederick Douglass’s Memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. This excerpt discusses Douglass’s experiences working as a slave for Mr. Covey. While enslaved, Douglass secretly taught himself to read and write believing that knowledge was the path from slavery to freedom. In 1838, Douglass successfully escaped slavery and worked to abolish it; he also supported woman’s suffrage. Listen carefully to the selection, then linking the words to tone and author’s purpose. The tone is anger, anguish, and pain from long, unreasonable work hours, lack of food, and weekly whippings. The frustrating tone comes from Douglass’s inability to control his life and decisions. There is also a sad tone with Douglass losing his humanity and feeling brutish. Knowing the tone helps me figure out the author’s purpose because the tone contains ideas that signal the meaning of both paragraphs. Douglass’s purpose is to show the evils of slavery and what happens when slaves are victims of inhumane masters like Mr. Covey.
2. Read the words and phrases out loud, and then tell students the tone I feel they convey, pointing out that it’s the author’s choice of words that creates tone. Here’s what I say: The tone is anger, anguish, and pain from long, unreasonable work hours, lack of food, and weekly whippings. The tone comes from Douglass’s inability to control his life and decisions. There is also a sad tone with Douglass losing his humanity and feeling brutish.
3. Invite students to pair-share and use tone to figure out another author’s purpose: A pair of seventh graders explained that a second purpose is to show that when a human being is treated worse than an animal, such treatment can turn a person into a brute who loses his humanity.

Second day. This lesson shows how to discover the author’s tone and purpose by selecting ten to fifteen key words and/or phrases from both paragraphs and then linking the words to tone and author’s purpose.
1. Here are the words I write on chart paper (or project onto a whiteboard): sore back, eat—five minutes, whipping, bitterest dregs of slavery, broken in body, soul, spirit, dark night of slavery, brute.
2. Read the words and phrases out loud, and then tell students the tone I feel they convey, pointing out that it’s the author’s choice of words that creates tone. Here’s what I say: The tone is anger, anguish, and pain from long, unreasonable work hours, lack of food, and weekly whippings. The frustrating tone comes from Douglass’s inability to control his life and decisions. There is also a sad tone with Douglass losing his humanity and feeling brutish.
3. Invite students to pair-share and use tone to figure out another author’s purpose: A pair of seventh graders explained that a second purpose is to show that when a human being is treated worse than an animal, such treatment can turn a person into a brute who loses his humanity.

Third day. This lesson will help students observe how a close reading can enable them to figure out the meaning of a confusing word or phrase. Here’s what I say: In the phrase “My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” the words “languished” and “disposition” are unfamiliar. Douglass was transformed into a brute, and he writes that the “dark night of slavery” closed in on him. If reading
brings light then disposition could mean desire to read and the word “departed” confirms this hunch. “Languished” refers to intellect or mind. If the desire to read departed, then languished could mean that Douglass didn’t use his intellect or mind. He placed his energy on dealing with “the dark night of slavery.”

For students who don’t experience visualizing, thinking, and feeling about a text, anchor text lessons show them what expert readers do. And these lessons can develop students’ in-the-head thinking voices and in-the-heart feelings, bonding them to texts.

Anchor Text Lesson Framework
I’ve listed the structure of the anchor text lesson so you can plan your own:
- provide background knowledge if necessary;
- tell students what you will model;
- read the passage aloud;
- think aloud, citing details and inferences from the text;
- recap what you did and show students how you used text evidence to support thinking; and
- engage students in the thinking part of the lesson by asking them to infer, determine the author’s purpose, etc., with a partner.

When partners discuss ideas and share them with classmates, students can learn from one another and observe the critical thinking process. After you present anchor text lessons, students read their instructional books at school where you are available for scaffolding that can improve comprehension.

Formative Assessments: The Data for Targeted Teaching
Assessment informs instruction (Afflerbach, 2011; Tomlinson, 1999). I’d say the most effective teachers go to class wondering, what am I going to learn from students as much as thinking about what they need to cover. And they understand students’ needs by evaluating observational notes, conducting conferences, reading students’ written work, and listening during discussions. But the formative assessment that I think is most valuable to students and teachers is the brief conference. You can achieve it every day as you make the rounds and continually circulate among students, responding to questions, helping them solve problems, offering suggestions, and helping them set goals for next steps (Allison, 2009; Serravallo, 2012; Robb, 2008). By making the rounds I feel the pulse of every student’s needs, and it’s this continual observation that points to topics for five-to-six-minute scheduled conferences for individuals, pairs, and small groups.

Short conferences while making the rounds form the foundation of differentiated reading instruction. I carry a clipboard with dated sticky notes as I circulate to observe students and listen to their conversations. During this time I am providing immediate scaffolding. Often, I jot the main points of our brief conversation on a sticky note and give it to the student for a reminder so they can revise or complete a task with confidence. After helping Tony, a seventh grader, make logical inferences from several pages of The Great Fire by Jim Murphy, I jot suggestions onto a sticky note: inference is an unstated meaning; reread a paragraph or passage to find details; to infer, think about what you can conclude using details; ask what do these details mean? What do they tell you?

Other times, while making the rounds, I notice that a student requires a longer conference, and I jot on a sticky note the student’s name and the topic for our meeting. If there’s time, I will confer with the student during class that day; otherwise I schedule the conference for the next time class meets.

Some Possible Reading Conference Topics
Instead of a prepared list of topics, it’s best to use your observations of how students apply anchor text lessons to their instructional text as topics. Below are five reading and five writing topics that align with the CCSS and best practices; use these as a starting point until you collect enough data to tap into students’ needs.

Five Writing Conference Topics
1. Literary elements: showing understanding by connecting these to a specific text
2. How and why a person or character changes
3. Summarizing
4. Writing about reading (I cut the word “informal” because it’s out of favor)
5. Analytical essays

Five Reading Conference Topics
1. Informational text structures: analyzing the organization of nonfiction using these
2. Logical inferences, themes, central ideas
3. Comparing two or more texts to analyze themes, characters, settings, etc.
4. Tone or mood; author’s purposes
5. Close reading confusing passages

Recently, I coached a sixth grade teacher who taught four sections of English. She assessed where her students were using completed essays about reading. While it’s better than the once-a-year test results, it’s not good enough because several weeks passed between each essay—weeks when students received little help.

Clipboard in hand, the teacher made the rounds for a week in each section, and then we met to debrief. “I observed needs every day,” she said, “even from my better readers. I polled my students, and they wanted me to continue supporting them every day. The sticky-note reminders got high ratings because on the next
day, they had suggestions for inferring or using context clues to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words.” What this teacher experienced is that by making the rounds throughout a class, students had opportunities to learn and to revise their work, avoiding frustrating feelings that the task was an obstacle to learning.

Writing About Reading: Thinking on Paper
Evaluating what student readers put on the page about texts is the most personal, powerful window on a student’s life as a reader. We don’t want to overdo it by compelling students to write about every book they read—but as a profession we require it too little. Graham and Hebert (2010) in their landmark report, Writing to Read call for extra writing time in all subjects. Yet, a study completed by Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer in 2006 points to the fact that students in middle and high school ELA classes don’t spend enough time writing. Applebee and Langer state: “Overall, this study leaves us with some disturbing findings about how little time many students are spending on writing…” (p. ii).

Applebee and Langer call for extended writing across the curriculum, especially in English class. The Common Core also calls for extended writing in English and in content subjects. However, middle and high school teachers with 100 to 150 students avoid extended writing tasks due to the grading demands. Again, ongoing professional development can ease the grading problems as teachers come to see the benefits of forming writing partnerships among students and teaching students how to self and peer evaluate their work using a rubric. Teachers provide support while students plan and draft essays and narratives by conferring but ask the students to revise and edit those messy first drafts. And as I point out in Smart Writing, teachers who read and grade much improved second drafts do little red marking and rewriting because the students are doing the work of revision and editing and moving toward independence with these tasks (Robb, 2012).

Extended writing tasks are not enough. Graham and Hebert (2010) state: “Writing about a text proved to be better than just reading it, reading and rereading it, reading and studying it, reading and discussing it, and receiving reading instruction” (p. 12). Why? Back to E.M. Forster’s statement: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” I’m suggesting that in addition to extended writing, students complete brief responses to teachers read alouds and to their instructional and independent reading.

However, the Common Core suggests that students reread a text they don’t understand several times to get the text’s meaning. One point I’ve learned from teaching is that if a student can’t read and comprehend a text, he or she can’t learn from it. Offer students complex texts via your read alouds because students’ listening capacity is greater than their instructional reading level (Woods & Moe, 1998). But for instructional reading, offer students materials they can read and learn from.

Clearly, writing about texts is essential if we want our students to improve comprehension. Writing includes drawing and writing about the illustration as well as jotting notes, making lists of ideas, and writing short paragraphs. Informal responses to reading occur every day, and students record their responses in readers notebooks. All learners, including ELL, learning disabled and special education students can complete responses that are short and where the focus is on ideas. As students enter class, have four to five distribute readers notebooks; students immediately head a page with their name and date. Now the notebook is poised and ready to receive hunches, emotional reactions, inferences, drawing, etc. based on the teacher’s read aloud.

Short responses are also part of instructional and independent reading. Notebooks are with students while they read at school so they can close write, that is zoom in on applying a skill or strategy to their reading. Even informal writing can be differentiated. Some students summarize a paragraph, section, or chapter of a text while others make an inference or pinpoint a theme from a chunk of text, supporting their thoughts with detailed text evidence. I encourage students to talk to a partner before writing because talk clarifies thinking and reclams ideas. Students use their responses to develop claims or explain a position in an extended essay or a paragraph. Like entries in writers’ notebooks, informal responses to reading contain idea seeds for more extended writing. And teachers need to differentiate extended writing tasks as this literacy story illustrates.

It was my first day observing in the eighth grade class of a teacher who had invited me in as a coach. While making the rounds, I noticed a girl with her head on her desk. Bending down so I could make eye contact, I gently tapped her shoulder and asked, “Can I help you?” She shrugged her shoulders, and kept her head face down on the desk. Again, I asked, “Can I help you?” No response. After class, I asked the teacher to tell me about her student.

“She’s from the Ukraine, been in the U.S. for two years, and she dislikes writing—sometimes, like today, she won’t write. She’d rather draw than write, but this is writing class.” The teacher and I brainstormed how to differentiate the assignment of writing a narrative. I suggested she let the student draw the events of the story and use her illustrations to write. Asking every student to complete the same writing task, especially when the task is at their frustration level, might satisfy a school’s requirements, but it won’t result in improving thinking and writing skill.
Independent Reading:
The Achievement Accelerator

*Read.* Four letters. One short word. Powerful skill. Reading is powerful because when students have a rich independent reading life, they can accelerate their reading achievement, enlarge their vocabulary, build prior knowledge, and increase their reading stamina, and ultimately become productive and thoughtful citizens (Allington, 2011; Allison, 2009; Gambrell, Marinak, Hooker, & McCrea-Andrews, 2011; Krashen, 1993; Robb 2010). Independent reading should be easy (99-100% accuracy), enjoyable, and on topics and genres that interest learners. So how do teachers motivate students to read thirty to fifty books a year at an appropriate level? Here are four ways:

Understand text complexity. Insights into text complexity can help you guide students to selecting readable books. The Common Core identifies three aspects of text complexity: quantitative, qualitative, and the reader and the task. Here is a summary of each one:

Quantitative measures examine characteristics of a text best analyzed by computer, such as sentence length and word frequency. School districts latch onto Lexiles because it’s a number and easy to use. Lexiles provide readability and not grade level. So a seventh grade student might be able to comprehend texts at a Lexile linked to third grade, while an advanced reader in that same class can comprehend texts Lexiled for tenth grade.

Qualitative measures examine a book’s content and concepts: knowledge demands (prior knowledge), levels of meaning, text structure, language conventionality, and clarity. This is the area that is the heart and soul of text complexity. Fifth graders can read *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, but should they read it? This dystopian novel deals with complex issues of euthanasia and inhibiting sexual yearnings, concepts appropriate for seventh and eighth graders, not fifth graders—concepts that make the book’s text complexity more appropriate to middle schoolers and above. So as we rush students toward texts of increasing complexity, continue to ask yourself, “But is this book’s content right for this particular child?”

The reader and the task consider students’ motivation, knowledge, and experience to determine whether a book is “just right,” giving teachers the flexibility to match students to texts so learning can occur. The Common Core asks teachers to make the final decision about what students can read. This is important because you don’t have to place students reading three or more years below grade level in texts they can’t read. Developing readers will need more than one year to meet the goal of reading complex grade-level texts.

My point is this: we can differentiate instruction and ramp up independent reading if we are aware of what readers can do and keep independent reading a joyful experience (Allington, 2002; Allison, 2009; Miller, 2009; Krashen, 1993; Snow & Biancarosa, 2004; Robb, 2008). If we “do” Common Core without ever really unpacking its terms, such as text complexity, we probably aren’t going to move the needle on achievement very far.

Give an interest inventory and tap into students’ interests. When you know students’ interests, you can find books that engage them (Allison, 2009; Miller, 2009; Robb, 2010). An eighth grade girl wrote on her interest inventory that she only likes books about vampires. Off I went to the school library, and the public library, and I found ten books about vampires that would be acceptable in an eighth grade classroom. She devoured the books and through book talks inspired classmates to read about vampires. Book talks by her peers and the teacher hooked her onto the Chicken Soup books and then graphic novels. By the end of the year this student had read thirty books! *Read* is a powerful word!

Put book talking on center stage. Book talks introduce students to hundreds of books in the course of a school year. Teachers should book talk all new additions to their class libraries, books by a featured author, and a genre or theme that’s spotlighted. Invite students to complete a book talk each month. If a class of twenty-five students presents book talks from September to June, students hear about 250 books. Peer recommendations matter and can transform reluctant readers into book lovers!

Encourage eBook reading at home and at school. The statistics are here: Scholastic’s *Kids and Reading Report* (2012). Ten percent more boys read and enjoy eBooks than girls. Half of children age 9–17 say they would read more books for fun if they had greater access to eBooks – a 50% increase since 2010.

Lobby for eBook readers at school, and encourage students to check out eBooks from their public library and read eBooks at home. For today’s students, technology can make a huge difference in developing personal reading lives.

Finding Appropriate Texts for Instructional Reading

I organize reading units by genre, a literary category such as historical fiction, biography, or informational texts. This frees me to find books of the same genre that meet students’ diverse instructional reading levels. All instructional reading occurs at school so teachers can support students, and meaningful partner and small groups discussions can occur.

*Your* school and public librarian are the best resources for helping you gather books of the same genre for your students. Use them! About two weeks prior to beginning a unit, ask these librarians to pull books that relate to the genre or theme on the instructional
level range in your classes, ask them to identify the readability of each book. If you have a classroom library, mine that for books.

Collect enough books so students at each reading level have choices. Have students put their names on a sticky-note on the cover of the book as students from different sections will choose the same book. You'll find that developing readers select shorter texts than proficient and advanced readers.

Next, give students four to five sticky notes and have them print their name at the top and under that write “Stop to Think;” I call this chunking a book. Divide books into four to five chunks making sure each chunk is at the end of a chapter; this means that skilled readers who select long books will read larger chunks of texts. Place a sticky note at the end of the book, and help students divide their books in chunks of two or more chapters, depending on the book’s length.

Since I recommend that instructional reading occur at school, students from different class sections can read the same book. Determine how much class time students need to finish each chunk of text. Those who finish early can complete independent reading. If some students require more time to read a chunk, give it to them. The “stop to think” is students’ reminder that they will spend part of two or more classes discussing writing about a chunk of text before going on to the next chunk. Frequently, I have several students beg: "Can we finish the whole book? Please, please, can we?" Let them; you’ll maintain their enthusiasm for reading. I add one caveat: if students finish the book early, they must reread each chunk to refresh their recall of details, but they cannot reveal the book’s outcome to peers.

Pair students so partners are no more than one year apart in instructional reading levels and have something to offer each other. Developing readers can pair-up but you need to support them.

**Discussing Diverse Texts With Small Groups of Students**

Even though students read different books, you can lead small group discussions—just focus them on genre and theme (Serravallo, 2012; Robb, 2008). After students complete their second chunk, schedule two small groups about three times a week to meet for about fifteen minutes during independent work time. Here is a list of topics that students can discuss and compare referring to specific text evidence:

- text structure;
- themes and central ideas;
- author’s purposes;
- character’s or person’s goals, obstacles faced, personality traits;
- significance of information presented; and
- literary elements: setting, plot, conflicts, problems, outcomes, protagonist, antagonistic forces

You can select a focus for the discussion or refer students to the list and ask the group to select a focus. I find that discussions have greater depth if students can prepare for them by jotting notes related to the topic in their readers’ notebooks. Students can document their discussions by writing a summary.

**Closing Thoughts**

A strange disconnect exists in our educational system. We want our students to read, write, think, and speak well; we want them to excel and be the best. We want students to be creative thinkers and problem solvers. To reach this goal, we continually change programs from The Reading First Initiative to No Child Left Behind, to State Standards, and now the Common Core. Programs are not educational solutions; if they were we’d be number one on the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment); but in 2009 we were number 17. In addition, among the 34 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States ranks 14th in reading (Schleicher, 2011).

The first big takeaway from this article is that it’s the teacher who makes the difference in students’ progress and learning (Allington & Johnston, 2001), and investing in ongoing professional study is one way to grow great teachers. The second big takeaway is to integrate the five best practices into your curriculum.

Snow and Biancarosa (2004) noted in *Reading Next*, page 8: "A full 70 percent of U.S. middle and high school students require differentiated instruction, which is instruction targeted to their individual strengths and weaknesses." Struggling readers and writers, whether English is their first or second language, deserve opportunities to improve their skills so they can read and comprehend and write and communicate well. Using formative assessments to differentiate reading instruction, to tier writing tasks, and to develop a rich independent reading curriculum provide an efficient pathway to accelerating students’ achievement.

**References**


read widely, helping them read well. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.


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