

Creating an Authentic Reading Culture



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Across grade levels, educators are rethinking how to build a **true culture of literacy**, one where books are abundant, skills are explicitly taught, and students see themselves as readers. These articles highlight the importance of protecting time for reading, offering choices, reading aloud, as well as reaffirming that **spelling still matters** in a digital age. From **engaging boys with high-interest texts** and **graphic novels** to **using AI to strengthen comprehension** and supporting older struggling readers, the common thread is clear: a strong reading culture depends on **intentional instruction**, **meaningful engagement**, and steady opportunities for students to succeed with **challenging texts**.

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These Teachers Have Their Students Read Multiple Novels a Year. How They Do It

By Sarah Schwartz

A popular diagram for teaching plot structure to middle and high school students looks like a mountain, mapping out exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

It's an apt representation for the act of novel reading—a task that for some students, can feel like summiting Mt. Everest.

"I don't know if it necessarily comes naturally to anyone, adult or young person, to take on a challenging or complex text on their own," said Caroline Rose, an 8th grade English/language arts teacher at Boston Collegiate Charter School in Boston.

For that reason, Rose and her colleagues offer their students a bevy of support, creating additional time for reading and teaching comprehension strategies, like annotating. Reading several full-length novels a year can be challenging for some students, but the effort is worth it, said Rose.

"By reading novels, they get to sit with an idea or some characters over the whole course of a story," she said. "There is a benefit to really getting to read and understand the whole narrative arc."

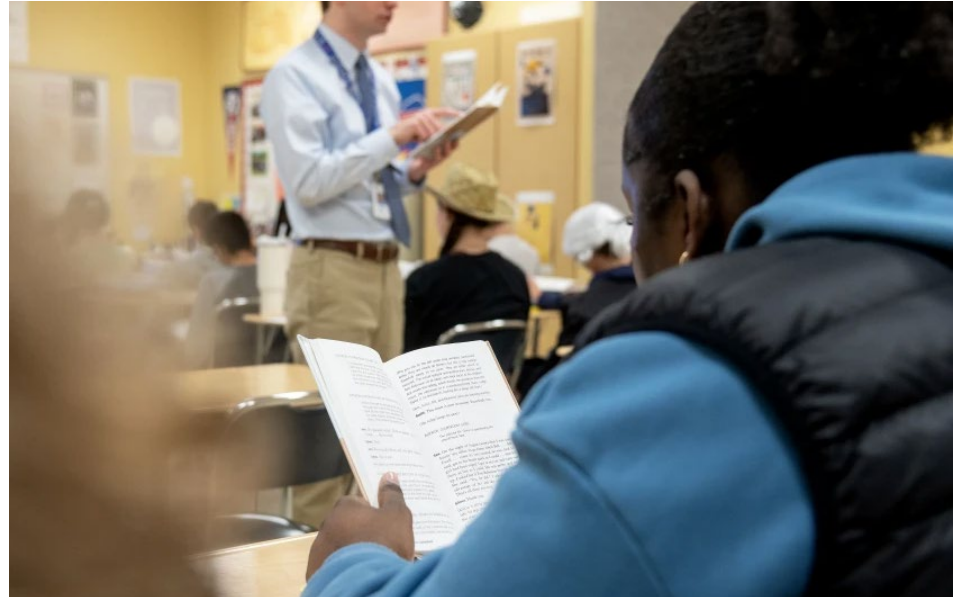
Exactly how much reading of whole books—especially novels—students should be doing is a contested topic, with no clear research-based answer. Some evidence suggests that elementary and middle school students nationwide may be reading more short texts and excerpts in class than full, longer works.

The reasons why are complex and layered. Some educators point to the perennial challenge of getting students to actually do the reading, and follow a story over several weeks—a challenge they say is compounded in today's information landscape, where children and teenagers are used to reading snippets of text online and watching short-form video content.

Even so, teachers like Rose, along with other experts, say there are ways to capture and keep students' focus. Read on for three tips for teaching with novels from educators and researchers.

1. Make time for students to do the reading

High school English teacher Jay Arellano entered the classroom at the beginning of his



Jaclyn Borowski/Education Week

Students in Saxon Brown's 9th grade English class take turns reading as the different characters in *To Kill A Mockingbird* during class at Bel Air High School in Bel Air, Md. Teachers say several tips help them build the scaffolding and stamina kids need to tackle complex novels like Harper Lee's masterpiece.

career with an assumption: If he assigned his students reading for homework, many of them wouldn't do it.

This isn't simply a phenomenon of the social media age, he added. "I feel like that's kind of how it's always been," said Arellano, who teaches 9th and 10th graders at Legacy High School in Broomfield, Colo.

He has never asked his students—who study several novels and plays throughout the year—to read at home for class. Instead, they read together as part of the period.

This works for Arellano because most of the books he assigns are on the shorter side.

For Rose, the Boston teacher, the English/language arts class period just doesn't offer enough time to get through the four or five full-length books that her 8th graders read each year. To keep that pace, she said, students have to do some reading outside of class.

Still, though, Rose's school offers options that help students get it done. There's time and space in the school building before the day starts and after it ends, she said. Teachers also "work really closely with families"

to make sure that students read what's assigned, Rose added.

2. Check for understanding before moving to literary analysis

State standards for English/language arts often ask students to pull apart what they're reading—to identify an author's use of figurative language, for example, or explain how a particular sentence or chapter fits into the broader theme of a book.

But before students can do this kind of close reading, they need to do something much more fundamental: grasp the gist of the story, said Julia Sutherland, a professor of education, literacy, and language at the University of Sussex in England.

A decade ago, Sutherland and her colleagues tested a reading intervention with middle grades teachers that asked them to read two novels back to back with their students over 12 weeks.

"They just had to focus on getting through a whole book, making sure students comprehended it," Sutherland said. This differed

from how these teachers usually taught full books—two over the course of a full year, with lots of pausing for detailed study of excerpts.

In classroom observations, Sutherland and her colleagues saw both teachers and students frequently pause to ask questions, clarify meaning, and ask for recaps of what had just happened. The students had a stronger understanding of the book, said one teacher in her interview with a researcher, “because I’ve allowed them to read it, rather than analyze it.”

Fully understanding the gist of the story then allowed for deeper analysis, Sutherland said. “The kind of comments they were making about the literature was extraordinary,” she said. “They were commenting on structure, they were commenting on narrative voice. ... They were doing a lot of complex things with the novels that you wouldn’t expect children of that age to be doing.”

Ultimately, the study found, students made about 8.5 months of progress on a standardized assessment of reading comprehension after 12 weeks of the faster-paced novel reading.

It’s important for teachers to scout ahead for parts of a novel that might trip kids up, and pre-plan how to address them, said Tim Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago who studies reading.

“I don’t think we pay enough attention to what it is that makes a particular text hard to understand,” he said.

text it explores, doesn’t just make the book more accessible—it can also make it more engaging, Lyons added.

The practice helps to address the question at the heart of the district’s English/language arts classrooms, she said: “How do you get kids engaged around a topic that is worthy of their time and attention?” ■

3. Connect shorter texts to the novel—and use them to build students’ background knowledge

In the Elmhurst 205 school district outside of Chicago, 4th and 5th graders read three full-length books a year, a mix of novels and non-fiction, said Katie Lyons, the district’s assistant superintendent of teaching and learning.

But these books are far from the only texts students read. They’re the capstones of larger text sets, topically aligned selections of poems, speeches, informational text, and other works designed to build students’ knowledge.

When students read a historical fiction novel, for instance, they also read speeches from real historical actors at the time, and informational text about the period. This helps familiarize them with context and vocabulary they can use to understand the novel, while also offering opportunities to practice close reading skills with shorter text, said Lyons.

“This is a scaffolded approach,” she said. “All learners can benefit from that.”

Knowing more about the time period in which a novel was written, or the cultural con-



iStock/Getty

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Fewer Parents Are Reading Aloud To Their Kids. Why That Matters

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Early-elementary teachers work hard all year to support their students' emerging reading skills. The payoff—gains in literacy progress—tends to come toward the end of the school year, just as it's time to break for summer. That would seem the perfect time for emerging readers to hone their literacy skills by leisurely reading for pleasure, either by themselves or with a caretaker.

But the likelihood of young children spending significant time during summer immersed in a good book has dwindled significantly in recent years, surveys suggest. TV shows, online videos, and mobile games are competing for—and often winning—children's attention, and today's parents, too, are less interested in reading than were prior generations.

It's important for educators to encourage parents to regularly read aloud to their children, literacy experts say.

"Reading aloud is a shared experience that builds human connections and provides children with a model of what good reading sounds like, especially if the reader uses expression and dramatizes the story even a little bit," said Sue Corbin, a literacy specialist and

board member of the International Literacy Association.

Reading for pleasure is on the decline

Historically, children's formative reading experiences often started at home. But the rise of screen time for young children might be cutting into those experiences, according to recent statistics.

Eleven percent of children ages zero to 2 in the United Kingdom spent one to three hours a day on a screen in 2014. By 2019, that percentage rose to 42%, according to the National Literacy Trust, an advocacy organization based in London.

Similarly, a 2019 National Institutes of Health study that surveyed U.S. parents of nearly 4,000 children found that 12-month-old children averaged 53 minutes of screen time daily; by 3 years of age, that daily amount jumped to 150 minutes per day.

As their screen time increases, young children are less likely to be read to by their parents. In a 2025 nationally representative survey by HarperCollins UK, less than half (41%) of U.K. parents surveyed said they read frequently to their children ages 4 and younger—down from 64% in 2012. Just 36% of parents with children 5 to 7 years old said they regularly

read to their kids. And 40% of survey respondents agreed that reading to their child is fun.

"When children are read to frequently, they very quickly come to love it and become motivated to read themselves. Children who are read to daily are almost three times as likely to choose to read independently compared to children who are only read to weekly at home," wrote Alison David, the consumer-insight director at Farshore and HarperCollins Children's Books, in a press release tied to the survey.

Recent statistics seem to support David's assertions. An estimated 39% of American 9-year-olds in 2022 reported that they read for fun almost every day, down from 53% in 2012, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In that same survey, just 14% of 13-year-olds surveyed reported reading for fun almost daily, down from 27% in 2012.

Why fewer parents read aloud to children

Several factors may be squeezing out the once-popular act of reading aloud to children routinely at home; busy lives, the allure of screens, and changing sentiments around reading's purpose top the list.

"For parents who have grown up on screens, reading for pleasure is something that not a lot of them do," Corbin said.

Notably, the HarperCollins study showed how adults' and children's perceptions of reading's intended purpose has shifted in recent years. Generation Z parents, those born between 1997 and 2012, who participated in the survey and are considered "digital natives," were more likely than older parents (Millennials and Generation X) to say they view reading as "a subject to learn" as opposed to a "fun or enriching activity."

Twenty-nine percent of children ages 5 to 13 who responded to the survey agreed that reading is "more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do."

The study's authors suggested that this sentiment contributes to the decline in pleasure reading, and literacy experts agree.

"Anyone who has ever taught kids or even had children know that kids aren't going to want to do something if it's not fun," Corbin said.

Yet, there is a multitude of benefits gained when children hear stories read aloud.

"Reading aloud helps grow a child's vocabulary and their understanding of the world," wrote Carol St. George, the director of the University of Rochester's Warner School of

Education and Human Development, on the university's teaching and curriculum blog.

What's more, the activity doesn't require extensive time. "It only takes 15 minutes a day to nurture this growth," St. George said.

Accessing reading resources during the summer

Public libraries offer air-conditioned respites for families who want free access to books during the summer. But they're underutilized.

"We tell parents, 'Take your kids to the library,' but we know they're not always going to do that," Corbin said.

In 2016, a Pew Research Center survey found that 44 percent of Americans had visited a local library or bookmobile within the last year. Those data appear to be the most recent available on the topic and, given recent statistics that show a dip in pleasure reading, it's not likely that library visitation has increased in the almost 10 years since then.

Historically, teachers have sent students home in the summer with bags of books, recommended or required summer reading lists, and information on reading programs hosted by local libraries. Parents can now also provide their children with access to free digital books without physically entering a library.

Other digital options that teachers can share with parents include:

- For English learners: The Rosetta Project has free online books that offer translations in many languages.
- For a read-aloud option (other than mom or dad): MrsP.com, a free children's entertainment website, features actress Kathy Kinney as Mrs. P, who narrates classic children's stories.
- For online children's books categorized by age range: FreeKidsBooks.org. ■

The problem:

Today's students are reading less and scrolling more

This results in poor learning outcomes and
missed opportunities:

Students in grades
3–8 are **half a year
behind in reading**,
on average.

Source: [Education Recovery Scorecard](#)



31% of students in
grade 8 say they
rarely or never read
outside of school.

Source: [NAEP](#)



Most teens spend
**4–5 hours per day
on social media**—
but mere minutes
with books.

Source: [Gallup](#)



Could one simple formula hold the answer to reversing this trend
and helping all students become stronger, more engaged readers?

T + L + C²

Turn the page to find out.

Renaissance

The solution:

Reclaim reading with a strong school culture

With the right tools and approach, you can make reading something students *want* to do, not something they *have* to do. Here's what it takes to build a school culture that motivates, values, and celebrates student reading:

T + L + C²

TIME (T)

Dedicate 15–20 minutes each school day to independent reading practice.

This can be a schoolwide activity at the beginning of the day or an essential part of every ELA class.

LIBRARIES (L)

Invest in robust access to text, covering a wide range of genres, interests, and authors.

This may involve beefing up your current collection and adding digital access as well.

CHOICE (C)

Let students follow their interests and encourage them to explore new topics and genres.

To maintain motivation, manage students' independent reading practice—but not too rigidly.

CULTURE (C)

Launch a schoolwide reading challenge and invite students to share book recommendations with peers.

Celebrate reading accomplishments in daily announcements and schoolwide assemblies.

RECLAIM READING

with Renaissance

If you're looking to create a stronger reading culture, we can help. Connect with a literacy expert to explore proven solutions for motivating more daily reading—and for helping students find books they'll truly want to read.

[Connect with an expert](#)

Published February 25, 2025

Spellcheck Won't Cut It. Here's Why Kids Need Spelling Instruction

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Spelling lists. Spelling tests. Spelling bees. Adults of a certain age who remember anything about elementary school likely recall spelling as central to their literacy instruction. That's not necessarily true anymore.

Spelling's prominent role in literacy instruction has dwindled significantly in recent years. Hundreds of schools and districts have dropped spelling tests and explicit spelling instruction from their curriculum, according to a 2021 report from Educational Psychology Review, and spelling no longer appears on all state standardized tests.

Even as "science of reading" mandates sweep across the country, requiring schools to use evidence-based methods for teaching young students how to read, spelling rarely is mentioned in the conversation. Some skeptics of spelling instruction cite the advent of spellcheck technologies, including artificial intelligence, as proof that students no longer need to know how to spell. But literacy experts ardently disagree.

"Spelling is a highly accurate window into children's understanding of language and literacy," said Molly Ness, a reading researcher and teacher-educator at City University of New York, Brooklyn College. "It's so predictive of their understanding of how words work and the synchrony of spelling, vocabulary, and word knowledge."

As longtime spelling authority Richard Gentry sees it, the absence of spelling in literacy instruction is akin to cutting off one leg of a three-legged stool.

"Spelling kickstarts the process of reading and writing, and it does this by connecting to [brain] circuitry, where the sounds and pronunciation of words already exist in spoken language," said Gentry. "Spelling literally ignites the reading and writing process."

Being able to spell accurately drives reading automaticity, which in turn allows for fluency and, ultimately, greater comprehension, Gentry explained.

"If you can spell a word automatically, and you have the word sound and meaning in your spoken vocabulary, you can map the spellings



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on the page or screen to your already existing spoken language," he said.

How spelling instruction waned in relevance

Critics of spelling instruction sometimes point to the ubiquity of technology available to correct a writer's spelling—like spellchecker software and, more recently, AI-powered spellcheck tools—as a reason why students no longer need to learn how to spell.

Some critics also argue that the English language's unpredictable nature makes it too difficult to expect students to become proficient spellers, said Shawna Kay Williams-Pinnock, a lecturer in The Mico University College's department of language, literacy, and literature in Kingston, Jamaica. It's a notion the literacy expert flatly rejects.

"More regularly spelled words with specific letter-sound patterns exist in English than we think there are," Williams-Pinnock said. "Only about 13 percent of the 400,000 or so words in the English dictionary do not have a regular pattern. The majority can be spelled phonetically."

But for many years—primarily through the 1980s and into the 1990s—the "whole language" movement that dominated literacy instruction downplayed or outright dismissed the importance of teaching students to spell phonetically. Instead, it stressed that students learn to read through exposure to and immersion in books.

In *What's Whole in Whole Language*, originally published in 1986, the late Kenneth Goodman, who's considered the father of the whole language movement, calls for educators to "put aside the carefully sequenced basal readers, spelling programs, and handwriting kits."

A large body of literacy research, however, debunked Goodman's ideas that students learn to read by relying primarily on context clues. It concluded, instead, that skilled readers do rely heavily on knowledge of letter-sound correspondences when learning new words. It's exactly that knowledge that's integral to spelling.

Strategies for implementing spelling into early literacy curriculum

Spelling instruction should start from the moment you begin teaching students how to

“Spelling kickstarts the process of reading and writing [...] spelling literally ignites the reading and writing process.”

RICHARD GENTRY

decode words, said Williams-Pinnock, who added that it's best taught as part of phonics lessons.

She described it as a three-part process, whereby the teacher introduces the principle of the letter-sound relationship (for example, the short “a” vowel sound), students read together examples of words that share this principle, and then they attempt to spell words with the spelling pattern taught.

In this explicit method of instruction, students apply phonics principles to spelling, as opposed to simply memorizing a list of words, a method denounced by most literacy experts that long dominated spelling instruction.

“We have to move away from rote memorization,” said Williams-Pinnock, who notes that when she was in school, she and her classmates would receive a list of words and be expected to commit that list to memory.

“Students need to understand the letter-sound relationships and certain spelling principles and rules that they can then apply in spelling,” she said. “You can’t expect students to memorize all 400,000 words.”

This explicit method of instruction, ingrained into phonics lessons, requires a significant commitment during class time—and it’s something that’s not emphasized enough, said Gentry. He has reviewed recently published curricula that tout evidence-based literacy instruction—but recommend as little as 20 minutes’ worth of spelling instruction weekly.

In elementary school, “they should be doing 20 minutes [of spelling instruction] every day,” he said.

The following tips can help early literacy teachers reach that goal.

FIVE TIPS TO TEACH SPELLING

- Make spelling an integral part of your phonics lesson.
- Give students dictation based on the sound-letter principle you’re focusing on.
- Model the thought process of sounding out words.
- Make it fun: Play games, use friendly competition like spelling bees, and incorporate movement.
- Provide students an opportunity to learn words they want to know how to spell. ■



Allison Shelley/EDUimages

Published January 30, 2025

5 Ways Teachers Can Get Boys To Love Reading

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Too many boys think reading for fun isn't "cool."

This isn't breaking news. Global studies from the mid-2000s found boys are less likely to read for pleasure than girls, a trend that continues today. But it matters, a lot.

Experts point to a direct correlation between reluctant readers and lower reading proficiency. And the abysmal reading scores on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, released this week, show a dire need to improve reading proficiency among all students—especially boys.

The NAEP results were poor overall: Just 31 percent of 4th graders performed at or above the "proficient" level on the reading assessment; 26 percent of all 8th graders scored proficient. But boys' average reading scores were lower than girls', as they were in 2022, and they fell further than girls' scores from 2022. Notably, NAEP findings also concluded that lower-performing students reported feeling less confident in their reading skills.

It's not surprising that students who lack confidence in their reading ability would avoid reading for fun—and, conversely, that reading more regularly leads to mastery. The

2022 NAEP results showed that 73 percent of high-performing 9-year-olds reported reading for fun either almost every day or once or twice a week, compared with 58 percent of their low-performing peers.

In response to the nation's persistently poor reading report cards, a growing number of states in recent years have introduced sweeping legislation to mandate that schools implement evidence-based reading instruction in their classrooms. But overall, students' reading test scores have yet to show significant improvement, and the number of "reluctant readers" grows.

Now, some educators are bearing down on a strategy they hope will create better, and lifelong, readers: pleasure reading. Here's a look at how four teachers across grade levels are piquing boys' interest in reading for fun.

Hook them early

David Buskirk is on a mission to get his young students to become literate—and hooked on reading. For him, it's personal.

"I know education could really, really change the lives of children coming from poverty. I know because I grew up receiving a reduced-priced lunch," said Buskirk, a kindergarten teacher at Beall Elementary School

in Frostburg, Md., and the 2024-25 Allegany County teacher of the year.

He feels a particularly strong responsibility to introduce his male students to the joy of reading.

"Boys, especially from lower-income families, they just don't have that role model of males who are reading at home, who are interested in academics," he said.

In his classroom, the 15-year veteran educator focuses not just on early literacy skills but on gripping storytelling. Buskirk chooses a lot of fairy tales and folk tales to read to his students during class time.

"The kids, they really like it," he said of the classic tales that he calls "kind of creepy."

His efforts appear to be paying off. In any given year, the majority of students enter Buskirk's kindergarten below where they should be on reading readiness, and, by the end of the year, they're testing well above average, based on standardized literacy-assessment tools, said Buskirk.

Make it a group activity

When Susan Grover, now the principal of Symonds Elementary in Keene, N.H., was a 4th grade teacher, a male student, whom she referred to as a "reluctant reader," refused to pick up a book for pleasure reading. The moment was a turning point for Grover.

"Whatever I was doing wasn't inspiring him," she said. "So I decided to change the way I was approaching reading with my class."

She turned reading for pleasure into a book club format, providing students with choices from a wide sampling of books.

"You're reading books because you want to and you're reading them with other students in your class," Grover said of the tactic which, according to her, helped "immensely" in getting that once-reluctant reader interested in reading for fun.

Model a reading culture

Henry Melcher, the head of the middle school at Boys' Latin, an all-boys K-12 private school in Baltimore, said his staff has created numerous opportunities for students to read for pleasure throughout the school day—all of which involve an educator sharing in the activity.

Reading for pleasure is embedded into the school schedule: two 20-minute periods per seven-day cycle. During these periods, all the adults in the room are reading, too.

"It's incredibly important that we're modeling what we want to see from kids," Melcher said.

To further motivate the students to read, gradewide incentives are built in for those who read the most pages, with prizes ranging from footballs autographed by professional players to pizza lunches. For boys who want to read even more, the middle school offers additional opportunities.

One is called Whatcha Reading?, a low-key periodic occurrence during the school day that students sign up for in advance, Melcher said. On the designated day, the boys bring whatever book they're reading into the library during lunch, eat pizza, and discuss their book with their classmates and participating teachers and coaches. The educators talk about their own books, too.

"The straightforward, low-lift activity sends the message to boys that 'it's normal to read, it's cool to read,'" Melcher said.

Offer choice and make reading material accessible

Joseph Rodriguez was determined to create a different reading environment for his students than the one he experienced in high school.

"In high school, I had to read my teachers' favorite books, and that tormented me," said Rodriguez, a language arts teacher at Akins Early College High School in Austin, Texas, and a teaching fellow at the National Book Foundation.

"Most of my English teachers in high school were white middle- and upper-class women, and I had absolutely no relationship with their favorite characters," he said, adding, "I believe that I can connect with readers who are boys in ways that maybe some of their teachers haven't in the past."

While Rodriguez does assign his nearly 180 students specific reading tasks, he makes sure they include a diverse array of material—from analytical and science-based essays to classic works like Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*. He also makes sure his students know where they can access reading material for pleasure.

"I have a classroom library. We have a school library, and then we also have an online digital library from our school library, and we also have a public library, and down the street is a little free library," Rodriguez said.

Allocate class time for pleasure reading

Rodriguez's students need options for finding reading material, as every 90-minute lan-

guage arts period consists of 20 to 30 minutes of independent-choice reading—an embedded part of the curriculum used by all teachers in the high school's language arts department.

It's important, Rodriguez said, to let students have time to read (or listen to) what they choose—whether it's a graphic novel, how-to article, or audiobook.

Rodriguez takes seriously the responsibility of ensuring that his students are readers: "It's a way to understand the world around us—one that keeps changing so quickly." ■

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How a Teacher Used an AI Tool to Help Her Students' Reading Comprehension

By Jennifer Vilcarino

San Antonio—

What barriers do students face when asked to read text and show their comprehension of it?

This question was posed by an English/language arts teacher and educational consultant to a group of educators at a session at the ISTE Live 25 + ASCD Annual Conference 25 here, held June 29 to July 2.

Some of the common responses among the audience of mostly teachers included limited vocabulary, boredom, and difficulty decoding.

The session—led by Jessica Pack, a 6th grade language arts teacher at James Workman Middle School in Riverside County, Calif., made the case that smart, strategic use of artificial intelligence tools could help boost reading skills. (However, it's important to note that many educators say AI tools do the exact opposite—they stifle creativity, lead to plagiarism, and give students an easy way out of tackling challenging assignments.)

Improving reading skills is one of the top priorities in schools across the country because of data showing that those skills are declining. The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress has shown declining reading scores for 4th and 8th graders for years.

Those trends have prompted growing interest in the “science of reading,” the use of proven, evidence-based methods for teaching reading that include teaching the foundations of language in a structured progression.

Pack has been using AI tools to bolster reading comprehension lessons, she said during the ISTE session, titled “Enhancing Literacy Through Creativity Using AI-Powered Tools.”

“A lot of folks are landing on AI as a purely teacher-centered type of tool, so what we are going to do today is encourage a bit of student-centered use,” Pack told the audience of educators at the conference here.



Kaylee Domzalski/Education Week

Jessica Pack, a 6th grade language arts teacher at James Workman Middle School in Riverside County, Calif., speaks about AI and literacy at the ISTE Live 25 + ASCD Annual Conference 25 in San Antonio.

How this teacher used an AI image generator to work on reading skills

Pack said her 6th grade students from last school year had an average reading level of about 2nd or 3rd grade.

To address this learning gap, students were first asked to examine paragraphs from a book and generate keywords from that text. They would use those keywords to create a prompt for an AI image generator.

The students would then work in small groups to evaluate the image to see if it was missing something that was important to the text from the book. Finally, they would submit additional AI prompts to get the image to more accurately represent the text.

“This is huge. This is the metacognitive moment where they’re demonstrating their comprehension—their full comprehension of the text—by being able to connect it back to whatever it is they were able to generate,” said Pack.

Research shows that asking students to monitor and correct their own understanding of text as they read can boost their comprehension—though using AI for this pur-

pose hasn’t been studied extensively.

Pack emphasized that it is important for students to be taught to cite the images they create as generative AI images, because that instills the value of citing sources for content they create.

“They need to be aware of what content is AI-generated, and it starts building that digital citizenship foundation for citation of AI and being aware that not all the things we are creating are actual factual things,” she said. ■



Jane Barlow/PA via AP

Taylor Swift performs on stage during her Eras Tour at the Murrayfield Stadium in Edinburgh.

Published June 19, 2024

Can Taylor Swift Get Students To Love Poetry?

By Madeline Will

Taylor Swift's lyrics are studied by college students across the country, including at Harvard University, for their literary value. Should they be woven into the high school and middle school English/language arts curriculum, too?

Elizabeth Scala, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who taught one of the first university courses on the literary significance of Swift's songwriting in fall 2022, thinks so. She is leading a webinar for secondary ELA teachers in Texas next month on how they can incorporate the pop star's songs into their instruction in a standards-aligned way.

After all, many of Swift's songs include motifs, metaphors, allusions, and other literary and poetic devices. The artist also makes reference to several familiar middle and high school texts throughout her discography, including *The Great Gatsby* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

"What I do with [the students in my course] is get them to read a bunch of older love poetry that I think they would have no patience for if they didn't realize that Taylor Swift is doing something very similar," Scala said. "She is one of the latest makers in this very, very long

history of love poets that goes back to a time that's incredibly, intolerably masculinist and sexist. Students have no patience for it—but she comes right out of it. She uses the very same techniques that they do."

Scala spoke to Education Week about how teachers can lead analyses of Taylor Swift's songwriting and which songs are good choices for middle and high school classrooms. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How does the analysis from your Taylor Swift course translate to the middle and high school levels?

I'm teaching [my] course to freshmen. Right now, it's still a small seminar. It is kind of their intro to literary studies course.

I am dealing with students who are coming to college right out of high school. I'm helping them with that transition. And I have seen a big shift with students, especially after the pandemic—students who have ... not really had that old-school, in-person, full high school [or] middle school experience. I've seen the damage that has really done to their skill sets, and to their ability to write, their ability to engage, their ability to just be in a room and talk with people, talk to grownups.

I think that what I'm working on with these freshmen are some of the same problems that high school teachers are dealing with—we have people who want to be English majors who don't like to read or write. They like books, they like stories, they like film, they like representation, but they do not have the patience to do long-form reading or long-form writing. They have the patience for, like, two paragraphs. ...

I do think that it's social media—they have a TikTok attention span, and they don't really want to think about things very deeply, or for a very long time, or from a number of different angles. I think they're interested in Taylor Swift, and their ability to pay attention to what she's doing in much more depth is something I tried to capitalize on.

I'm going to try to give [teachers enrolled in this webinar] a cornucopia of approaches to Taylor Swift, that can help them do everything from reading comprehension all the way up to advanced writing and research.

I've read what the teachers' hopes are for the course. They're having a hard time getting students to read anything, getting them to pay attention, and [students] are especially poetry-resistant. Tapping into an interest that students have outside of school will get them, maybe, to pay more attention to what they're working on, be more interested in what's going on in the classroom, be a little bit more engaged. And then treating [Swift's songs] as poetry is a great double whammy, right? It takes something that everybody has found really difficult, and it's making that even more engaging and palatable.

What Taylor Swift songs do you think are most ripe for analysis?

Well, I'm going to be dealing with students from middle school through high school, and this is Texas. I'm really trying to be sensitive to the constraints that teachers will feel placed upon them. So on the one hand, the students will be most interested in Taylor's most recent work, and yet that recent work, she's written as an early 30s adult. It has more cussing in it, it's got more adult themes, more adult concerns.

I'm trying to figure out a way to ... give them some recent work on "Midnights" and "Tormented Poets" that isn't explicitly sexual. We are going to focus on "Clara Bow," [a track on Swift's latest album with commentary about how women in the music and film industries are pitted against each other].

The reason I've chosen "Clara Bow" is because they have no idea who Clara Bow or who

Stevie Nicks is, and I want to give them different ways into this material. Everybody jumps to ... trying to figure out, what does the song mean? They don't go through and think about: OK, who's speaking? Who's listening? How does this song position me as the reader? What am I supposed to know? What am I not supposed to know? How do I fill in the gaps? Is it telling a story? Is it elaborating on a situation? There's a lot of questions in there. I'm going to try to tease all that out.

[While listening to "The Tortured Poets Department" album], I was noticing her vocabulary. Taylor Swift does not always talk in her songs in the most colloquial manner. You can start asking [students]: Why is she using this language?

You can have them ... talk about expressions that they hadn't heard before. What do they mean? Where did they come from? Look up their etymologies. Look up who these figures are. [In "Clara Bow"], why is she aligning herself with these other two female performers?

I am going to really try to unpack that song in a bunch of different ways before I get into the poetic analysis part where we deal with the song structure: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus. We're going to talk about, if you treat them as stanzas, what kind of repetition do you see between different parts of the song? Once you establish repetition, you can now notice variation. The bridge is always this really different part of the song—the music often changes, the rhyme scheme changes. What do you see between one line and another? Is the rhyme scheme consistent?

Taylor Swift uses rhyme, but she often uses slant rhyme so the words don't rhyme absolutely with the same ending—they have sort of the same sound at the end. And she often uses assonance, which is the repetition of vowel sounds, much more than alliteration, the repetition of consonant sounds within lines.

We are going to get at how teachers can actually make students care about learning about literary terms, because it gives them a better way to talk about what they find innovative, meaningful, important, artful in her music, which they generally like. [Now], they have no other way of dealing with it other than saying, "Well, to me, it's good." Can we come up with an objective reason why it's good? What makes it good?

It's not just that it speaks to you—it does do that. But if we're going to talk about literary value, it's more than that. It's something general, objective, describable, able to be evaluated, and so forth. I'm going to try to move them in that direction.

Swift often makes use of foreshadowing and allusions to tease her upcoming projects. Do you include that aspect of her work?

I do not really do that so much. One of the things that I may talk about is, what does it mean for something to be literary? Separating informational and literary is probably something these teachers should think about doing very specifically. The literary seems like language that is very self-conscious of itself. It's about, what is the texture? What does something sound like, not just what does it mean?

Because if she was trying to say things clearly and what they mean, she could do everything in a sentence, right? The fact that it's a song, and that she's ... dancing around what she's trying to say, and finding all these different words for it, and using heavily metaphorical language—she's trying to obfuscate what she's trying to tell you, which might be a little like an Easter egg, in a weird way. Sometimes she's throwing out red herrings, and sometimes she's playing this game with her fans and seeing if they're really paying attention.

I love it, because it's like she's training the literary critics out there to do the work.

One of the things I love about "Tortured Poets" is how there's so much repetition between songs. She uses certain nouns and phrases in very different songs. It's weaving a set of references to itself. She's creating this tapestry in which she is playing with the different things that some image or some collocation of words can mean placed in different contexts.

Which Taylor Swift songs do you recommend for an ELA teacher who hasn't listened to her much?

It's probably the "folklore" triangle songs I would send them to. [The songs "betty," "cardigan," and "august" center around a teenage love triangle.]

That would be something that they could sink their teeth into in a really interesting way—from the more simple idea that, here's a narrative with three characters, and they're all talking about their point of view, all the way to a later high school classroom where you can actually start to ask [more theoretical] questions. Are these people rooted in the same timeframe? They're all telling the story from their point of view, but are they all telling the story at the same moment, or are we deep in the future, or back in the past? You can make that much more sophisticated. ■

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When Older Students Can't Read: How This Middle School Is Tackling Literacy

By Sarah Schwartz

Bow, N.H.—

Loralyn LaBombard is the only reading specialist at Bow Memorial School, a middle school serving grades 5-8 in a leafy town outside Concord, N.H.

In the world of literacy education, that is not an unusual distinction. After elementary school, many schools reduce or eliminate positions for supporting struggling readers.

But several years ago, LaBombard started to feel like student needs were outpacing what she could handle. More middle schoolers needed help with foundational skills, like decoding words, and many students had the same gaps.

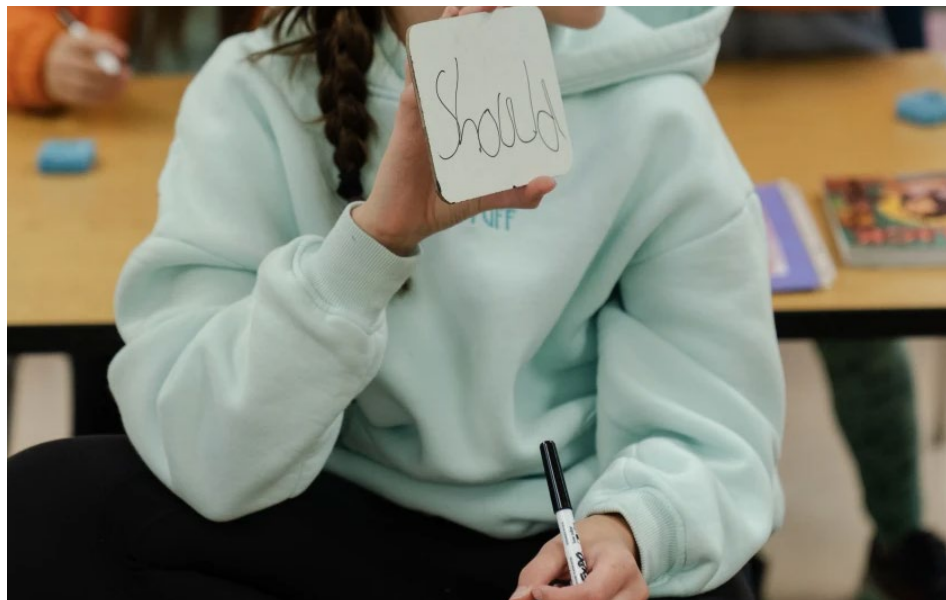
“This is not sustainable,” LaBombard remembered thinking. She wanted a way to reach more kids at once, and, just as importantly, help them build a community. “When you have a group of students who are all struggling in the same area, they make mistakes, they learn from each other,” she said.

Spearheaded by LaBombard, Bow has since launched an ambitious program to tackle foundational reading difficulties. In specialized classes across grades 5-8, students learn how to break down complex, multisyllabic words, improve their spelling, and practice reading fluently—all while also digging into novels and other whole books.

It’s an innovative solution to a surprisingly common problem that has become more acute of late: What do teachers do when their middle or high school students struggle to read?

New data provide a sobering look at the scope of the issue. In a nationally representative, online survey of nearly 700 educators conducted this fall by the EdWeek Research Center, the vast majority of respondents said at least some middle and high school students in their districts struggled with basic reading skills. Almost a quarter of educators said the majority of middle and high schoolers in their districts struggled.

Educators in the survey cited a number of reasons for this problem—their students weren’t motivated to read, couldn’t read fluently or automatically enough, or didn’t have



Sophie Park for Education Week

Bow Memorial School has developed a systematic approach to addressing foundational reading gaps among middle schoolers, integrating sound-letter skills with a rich diet of reading materials. A student shows their spelling during an exercise in a 5th grade class at the school in Bow, N.H.

enough stamina. But underlying these perceived causes is likely something more fundamental, researchers say.

“People still don’t understand that for so many adolescents who struggle with reading, their difficulty begins at the word level,” said Jessica Toste, an associate professor of special education at the University of Texas at Austin, who studies intervention for students with persistent reading challenges.

Bow is at the forefront of trying to crack that instructional problem at scale. It’s taken careful planning and dedicated staff, but it’s a model that other schools can replicate, educators there say. Now, students in Bow’s structured literacy classes are making faster average reading progress than the rest of the school. This year’s 8th graders have seen eight times as much reading growth on interim assessments over the past three years as their peers who aren’t in the program.

“The students started to share, ‘It’s the first time that I feel comfortable reading aloud,’” said LaBombard. “The data speaks. There’s an incredible amount of buy-in now.”

Why older students struggle with reading

A picture-postcard New England town between two of New Hampshire’s largest cities, Bow is surrounded by forests and trails. Only about 6% of the middle school’s 500 students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

But as Jessica Brown, the district director of special education put it, “We’re not immune” to reading difficulties. Four years ago, coming out of the COVID pandemic, the district was trying to figure out how to better support older readers with big gaps in their foundational reading skills.

“It was right post-COVID,” said Kelly Ardita, the special education student-services coordinator at the school. “We had a lot of kids who missed out on that direct, phonetic instruction. They had it behind a camera.”

Students who received special education services met one-on-one with case managers, including LaBombard. But not all had her background in providing effective word-reading interventions.

Nationally, while more states and districts

are now requiring young students to get explicit, systematic instruction in skills like phonics that set children up for reading success later on, many older readers are missing some of these critical building blocks.

Some may have never been flagged for reading intervention early on and need basic sound-letter instruction to “crack the code of how language works,” said UT-Austin’s Toste. But more commonly, she said, older kids and teenagers who can decode short, phonetically regular words such as “cat” and “dog” have trouble with more complex, multisyllabic words.

Those are the kind that start to show up not just in English classes but in science, math, and social studies too: “photosynthesis,” “unbelievable,” or “transportation,” for example. A typically developing reader might apply their decoding skills intuitively, Toste said. But there’s a group of students who need more explicit instruction to make that leap.

“Those multisyllabic words, they often carry the content or meaning of the text,” said Kelly Williams, an associate professor of special education at the University of Georgia.

Research bears this out. Several studies over the past five years have found that middle-grades students whose decoding ability was below a set point—a “decoding threshold”—make much slower progress in vocabulary and comprehension over time than their peers.

It’s hard to know exactly how many middle and high schoolers fall in this group. Reading tests for older students are usually general measures of comprehension, not diagnostic measures that probe into underlying component parts of reading difficulty.

But at least one study, published in 2022, suggests that a large share of children have word-reading difficulties beyond 3rd grade. The research examined the third of American 4th graders who scored below basic on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and found that this group struggled to understand multisyllabic words, especially those with three or more syllables.

Even so, services often disappear when students leave elementary school.

Only about 60% of the middle school educators in the EdWeek Research Center survey said their schools or districts provided support for struggling adolescent readers, like dedicated intervention time or screening tests. Fewer—only a third—of high school educators said the same.

Then there are the logistical challenges. Fitting in time for reading support classes competes with departmentalized sched-

ules and credit requirements that students must meet for graduation. And middle and high school English/language arts teachers, trained to be content-area experts, rarely have a background in teaching foundational reading skills.

Imagining a reading class that works differently

LaBombard, or “Dr. L,” as she’s known at Bow, has a relentless energy. At the front of the reading classroom, she operates like a conductor: gesturing to the students she wants to speak up, then tracing letters on the board, finally throwing up her arms with joy as students deliver a correct answer.

She greets students by name walking down the hallways, asking about their other classes, their swim meets, their families.

“I see myself in so many of the kids I work with,” LaBombard said. She struggled with reading and math throughout school. “My guidance counselor told me not to go to college,” she said. LaBombard left his office determined to prove him wrong. Later, she dedicated her doctoral dissertation to him.

LaBombard’s expertise and passion built up “a perfect storm” to get the structured literacy program at Bow off the ground, said Brown, the district special education director.

At Bow, LaBombard found her road map from one of the few districts in the country that has been doing this work with adolescents for more than a decade: Mountain Views Supervisory Union in Vermont. There, educator Julie Burtcher Brown launched a program for middle and high school students to provide explicit, systematic instruction in word-reading and spelling, coupled with time to practice in real books.

“What our model demonstrates is that it’s absolutely possible to do this, even in a small rural school without a lot of extra resources or staffing, if we follow the research and work collaboratively together to find a way to provide effective instruction,” said Burtcher Brown, in an interview.

“I think it’s important on a philosophical level and a moral level, because it’s our students’ right to be fully literate. If we really believe that, we need to ensure that no child is graduating without the skills needed to be fully independent in life.”

LaBombard knew Burtcher Brown professionally, and remembered thinking, we could do this here.

During the 2022-23 school year, LaBombard approached Kerri Harris, a special edu-

cation teacher at Bow, who already taught a special education reading class that focused mostly on comprehension. LaBombard pitched turning it into a structured literacy class for 7th and 8th graders, and team-teaching—integrating the word-level instruction that LaBombard had been providing to students one-on-one.

In summer 2023, blessed with district permission and some creative scheduling from Bow’s leaders, the two teachers planned the year ahead on trail runs through the New Hampshire woods. They brainstormed how to repurpose intervention materials they already used in one-on-one instruction to fit a whole class setting.

Having district support and a team of dedicated educators makes a program like this more likely to be successful, said Burtcher Brown. “It’s not just one teacher in a building understanding what kind of instruction needs to happen,” she said. “It’s the leadership team empowering the teachers.”

In middle school, where English teachers can feel pressure to move fast to cover the many standards students need to master, the class led by LaBombard and Harris would work differently.

They would track students’ progress toward mastering the foundational skills they needed to read words quickly and accurately. “We only move on when we’re ready to move on,” Harris said.

Creating a safe environment for students to learn

Now in its third year, the 7th and 8th grade structured literacy classes have become fixtures on the schedule. Bow has since expanded the program, offering structured literacy in 5th and 6th grade as well. LaBombard works with both of those teachers, while Harris has taken on the older students solo. “For me, it’s a co-teaching model,” said LaBombard. “I’m trying to build capacity.”

On a sunny October morning this year in the 8th grade class, Harris was introducing a new set of suffixes—appendages like “-less” and “-est”—to her group of eight students. Learning how to identify word parts like these, and understanding how they modify bases, can help students more easily decode and understand new multisyllabic words while reading.

Harris led the class in chanting the suffixes together, then went on to define each in turn and ask the students for examples of words that include them. “They all have meaning,” she said.

Later, she would connect this lesson in morphology and multisyllabic decoding to the young adult novel that students were reading as a class.

Reading aloud from the book, Harris asked students to follow along and note all of the words that ended in the suffixes they just learned. Most of these words are adverbs and adjectives that describe how the characters act, she said. She asked: What do these words reveal about their personalities?

The opportunity to immediately practice multisyllabic word-reading in authentic text is crucial, said LaBombard, in an earlier interview. “A lot of times, students see this as an isolated skill, and they don’t transfer it,” she said. “I want my students to not only read controlled text, I want them to read good literature. It’s the hardest part to fit in.”

Harris keeps the class moving quickly, with the kind of dry humor that wins grudging respect from preteens. (“Surprise,” she deadpanned, before she began to read aloud, “I want you to highlight evidence.”)

From the start, she and LaBombard tried to head off any stigma or shame that could come with being enrolled in the class.

“We have very frank conversations with them,” Harris said. They talk with the students about how literacy skills will help them with their goals, in and outside of school. If students start to make fun of each other, Harris said, “we nip that in the bud real quick.”

In the 8th grade classroom, a quiet space set back from the building’s main hallways, autumn light filters in wide windows through red and gold leaves, illuminating student work on the walls. It was important that the class not be in the “dregs” of the building, where so many special education courses are relegated in schools, LaBombard said.

This attention to the student experience has paid off, said Shannon Bader, the mother of a current 8th grader. Her son Fletcher is in his second year of structured literacy classes.

“He can walk in, and say, ‘This is what we’re working on, and I don’t get it. I don’t understand; I missed a step,’” she said. “He feels safe to say that. No one else in the class is going to say he’s dumb.”

Bader was initially skeptical of the program. Fletcher had received speech, language, and reading intervention since before kindergarten. She worried about him missing content-area instruction for reading classes in middle school. “I was very anxious about it,” she said. “Dr. L said, ‘Give it a chance. Give it a try.’”

Now, she thinks the foundational instruc-

tion Fletcher gets in word-reading is propelling him forward in his other classes.

“It’s the preparation,” she said. Learning how to break down complex math and science terminology frees up more of his brain space to focus on content demands. “That is no longer taking up his full energy,” Bader said.

Fletcher offered a more mixed review.

The class’s regular skill practice can feel repetitive, he said, and he still wouldn’t say he likes to read. But he’s learned to pay more attention to his spelling. And the writing structures Harris has taught has made it easier for him to get down a full thought on paper, he added.

Having someone break down the reading and writing process, he said, “I found that it helped a lot.”

Expanding support to fit every student

As the structured literacy program has grown, so have the districtwide systems that prop it up. And within Bow, LaBombard and her colleagues are slowly integrating more opportunities for reading support throughout the school day.

In the spring, she and the special education case manager for 5th grade meet with the 4th grade teachers at Bow Elementary to review student data. They identify which kids are struggling with decoding and might be good candidates for the 5th grade structured literacy class. Most, but not all, of these students have been identified for special education services.

For some students, one year of support is all they need. Last school year, three 5th graders in the class were able to “exit” intervention and no longer needed additional classes. LaBombard sees the early support as preventative: “I truly believe it would have been a special education referral at some point,” she said.

Others have been in the class for multiple years. Ultimately, LaBombard said, the goal is to get to a place where these students can exit, too.

Schoolwide, 5th and 6th grade teachers are taking LETRS, a professional learning course on evidence-based reading instruction. Depending on their needs, some students still receive one-on-one intervention. And Bow is piloting a new reading class this year, for students who don’t struggle with word-level decoding, but need help with other elements like fluency or reading comprehension.

Co-taught by LaBombard and English teacher Alexandra Stewart, it operates as an extra English period, which students can choose to take in place of a foreign language. It enrolls both students who have and have not been identified as needing extra reading support.

Still, all of these structures—dedicated reading classes, a school full of teachers trained in foundational reading science—will end when 8th graders at Bow move on to high school. At that level, “you don’t look at discrete skills as much as, how do I have a comprehensive plan to get this student to graduate?,” said Brown, the district special education coordinator.

But the teachers at Bow hope that the work they’re doing will buoy their students as they make the leap to 9th grade. Stewart, who just started working with LaBombard in the reading class this year, is already seeing dividends.

In a role in a previous district, she worked with 9th graders who were mostly reading at a kindergarten level. By that point, she said, “it’s like triage. What do they need to survive in a literate world?” Middle school intervention offers something different and more powerful.

“This isn’t survival,” she said. “It’s about, what do they need to reach their potential?” ■

Additional Resource 
View this article's charts



Sonia Pulido for Education Week

OPINION

Published April 23, 2025

Don't Underestimate the Power Of Graphic Novels for the Classroom

By Larry Ferlazzo

Many students—and teachers (including me!)—love graphic novels. Today's post begins a series exploring how they can be used in the classroom.

'Wonderful Societal Artifacts'

Tim Smyth is an award-winning educator and Eisner-nominated author of Teaching with Comics and Graphic Novels: Fun and Engaging Strategies to Improve Close Reading and Critical Thinking in Every Classroom, available from Routledge. He also shares many engaging education strategies on his website, www.teachingwithcomics.com and can be found on social media @historycomics.

Being a reading specialist and social studies educator for over 20 years, I continue to be amazed at the power of comics and graphic novels to inspire and engage students of all ages and levels. Students are not the only ones who benefit from this medium, as I am also a lifelong comics reader and get to share my passion with them, which energizes me.

As an educator, I agree with Spider-Man that with great power, truly comes great responsibility. I have a responsibility to make sure that I go beyond using comics as just a hook and, instead, I focus on using this compelling medium to create analytical readers and writers.

Some ideas:

- Don't underestimate the power of creation. My students generate their own comics in the manner they feel most comfortable, using Canva, Pixton, PowerPoint, photographs, hand drawing, etc. For example, students could choose a person from history that inspires them and make that person into a superhero—complete with origin story, accessories, uniform, enemies, allies, and an annotated works-cited page.
- Every subject area has heroes that have impacted the content area, and these figures can be made into heroes allowing the students to fully immerse themselves in the research. My students have done this for celebratory

months, such as Black History, Women's History, Arab History, LGBTQIA+, etc.

- Don't forget that comic books come out every Wednesday, which means that they serve as wonderful societal artifacts, chronicling what's happening in the world around us in real time. I begin many classes by putting a single comics panel on the smartboard and asking students to discuss its meaning as a do-now activity. These panels have allowed us to open vital conversations about race, gender, identity, and so much more in an engaging and nonconfrontational way. Today's comics truly do represent all walks of life, and I hope that this representation will help make meaningful change.

An easy comics lesson is one that I have done on the very first day of school. Before the students arrive, I set out assorted comics for groups of 3-4 students to read and analyze as historical artifacts. These comics span from the 1940s through today, allowing students to discuss the meaning of historical artifact and that history is all around us. I encourage them to look at advertisements, letters to the editor, technology, representation, gender roles, and so much more. They go home on the first day of school talking about class and they are excited to come back knowing that we will look at history in a completely new and exciting way.

As a reading specialist, I truly feel that we are all teachers of reading, regardless of what classes we teach. An important skill for students is annotating (did I just hear a groan?) and actively interacting with text. Comics are perfect in teaching this skill as students are forced to slow down and truly see what is happening—to make meaning in the melding of text and image. This is a 21st-century literacy skill as we routinely do this when consuming media in all of its forms.

My comics readers are experts at picking apart and annotating not just words but also political cartoons, videos, propaganda, and advertisements. While comics are never a replacement for prose, they are another important literacy resource which often inspires excitement and further research.

In my class, students have been drawn (pun intended) to wonderfully illustrated graphic novels about so many topics, including the March Trilogy about Congressman John Lewis' life (we also create our own well-researched

comics about modern civil rights issues), the Harlem Hellfighters, Japanese-American internment camps, the plight of a mother in Syria, genocide, politics, economics, music, and countless inspiring graphic biographies.

As a content-area teacher, I just do not have the time to teach all of these topics with prose resources, but I can have students read the manga adaptation of *Les Misérables* in one 90-minute class. Students can also individually read comics in one sitting on multiple topics and then share with their partners and gain a wider understanding of an event or person while allowing for student choice.

'Allegorical Digital Books'

Jun Shen is a social studies teacher and teacher on special assignment (ToSA) for educational technology at Laguna Beach High School in California:

My example might be more of an illustrated novel than a graphic novel, but in my 10th grade world-history class, I have my students create ones that get published in our local libraries.

I redesigned my pre-WWII totalitarianism unit last year through my district's Unit Design professional development process. Inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, I had my students create original allegorical tales that paralleled the actions of totalitarian regimes before WWII.

More specifically, students were given a list of key historical events, characters, groups, and institutions from Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Stalin's U.S.S.R., and the Holocaust. Student groups had to choose one of those themes, research the history behind it, brainstorm creative ways to retell the story using symbolism and metaphors, and then craft an illustrated novel using the BookCreator app.

Many students made *Animal Farm*-like stories, with slightly different animal characters and settings. However, I was really impressed and entertained by some of the more creative allegories. For example, one book about the rise of Nazi Germany was set in a used car lot where an intelligent Tesla manipulated the head salesman to give it ultimate power over the dealership.

Another book about the rise of Stalin in the U.S.S.R. had its story take place within a power struggle between two girls on a high school varsity volleyball team. The students were also required to include a real history lesson in the back of the book to help the readers understand the historical parallels. Each group read their books to the class and taught the corresponding history lessons at the end of the unit.

One of the key components of the units created through Unit Design is the authentic assessments. This is taking project-based learning a step further by incorporating social entrepreneurship into the curriculum. We want to make sure that what the students learn is demonstrated by more than a test or paper, even more than a project that gets displayed. We wanted to make sure that the students take what they learn and help make the world better.

For this project, all the allegorical digital books were sent to one of our 8th grade English classes at our local middle school. The 8th graders were at the time reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and were learning about the dangers of totalitarianism, which coincided perfectly with our 10th grade content.

First, the 8th graders read the 10th graders' books. Then, select 10th graders went on a field trip to the middle school to hold an authors panel in the 8th grade English class. There, the students had a chance to ask the authors questions about the creative book-writing process. The authors also had a chance to teach the 8th graders about the politics and the real-life implications of their stories, so as to inspire civic participation and citizenship.

Finally, the best book of the class, an allegory about the rise of Mussolini, but set in a coral reef, was published digitally and physically. *The Rise of the Mega* was published in our school district's digital library in the Sora app. It was also printed and hardcover copies were placed in each of our district's school libraries plus our local city public library.

Students all felt empowered through this unit, not only to have done something creative but with the knowledge that they helped, even if in a small way, maintain our democratic norms and institutions.

'Rich, Complex, and Engaging'

Kiera Beddes has been a high school ELA/history teacher, now digital learning specialist, in Utah for 13 years. She is currently a member of the Utah Teacher Fellows and is passionate about social science, literature, and technology in education:

I've been an English teacher for 10 years, even though I went to school initially to be a history teacher. In my classroom, I had a very broad view of what qualified as a text. Just like how anything could be a historical artifact, almost anything can be "read" as a text. Graphic novels and comics are 100 percent worthy of being instructional materials and offer a wide landscape for critical thinking.

I remember reading *American Born Chi-*

nese by Gene Luen Yang in my adolescent literature class during my teacher-prep program, and it completely changed the way I looked at graphic novels in the classroom. I had no idea graphic novels could be so rich, complex, and engaging.

As I have dived more into the format, I've fallen in love with the vast array of graphic novels that can be used in the classroom. If you are still looking for reasons why you should consider using graphic novels, I could point to the enduring popularity and high quality, the chance for students to practice both visual and multimodal literacy, as well as the chance to use 21st-century skills of creativity and critical thinking as they decipher the text. Great graphic novels are a seamless blend of text and picture. You can't make complete meaning of the story without both.

When I first started teaching, I encouraged my struggling readers to use graphic novels as a way to build up their confidence with reading, because they could usually read them faster than a regular book and feel a sense of accomplishment when they finished a whole book.

I used part of a graphic novel retelling of *Frankenstein* with the whole class for the same reason. Since the novel is a frame story (a story, within a story, within a story), using the graphic novel version for the creature's version of events allowed us to cover a lot of chapters in a short amount of time, comprehend it well, and explore a new type of storytelling.

I taught a film and literature elective ELA class and I used *Filmish: A Graphic Journey Through Film* by Edward Ross as one of the reference materials for the course. It is the most fascinating discussion of film that I've ever read. It is also super interesting to use a graphic novel format to analyze film.

Considering film is a visual medium, it makes sense to use another visual medium to analyze it. This book allowed me to use a unique literary form to help students look at film in a different light. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is also a must read for this very reason. What better way to understand comics than with comics?

McCloud breaks down the nature of sequential art, its history, and how to craft your own story. I would recommend using short selections from each with students, as taken as a whole they are quite dense.

The last way I've used graphic novels or comics with students is as mentor texts for student work.

There is a lot of power in using art as storytelling, even for the kids who aren't super

artistic. For instance, students can explore tone really easily with the use of color. Comics are a great way to help students understand sequencing and to demonstrate their comprehension of plot structure.

Comics are really flexible considering the technology you have on hand: I've had students create comics on paper, in Google Slides, or with comic book templates in Canva or Adobe Express.

Teachers should use graphic novels and comics in the classroom because they engage students, develop different literacies, and foster critical thinking. These texts offer diverse perspectives and can simplify complex concepts, making them accessible and relatable. To easily incorporate graphic novels, teachers can use them to build struggling readers' confidence and employ them as mentor texts for student projects. Using graphic novels or comics in the classroom is more than just the cool factor. They are a valuable source of rich text worthy of study and use in the classroom.

Thanks to Tim, Jun, and Kiera for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades. He is currently a volunteer tutor to English-learner newcomers at a local school and to youth in juvenile hall.

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OPINION

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Want Students to Read on Grade Level? These Strategies Can Help

Active reading, peer-assisted learning, and other ways to scaffold literacy instruction

By Jennifer Throndsen

Are you a teacher, instructional coach, or school leader who is concerned about how to support all students in accessing grade-level texts? If so, you are not alone. In fact, in a survey last year, less than a quarter of educators reported their school is doing “very well” in meeting the academic needs of all learners.

Exacerbating this issue is the large percentage of students who are not reading proficiently, as we were recently reminded by the declining scores captured in the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress.

So, what are educators to do? Luckily, the research is clear that one of our best strategies is scaffolding, an approach in which the teacher or more capable peers directly support developing readers. In fact, literacy researcher Timothy Shanahan has curated dozens of studies that show appropriate scaffolding can accelerate student learning by using more challenging text than a student might be able to handle independently.

In my nearly two decades first as a classroom teacher then a teacher trainer, I have found the following three strategies highly effective:

Active reading strategies

Instead of reading texts to the students, listening to an audio version, or asking the strong readers to read, we can use active engagement strategies that afford all students the opportunity to engage in grade-level text with scaffolding. Six common active reading-engagement strategies include:

- **Cloze.** Cloze reading occurs when a teacher reads a challenging text aloud and strategically selects words to omit. Students are prompted to fill in the missing words.
- **Echo.** Echo reading happens when the teacher reads aloud a portion of the text,

such as a sentence, paragraph, or page, and students echo back with similar pacing, intonation, and expression.

- **Choral.** Choral reading takes place when two or more students, or even a whole class, read the text simultaneously. This strategy gives striving readers scaffolded support via the more proficient readers as the teacher models appropriate pacing.
- **Duet.** Duet reading is when two partners, one strong reader and one striving reader, are paired together to read a text aloud in unison.
- **Partner.** Partner reading strategically pairs up two students who take turns reading part of the passage aloud. It may be a page at a time, a paragraph, or even a sentence depending on the length of the text and students’ stamina. Both students have the text in front of them and are tracking it. The stronger reader can provide prompts for unknown words for the striving reader.

Whisper. Whisper reading is just what it sounds like. Students read independently in a whisper voice. It is a great replacement for silent sustained reading as it offers hard evidence of student practice instead of hope that there is.

Background knowledge activation

Depending on the text and the students you are serving, you can either activate their prior knowledge on the topic or take a few moments to build background knowledge if it is foreign to them. For example, if you’re reading about the Civil War and the topic is new to your students, then it would be best to spend some time building their knowledge. This could take the form of a short video that provides a basic overview of the conflict or preteaching some key terms that are in the text they will encounter.

However, if you’ll be reading about a topic that is known to your students—say you’re teaching about tornadoes in the Midwest—then you can use a technique like a K-W-L chart that asks students to share what they already know, what they want to know, and finally what they learned after reading. By



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activating prior knowledge or building background, educators can facilitate stronger and lasting connections to the new learning while increasing comprehension.

Peer-assisted learning

As researchers Douglas Fuchs, Lynn Fuchs, and Pamela Burish documented more than two decades ago, peer-assisted learning strategies are highly effective instructional practices that instantly increase the amount of scaffolding a student may receive just by providing a peer for them to engage with. The duet reading strategy mentioned above is one example.

Another is paragraph shrinking, when a capable reader and a developing reader practice summarizing a text they are reading. Within the partnership, the students take turns serving as the “coach” and the “reader.” The coach will provide the reader with feedback on each of their summary statements. The reader will read for a set amount of time or a certain amount of text before the coach and reader switch roles.

For additional scaffolding, both students could be reading the text aloud in preparation for the designated reader to summarize that portion of text. Generally, the student who coaches first is the more capable reader so that they can model the feedback process for their partner.

The coach provides feedback to the reader in a few ways: encouraging them to rethink the “who” or “what,” revisit what they identified as the most important details, or shorten their summary sentence if it exceeds the set limit of words. If the coach is unsure of what the main idea for a particular paragraph should be, they consult the teacher. (For more information, you may consider watching this three-minute video that highlights how to implement the three steps of paragraph shrinking.)

A caution: Let’s remember that scaffolding is not differentiation. When we scaffold our instruction, we are giving students access to grade-level material without altering the grade-level expectations. Unlike when we use differentiation, we are not lowering the expectations but rather identifying the scaffolds students might need to effectively access the grade-level material.

Using these types of scaffolding strategies can be powerful levers helping students successfully participate. Teachers and school leaders, ask yourselves how you can scaffold instruction to ensure all students have access to grade-level materials. ■

Jennifer Throndsen has more than 20 years of experience in the classroom, including as a teacher, instructional coach, district office specialist, and state-level director. She now works with state, district, school leaders, and classroom teachers to improve student learning outcomes.

OPINION

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Students Need Anchors When They Read. How to Make Them Stick

What teaching Chinese language taught me about literacy instruction

By Haiyan Fan

When Arkansas introduced mandatory state-wide literacy training several years ago, I didn't expect much.

Like many teachers, I assumed I'd click through this long series of videos, complete the quiz, and move on.

But I didn't.

I slowed down. I paused. I took notes, pages of notes.

This cognitive science-backed training struck a nerve—specifically, it reflected how many of our students struggle with spelling not because they lack understanding but because they haven't associated the written form with enough meaning to make the spelling stick.

They confuse their *vs.* there, your *vs.* you're, its *vs.* it's, or then *vs.* than. These aren't comprehension mistakes (a recent email from a former student, a native English speaker who is now a college senior, still surfaced this elementary error). They're what I call the “weak anchoring effect”: Even fluent speakers may not fully register the written form and map it to meaning—a critical step for the brain to retrieve it reliably.

From a cognitive science perspective, language learning is an act of information processing. Every day, learners take in streams of auditory and visual input—sounds they hear and symbols they see—and must connect those inputs to meaning for long-term memory retrieval. Oral fluency in a first language grows through immersion; literacy, however, depends on deliberate instruction, where the art of teaching guides attention to what matters.

A beacon is a salient auditory or visual pattern that tethers sound and form in working memory. The teacher's role is first to sensitize learners to those useful patterns, then help learners anchor the forms to meaning for understanding to take place. This is where teach-



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ing becomes artistry: knowing where students are, knowing where they must go, and building memorable bridges—drawing on stories, pictures, clever mnemonics, sensory cues, emotions, or kinesthetic movements to help the form stick.

Anchoring isn't instant. Even after students notice a pattern, the written form can flicker before it stabilizes in long-term memory. Drift is normal before the anchor holds, which is why teachers need both patience and persistence, knowing science is on our side.

What does anchoring look like in practice?

Earlier in my career, when I taught middle school English in China, I used simple visual cues and creative storylines for these “tricky pairs.” Students often learned here first, then there. I told them, “T is for to—from here to there.”

Similarly, I showed them that their contains heir, meaning descendant—a low-hanging fruit students could easily remember in a playful sentence: “The king and queen's

heir will one day sit on their throne.”

Now, as a Chinese-language teacher in the United States, I saw the exact same phenomenon from the opposite direction. To type Chinese characters, students type in pinyin (the Romanized spelling of the sound) and then choose the correct character from a keyboard list. Because many words share identical pinyin only varying in verbal tones, wrong characters are often selected.

Here's an amusing yet revealing example of that from one of my students:

wǒ ài chī shuìguò (我爱吃睡过, I love eating slept-past)

wǒ ài chī shuǐguǒ (我爱吃水果, I love eating fruit)

Teachers' role here is the same: to sensitize students to beacons already present in the language. A visual comparison ties the character 水 (water) to its pictographic origin, resembling flowing water. For 果 (fruit), 田 (look like a big apple) sits atop 木 (tree): a big fruit on a tree. And 睡 (sleep) combines the characters for 目 (eye) + 垂 (hang): eyes hanging heavy with drowsiness.

These examples show how securely litera-

cy can “click and stick” when form is anchored to meaning.

These English spelling errors and Chinese character confusions may look worlds apart, but they are cognitive breadcrumbs pointing us toward one deeper truth: orthography (the correct written form of a word or character) needs to be anchored in meaning. Deliberate instruction is a cost-effective, cognitively aligned way to steady literacy against drift—fastening form to meaning in a noisy open sea where fog blurs, waves toss, and cross-currents of distraction pull learners off course.

These effective, creative, low-cost moves often took less than five minutes to implement. Yet, too often, our systems reward the surface instead of the substance—through policies, curricula, and classroom formats alike.

Small-group rotations can shrink actual reading and writing minutes, leaving students busy but unanchored. Overloaded standards pack classrooms with micro-skills and checklists that dilute reinforcing forms. Digital “personalized” platforms fragment practice into screens and progress bars without strengthening meaning. Activity-heavy lessons look engaging but scatter attention away from steady exposure.

These approaches may serve certain purposes. But when they crowd out anchoring—the pillar of pedagogy—we mistake movement for learning.

What are the policy implications?

For English class, this means protecting the minutes when anchoring actually happens: meaningful cues, repeated exposure, and space for teacher creativity. It also means rethinking orthographic assessment.

Over the years, the pendulum has swung—from the weekly memorized spelling lists of my own schooling to approaches that assumed spelling would “take care of itself” through extensive reading. In my own teaching career, I’ve seen programs that emphasized reading fluency and creative expression but provided little explicit attention to the written form of words. Yet these goals aren’t in conflict: spelling and reading reinforce one another. As students encounter words across meaningful texts, explicit attention to form helps the written system stabilize.

We need to remember a simple truth: Literacy and orthography still matter, even more so in today’s high-tech, multimedia world. At the same time, knowing “beaconization” takes time, educators and parents must tolerate approximation while beacons stabilize, rather

than demanding 100% spelling bee precision from the start.

Scaffolding assessment is the key: Teachers should reinforce vocabulary with recognition tasks, pattern choices, and word matching before expecting full recall. The goal is to hold learners accountable for orthographic skill by steadily strengthening anchoring until recall comes naturally.

The case for anchoring orthography in meaning grows stronger in a digital world where autocorrect and predictive text reduce attention to spelling. In Chinese, keyboard input lets students select characters by pinyin without seeing characters enough to remember. With voice dictation, learners receive even less visual reinforcement of the written form.

In English, texting shorthand often bypasses standard spelling (e.g., because → bc, tomorrow → tmr, through → thru), and learners may internalize these forms. In Chinese, internet slang replaces 这样子 (‘like this’) with the homophone 酱紫 (‘soy-sauce purple’), a playful form that seriously confuses Chinese-language learners.

These conveniences aren’t the enemy, but they raise the stakes: If we don’t deliberately build beacons and anchors, the tide will carry learners farther from shore.

Literacy is navigation. Our students are at sea. The channel is crowded with bright objects that do not guide. Give them beacons to see. Give them anchors to hold. When we do, the drift subsides—and literacy reaches solid ground. ■

Haiyan Fan is an Arkansas-based Chinese language educator and independent researcher who has taught high school in both charter and private schools. A recipient of the U.S. Heartland China Association’s teacher award, she is the founder of MetaChinese, a research-informed platform for Mandarin literacy.

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