

UTAH COUNCIL OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

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*The Utah Journal of Literacy*



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# The Utah Journal of Literacy

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# *The Utah Journal of Literacy*

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JOURNAL OF THE UTAH COUNCIL OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

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# Text Complexity and the Common Core

Elfrieda Hiebert with Sharon Black and Terrell A. Young

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Interest generated by her presentation at the UCIRA Conference motivated us to request additional ideas from Freddy Hiebert, who gave us a highly informative electronic interview for this electronic journal. She included references to some of her writing and gave us freedom to edit at will. Taking her at her word, we have included some points from her articles to extend and reinforce her responses to our questions.

**Journal:** What are your greatest concerns regarding text complexity, and how do you recommend that teachers prepare for these challenges?

**Freddy:** I've written extensively about potential "consequences" of (mis)interpretations of text complexity. Here are my three biggest fears and potential ways for teachers to respond.

**Concern:** Teachers will be browbeaten to give students texts which have been identified by third parties to be complex, but which students either can't read facily or can't understand. An example of inappropriateness is children in the middle of second grade reading *Sarah: Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1987). Yes, they may be able to pronounce the words, but the ideas of this book were aimed at older children. After all, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* won the *Newbery* award for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children,



not the Caldecott for the most distinguished picture book for children.

**Solution:** Teachers in districts and schools need to identify texts that illustrate the progression and exemplify the growth that is expected of students at particular grade levels.

**Freddy's Writings:** In "Readability and the Common Core Staircase of Text Complexity" (2012d), Hiebert notes that one of the common explanations of this kind of discrepancy is that "the short sentences and high-frequency vocabulary used in the dialogue of narratives can artificially skew the readability formula downward" (p. 4). She illustrates with *Roll of Thunder* (Taylor, 1976), a book with significant themes and characterization, involving racial intolerance and abuse, effective for Grades 6-8, which has a lower text difficulty rating than *Bat Loves the Night* (Davies 2004), a simple, direct informational book intended for Grades 2-3. Hiebert explains, "To increase students' capacity with complex text, teachers want as much information as they can get to understand the features of texts that might 'grow' their students reading *and thinking*" (2012d, p.5, emphasis added).

**Concern:** Teachers will think that they don't have the expertise to identify which texts are appropriately complex to grow the capacity of their students. They will look for third parties to tell them which books are complex and which aren't.

**Solution:** Knowing that a text has a guided reading level N or J, a Lexile of 725 or 810, or a classification as "complex" for grades 4-5 does not provide teachers with information on the features of a text that might serve as obstacles for students' comprehension or the features that might increase students' capacity with text. Teachers need to learn to examine texts themselves, attending to features such as prior knowledge, text structure, vocabulary, and purpose *in relation to their own students*. Publishers can give useful guidelines that draw teachers' attention to critical features (e.g., the number of words that are challenging, the demands of prior knowledge), but teachers need to develop skills at identifying the features that require attention.

**Freddy's Writings:** In "Readability and the Common Core Staircase of Text Complexity" (2012d), Freddy makes an important point with a striking analogy: "A doctor wouldn't depend on temperature alone to diagnose an illness, . . .

and a reading teacher should not depend on a readability score alone to measure text complexity. But like temperature readings, Lexile scores [a blend of vocabulary and sentence length] are a good first source of information" (p. 3). To these "quantitative" measures of complexity, she recommends "qualitative" measures: "content and its connection to readers" (p. 5), including "levels of meaning, knowledge demands, and structure" (p. 6). She refers to such issues as requiring "human evaluation." She mentions the need to "determine what it is that readers need to know to be successful with a text or . . . the opportunities that a text provides for guidance" (2012d, p. 6).

**Concern:** In scrambling to give students complex texts, teachers will forget that proficiency at any complex task comes over time—with involvement and experience in the task.

**Solution:** Teachers need to attend to the amount that their students are reading across a school day. Many American students simply aren't reading enough across a school day to achieve the foundation needed to grapple with complex text. Part of "time spent reading" inventories need to address the amount that students are reading at any one stretch. Stamina—the ability of students to sustain their attention to a text over an extended period of time—appears to be an obstacle for many students, particularly when faced with the "new generation of assessments" (i.e., not short paragraphs with multiple-choice questions).

**Freddy's Writings:** In "The Text Complexity Multi-Index" (2012e) Hiebert reminds teachers that "their expertise also matters." She explains that "they are the ones who know their students . . . The ultimate goal is the matching of students to texts" (p. 3).

**Freddy's Further Reading Suggestion:** To learn more about my cautions related to text complexity and an alternative that I've proposed—the Text Complexity Multi-Index—see Hiebert, E.H., "Readability and the Common Core's Staircase of Text Complexity" (2012d)

and “The Text Complexity Multi-Index” (2012e). These can be retrieved from <http://textproject.org/professional-development/text-matters/> [We took her advice. Both of these are quoted above.]



**Journal:** In your presentation at the UCIRA Conference, you spoke about the differences in vocabulary found in narrative and informational text. You described new vocabulary in stories as typically being synonyms of words the students already know. You also explained that new words in informational texts often represent new concepts that students do not know but need to know to understand the texts. What suggestions do you have for teaching these words and related concepts so students understand and are able to use them?

**Freddy:** Narrative and informational texts share a *core* vocabulary (about 90% of the total words), while the remaining 10% (*extended* vocabulary) typically are unique in narrative and informational texts. I call this vocabulary *extended* because it is huge (as much as 300,000 unique words), whereas the *core* vocabulary consists of 4,000 simple word families.

The extended vocabulary of informational texts consists of conceptually related words such as *magnetic field*, *pole*, *attract*, and *repel* in a primary-level unit on magnetism. These concepts are complex and interconnected and are developed through extended activities (e.g., inquiry, discussions, writing, reading). Content-area specialists have identified the critical concepts, and teachers aren't left guessing about what they should be teaching.

The extended vocabulary of narrative texts, on the other hand, is much less well defined, and it is also more likely to vary from text to text. Authors of narratives draw liberally from the 300,000 words. If a character is shaking with fear, an author of a narrative might use *quiver*, *tremble*, or *shudder*. Students are likely to have the concept of *shaking*, but they may not have encountered *shudder* previously. Just teaching a single word such as *shudder* is insufficient: Teachers also need to guide students in recognizing other members of the semantic cluster of which the target word is a member. Instruction includes studying groups of words for their nuanced meanings. Instruction on making nuanced choices also extends to students' own writing.

**Freddy's Writing:** The relationship of *core* and *extended* vocabulary is developed further in Hiebert's "Core Vocabulary: The Foundation for Successful Reading of Complex Text" (2012a). She explains, "In complex texts, the extended vocabulary typically accounts for 7-10% of the words. These words give texts precision and specificity but they are infrequent" (p. 2). Because of this proportion, she advises, "A big step in becoming a reader is to become proficient with the core vocabulary. High percentages of rare words from the extended vocabulary can divert developing reader's attention away from the core vocabulary" (p. 2). Acquiring core vocabulary is not easy. Hiebert specifies, "To recognize these words depends on foundational skills in generalizing letter-sound knowledge and knowledge of morphemes (i.e., affixes, inflected endings, and roots in compound words) and recognizing the multiple meanings of the core vocabulary. Developing this foundation is the task of the primary grades"

(p. 3). “Unless students have scaled the core vocabulary staircase, they are likely to fall into the ‘fourth-grade slump’ and do poorly with complex texts” (p. 4).

“Unique Words Require Unique Instruction” (Hiebert, 2012f) is concerned with the differences in the *unique words* of narrative and informational texts. “In narrative texts, these low-frequency words typically represent new ways of representing a known concept.” This is because “Narratives, even fantasy-based, are rooted in familiar concepts . . . [and] have recognizable personality traits.” Thus new words “provide specificity and texture to a world that is based on the known world” (pp. 3-4). She contrasts purpose and thus vocabulary in informational texts: “The purpose of informational texts is to introduce new essential concepts to students’ understanding of the world. The new concepts are carried by unique technical vocabulary. . . . They are singular terms that encapsulate specific concepts.”

**Freddy’s Further Reading Suggestion:** A resource at TextProject.org which can be especially helpful is “Exceptional Expressions for Everyday Events” (Hiebert 2012b)—lessons on 32 semantic clusters, one for each week of a school year.

**Journal:** Finally, the CCSS do not directly address students’ reading engagement. Given the new focus required by these standards, what suggestions do you have for teachers in planning instruction and creating conditions to help their students develop a love for reading?

**Freddy:** Attention to engagement is absolutely essential if the goals of the Common Core are to be achieved.

At its core, the goal of the Common Core is to ensure that graduates of American high schools are equipped to participate fully in the communities of the digital-global age. The commodity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is knowledge. Those with knowledge (and ways of gaining knowledge) have opportunities; those without are limited in their prospects.

Yet if one adjective were to be used to describe the perspective of American high school students toward school learning experiences, it would be *disengaged*. A recent Gallup Poll reported that 4/10 of high school students described themselves as engaged in school, in contrast to 8/10 at elementary school and 6/10 in middle school (Busteed, 2013).

There is the possibility that misinterpretations and over-extensions of the standards could lead to even greater dis-engagement on the part of American students. And levels of engagement are already low. If the challenge is always so great that they’re failing, they will not be engaged. Don’t be browbeaten into giving your students texts that they absolutely can’t read. At the same time, don’t give them dumbed-down text (e.g., most decodable texts—especially for middle graders and higher).

**Solutions:** Ensure that there are accessible texts and that students are becoming better readers from these texts. What I mean by increasing capacity is that the texts of instruction need to have features that develop new skills, strategies, and understandings. For example, for second-graders *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995) is a genre that can challenge background knowledge. Unlike most tales and fables young children are given, this text is a trickster tale. Even the second graders who can easily recognize most of the vocabulary in this text can benefit from discussion about how this kind of tale differs from a fable (e.g., *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, Aesop) or a parable (e.g., *The Treasure*, Shulevitz, 1978).

Give students opportunities to develop areas of expertise with text: Engaged reading depends on knowing the power of print. Until students have seen what they can learn from texts, they won’t be engaged readers. Developing areas of expertise does not mean simply letting students loose to pick any topic. To initiate students into research, they might be given choices in selecting from dimensions of a shared classroom theme. For example, in a unit on medieval life, choices might include construction of castles, modes of travel, and training for knighthood, as well as aspects children might personally relate

to such as games and festivals, fashion, and typical diets.

**Freddy's Presentation:** We could not find an article on engagement, but a few relevant comments were included in a presentation from a webinar, "Growing Students' Capacity with Complex Texts: Information, Exposure, Engagement" (2012c). In this presentation Freddie concludes, "Student engagement is influenced by the diets of school tasks. A steady diet of certain tasks leads to disengagement; a steady diet of other tasks fosters engagement." "Even small changes in school tasks," she notes, "can support engagement" (slide 32). She recommends that homework can include reading "topic-related magazine articles and/or popular literature." For a unit on Greek mythology she mentions the series *Percy Jackson & Olympians* by Rick Riordan (2005-2010) or graphic myths and legends on Olympians by George O'Connor (slide 34). For more moderate changes, she includes constructing a castle of leggos for a medieval unit and growing a garden or raising a classroom pet for science reading (Slide 35). She closes the presentation with this warning: "Ultimately the degree to which students are engaged with reading will influence their involvement in reading."

**Freddy closed her conversation with us with a request for input from *Utah Journal of Literacy* readers:**

I'm eager to hear from Utah teachers as to ways in which they support students in the pursuit of knowledge (email me suggestions at info@textproject.org).

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# Children's Literature Awards: Why They Matter in an Era of Common Core State Standards

**Lauren Aimonette Liang**

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At 8:00 a.m. on Monday, January 28, many school librarians across the country hovered near the computers in their media centers. English and language arts teachers glanced at their Twitter feeds during passing periods, and reading specialists checked Facebook quickly on their phones while moving to the next classroom. Small groups of children eagerly awaited the meeting of their “Mock Newbery” book clubs after school. What was all the excitement? It was the Oscars of the children’s literature field: the American Library Association’s announcement of its 2013 Youth Media Awards. While the awards were closely followed, as evidenced by the number of logins and comments on the ALA webcast, some teachers wonder if the relevance of the awards to education is waning. In an era of Common Core State Standards, do children’s literature awards still matter?

Much of this concern arises from one of the more common “misconceptions” (Short, 2013) surrounding the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts. Appendix B of the CCSS offers a grade-leveled list of text exemplars, including stories, poems, and

informational texts. The CCSS document explains its purpose:

[These texts] primarily serve to exemplify the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade band to engage with. Additionally, they are suggestive of the breadth of texts that students should encounter in the text types required by the Standards. The choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list. (CCSSO, 2010, p. 2)

Yet almost as soon as the CCSS appeared, publishers across the country began selling “CCSS exemplar text sets,” “CCSS leveled libraries,” etc. A simple internet search pulls up several that are readily available for purchase. On initial reading of the CCSS document, some school districts even began mandating that the texts found on the exemplar lists be taught in the prescribed grade levels. Thus a quick backlash started in many education circles as teachers

became concerned over the trend to adopt the lists as required reading. As they examined the exemplar lists more closely, many criticized their seeming reliance on older books (many out of print) and the lack of culturally diverse texts. Was this a nod to the “canon”? Would administrators who did not adopt the lists outright believe the only books read in school should reflect the dated content of these exemplars?

None of this appears to have been the intent of the writers of the CCSS document, and they have tried to relay that message during the last several months. In newspaper articles, statements, and seminars they have reacted to these concerns. The most direct response has been to explain the text exemplars as simply examples to demonstrate text complexity levels rather than a specific reading list; the CCSS has emphasized the language used in the appendices of the standards. The CCSS has relied on this response in addressing concerns about the lack of newer and more diverse texts on the list rather than explain a more pragmatic issue: Many of the newer and more diverse exemplar texts originally chosen had to be eliminated due to the high cost of getting permissions to publish excerpts, generally not a problem with many older books (Short, 2013).

With these misconceptions related to the text exemplars as mandated reading put to rest, it becomes evident that in this era of Common Core State Standards, children’s literature awards may actually be even more important to educators now than they have been in the past. CCSS asks teachers to help students closely read and deeply understand increasingly complex texts. But they do not suggest rich texts with which to do this. In search of excellent quality texts worthy of the sort of time this task demands, what better place to turn than the winners and honored books of children’s literature awards? Books winning these awards are deemed as the highest examples of literary excellence for children. They serve as models of writers’ craft, they deal with complex issues and ideas, and many represent diverse perspectives and cultures—all goals in the selection of reading materials under the CCSS for English

Language Arts.

Most educators are familiar with the Newbery and Caldecott Medals, but recognition of additional awards is fairly uncommon. Three of the leading United States reading professionals’ organizations—the American Library Association, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English—grant several children’s literature awards, as do a few other important literary organizations. Individuals serving on these children’s literature award committees are either elected to their post or named to it by the president and executive board of the sponsoring organization. Service on the committees is considered an honor, a time-consuming one as each book eligible for the award must be carefully considered for literary and artistic merit within the guidelines of the award. Teachers can have faith that books winning these prestigious awards are outstanding examples of the best books of the year, thus worthy of consideration for their classroom use.

Being aware of the awards and their annual winners can be a time saving trick to finding complex and engaging texts that work well under the CCSS recommendations. Especially worth consideration are those books that win multiple honors and awards, something that happens with perhaps surprising frequency given the hundreds of children’s and young adults’ books published each year. As award committees work independently and in secrecy, having two or more groups select the same book to honor is a strong encouragement to check out that title. (Steve Sheinkin’s *Bomb*, for example, picked up a Newbery Honor, the Robert Siebert Award, and the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction this January.) Books winning awards, especially multiple awards, are also more quickly published in paperback editions and more readily available at bookstores and libraries.

Below are listed several of the major national children’s book awards which make yearly selections that are particularly useful for educators. Each award listed includes a brief educator-relevant description based on and when

indicated quoted from the granting organization's description (see listed websites) and a link to the award webpage. More details about the awards' processes and past winners as well as descriptions are found on these websites.

I encourage teachers to consider reviewing the winners each summer to determine possible texts for the following year's classroom use. Thus the awards are arranged in chronological "school year" order according to each award's typical date for announcing its winners.

### **National Book Award: November**

***National Book Award for Young People's Literature:*** Originally chosen by a jury panel of writers selected by the National Book Foundation, this award is undergoing a significant change in 2013. The award committee will begin to include literary critics, librarians, and booksellers starting with the next award. This is one of the few awards for children's literature that include a significant direct monetary prize for both the winning and honored authors. Most years middle and high school level books tend to be chosen.  
<http://www.nationalbook.org/index.html>

### **ALA Awards: January**

***John Newbery Medal.*** As the oldest children's literature award in the United States, the Newbery is given to the "most distinguished contribution to literature for children." In recent years there has been a tendency to select books with a readership of upper elementary students.  
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberymedal>

***Randolph Caldecott Medal.*** This award is given to the "most distinguished picture book for children." Traditionally it has been considered an award for young children's fictional picture books; however, picture biographies and illustrated nonfiction/fiction genre blends regularly appear on this list.  
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottmedal>

***Coretta Scott King Awards.*** The Coretta Scott

King Awards are given annually to African-American authors and illustrators who have accurately represented "the African American experience" in outstanding works for children and young adults. Awards are presented in memory of the lives and achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King. They frequently include nonfiction books in both author and illustrator categories.  
<http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/node/24>

***Pura Belpré Award.*** A "narrative award" and an "illustration award," as well as honors, are given each year to recognize Latino/Latina writers and illustrators whose work "portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature."  
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>

***Robert F. Sibert Award.*** The Robert F. Sibert award and honors are given for outstanding informational books written and illustrated "to present, organize and interpret verifiable, factual material for children." Sibert winners include books covering a range of topics; most have readability levels tending towards late elementary and early middle school.  
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/sibertmedal>

***YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction.*** This award is only in its third year. It is given for "the best nonfiction book published for young adults (ages 12-18)." Reading levels and anticipated reader maturity vary.  
<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/nonfiction-award>

***Michael L. Printz Award.*** The Printz award honors the book the group considers "the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit." Winners and honors have been generally aimed at an audience with ages 13-18. This is still a relatively new award, but it is quickly gaining popularity.  
<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz>

***Theodore Seuss Geisel Award.*** As evident in its title, the award recognizes "the author and illustrator of the most distinguished American book for beginning readers." Author/illustrator

Mo Willems has won several awards and honors in this category.

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/geiselaward>

**Schneider Family Book Award.** The Schneider Family Book Award recognizes an author or an illustrator whose book “embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for children and adolescents.” It is actually a set of awards with three categories: young children’s book, middle school book, and teen book.

<http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/schneider-family-book-award>

**Children’s Notable Books List.** This is one of the most useful award lists for educators. The Notable List is a compilation of fiction, information, poetry and picture books for children; it chooses books that are deemed the “best of the best” for that year. The list automatically includes the winners of the major ALA awards, but often includes those books that were talked about throughout the year but did not ultimately win one of the major ALA awards or honors. It offers an effective way to find those outstanding books that missed the big awards. The list is divided into “younger readers” (preschool to Grade 2), “middle readers” (Grades 3-5), “older readers” (Grades 6-8), and “books for all ages.”

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists>

### **National Council of Teachers of English Awards: January**

**Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction.** This award, dedicated to “promoting and recognizing excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children,” is given to the author of an outstanding nonfiction book; as many as five honor books are also named. The Orbis Pictus committee examines and considers the “accuracy, organization, design and style” of each eligible book as well as its usefulness in the K-8 classroom.

<http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbis/pictus>

### **United States Board of Books for Young People Awards: February**

**USBBY Outstanding International Books:** The USBBY Outstanding International Books list includes the “most outstanding book[s] published or distributed in the United States that originated or [were] first published in a country other than the US.” Typically divided by grade levels (Grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12), this list offers an excellent way to introduce students to outstanding easily available international children’s and young adults’ literature.

[http://www.usbby.org/list\\_oibl.html](http://www.usbby.org/list_oibl.html)

### **National Council of Teachers of English Awards: April**

**Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts:** The Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts list is a selection of 30 books of K-8 fiction or nonfiction or poetry that “deal explicitly with language,” “demonstrate uniqueness in the use of language or style,” and “invite child response or participation,” as well as being of high and enduring literary quality. The list is particularly useful for language arts and reading teachers.

<http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org/notes.html>

### **International Reading Association Awards: April**

**IRA Book Awards:** These awards are given to authors new to the field of children’s and young adults’ literature “who shows unusual promise.” Nonfiction as well as fiction books are considered for awards and honors in categories for the primary and intermediate grades and for young adult literature.

[http://www.reading.org/resources/AwardsandGrants/childrens\\_ira.aspx](http://www.reading.org/resources/AwardsandGrants/childrens_ira.aspx)

**Notable Books for a Global Society:** This annual list of texts includes 25 K-12 books that “represent a pluralistic view of world society” through the genres of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. The committee emphasizes authenticity and accuracy in their selections, as well as thought-provoking content that invites reflection, critical analysis and response.

<http://clrsig.org/nbgs.php>

### **Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards: June**

***Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards:*** Awards and up to two honors are given in three categories for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards: fiction, poetry, nonfiction and picture book. Because these awards run on a June 1- May 31 cycle, rather than the more typically used January 1- December 31 cycle, the BGHB awards often predict early potential winners of the ALA awards or reflect the strength of past ALA award winners.

<http://archive.hbook.com/bg hb/default.asp>

### **IRA Teachers' Choices Awards: September/October**

***IRA Teachers' Choices Awards:*** This unique award uses regional teams of librarians, teachers, and reading specialists from across the U.S. to pick their 30 favorite books of the year for 5-15-year-old students. The emphasis is on books that children and young teens “might not discover or fully appreciate without the help of a teacher, librarian, parent, or other adult,” which will be enjoyed and “can be used across the curriculum.” The use of large numbers of reviewers to select winners for this award list makes it slightly different from the other awards noted in this article, but the unique premise of the list is very applicable and useful for teachers.

<http://www.reading.org/resources/booklists/teacherschoices.aspx>

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# Working with What Works: Effective Reading Interventions for Adolescents

**Janice A. Dole, Naomi M. Watkins, Kerry A. Herman**

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Dr. Rudd has recently approached her English teachers, Martha, Jeff and Melissa, about literacy in their middle school. Dr. Rudd has been reading about the crisis in adolescent literacy and realizes that the school needs to add an intervention class for students who struggle with reading. Although the school has a special education teacher, currently there is no infrastructure set up in the building to help struggling readers who are not special education students. So Dr. Rudd and her English teachers decide to set up a class to assist the many struggling readers and writers who fall through the cracks.

Dr. Rudd feels that a strong literacy intervention must be in place as the foundation for the class. Martha, Jeff and Melissa agree, but where do they find such an intervention? All publishers claim that their materials are “research-based.” All publishers claim their materials work.

Up until a few years ago, there was no place to find the most effective literacy interventions for adolescents. Recently this has changed. In 2002 the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)

was set up by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>). The purpose of the website is “to be a central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education” (U. S. Department of Education, 2013a, para. 2). The site has a special section on Adolescent Literacy that consists of reports, practice guides, and other publications based on rigorous external evaluations of the current research.

Recently the WWC completed the evaluation of 14 literacy interventions for adolescents according to the strength of the research base supporting them, resulting in intervention reports on all 14. (These reports are available at <http://www.ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Topic.aspx?sid=8>). The WWC defines *intervention reports* as “a summary of findings of the highest quality research on a given program, practice or policy in education. The WWC searches for all research studies on an intervention, reviews each against evidence standards, and summarizes the findings of those that meet standards” (WWC, 2013b, glossary).

The WWC defines *research studies* as reports of a specific intervention on a specific sample of students, schools, or districts, along with a set of outcomes showing the results of that intervention. Studies must show that a specific intervention, such as a commercial supplementary reading program, actually *causes* literacy achievement to improve. In these studies participants are most often randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. These studies are considered the “gold standard,” and they meet the WWC’s strongest standard of evidence. Descriptions of qualitative research, such as an analysis of student samples of written work or a description of a particular instructional approach, are not included in these intervention reports. The research must show that an intervention is the *cause* of improvement in reading achievement.

The website reported that no studies meeting the WWC standards for evidence of effectiveness were found for two of the 14 interventions for struggling adolescent readers. Studies evaluating another three of the programs found mixed results or no discernable evidence for effectiveness. But there were seven programs for which the WWC found “evidence of positive or potentially positive effects.”

On its website the WWC reports only research results for the interventions. It does not report any rationale, description, characteristics, or cost of the interventions. So based on the WWC website, one knows nothing about the programs; one knows only about their effectiveness.

We report information here on program rationale and descriptions, characteristics, and approximate cost of the seven interventions for adolescents for which the WWC has found the best evidence of effectiveness. WWC defined *interventions* as “programs (such as whole school reform), products (such as a textbook or curriculum), practices (such as mixed-age grouping), or policies (such as class size reduction)” (U. S. Department of Education, 2013, Frequently Asked Questions, para. 1). Interventions are presented in alphabetical order to avoid implying that one program or practice is

better than another. We also include a table summarizing each intervention. We hope this article assists administrators, literacy coaches, and teachers at the middle and secondary levels in making critical decisions about which programs, practices, and materials to use to assist teachers as they work to improve the literacy skills of their struggling adolescent readers.

## **Fast ForWord®**

### ***Program Description***

A computer-based reading program, *Fast ForWord®* is designed to strengthen “memory, attention, processing rate, and sequencing” (Scientific Learning Product, 2013, para. 4), including reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and memory. The program, intended for struggling students, includes both a *Language and Literacy* series and a *Reading* series, with the capability of adapting the difficulty of the content based on students’ individual responses, thus ensuring that material and tasks are appropriately challenging. The *Language and Literacy* series focuses on improving the listening accuracy, phonological awareness, and knowledge of language structures of students who are two or more years below grade level. Exercises aim to increase the speed at which students can recognize changes in sounds and can identify and distinguish phonemes and syllables. The *Reading* series focuses on increasing processing efficiency and building reading skills. Exercises focus on developing skills in constructing and organizing fiction and nonfiction, teaching comprehension strategies, and building accuracy and fluency in spelling, decoding, and phonemic analysis (Scientific Learning Product, 2013, Support Existing Curriculum, para. 2). Both series include age-appropriate exercises, characters, and artwork.

Students may spend from 30-100 minutes a day, five days a week, for 4-16 weeks working through the program at their own pace, listening on head phones at a computer. Research examined by the WWC showed that this computer-based program produced favorable results in fluency and comprehension for

adolescents (U. S. Department of Education, 2007).

### **Implementation & Cost**

Scientific Learning, Inc. provides on-site consulting, web-based training, and professional development to schools and districts. The program also provides progress monitoring of individual students and groups of students. A single license for *Fast ForWord for Language* is \$900. A discount for multiple licenses is available. However, a single license for *Fast ForWord for Reading* is \$500 with no multiple discount option (U. S. Department of Education, 2007, Cost, para. 1). More information can be found at <http://www.scilearn.com/products>.

### **Project CRISS®**

#### **Program Description**

“Helping teachers teach and students learn” is the motto for the professional development program for teachers known as *CRISS®* (**C**reating **I**ndependence through **S**tudent-owned **S**trategies) (Project CRISS, 2010). Designed for implementation in Grades 3-12, *CRISS®* is based on research findings from the areas of cognitive and social learning, as well as from brain research. Foundational concepts and beliefs central to *Project CRISS®* include (1) the importance of metacognition and the role that it plays in student learning, (2) the recognition of the student as being highly active and not passive during the reading process, and (3) the significance of prior knowledge in text comprehension (U. S. Department of Education, 2010a). Students are taught a variety of comprehension strategies, such as questioning and summarizing, through the processes of teacher modeling and guided practice. The ultimate goals are two-fold: (1) students’ independent and strategic application of strategies to enhance comprehension and (2) students’ understanding and self-awareness of their own learning process.

Essentially the project advocates a change in overall teaching style, rather than a change in curriculum, as a means to improve reading, writing, and overall student learning. Therefore, *CRISS®* can be integrated into the existing

curriculum, including content areas such as science and social studies, thus eliminating the need to purchase additional student materials. Positive effects have been shown for *Project CRISS®* for comprehension (U. S. Department of Education, 2010a).

### **Implementation and Cost**

Two levels of professional development are available for those interested in the implementation of *Project CRISS®*. The cost for Level 1, which includes 12-24 hours of training and prepares teachers to implement the principles and strategies of *CRISS®* into their own classrooms, ranges from \$50-\$200 per participant. Level 2, which includes 28 hours of professional development and prepares experienced *CRISS®* teachers to become certified trainers, costs \$250-\$700 per participant (U. S. Department of Education, 2010a). Additional information can be found at [www.projectcriss.com](http://www.projectcriss.com).

### **READ 180**

#### **Program Description**

*READ 180* is a comprehensive intensive reading intervention program designed to increase the abilities of struggling readers in elementary through high school. Instruction is aimed at improving students’ decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as writing. The cornerstone of the *READ 180* program is implementation of a daily 90-minute instructional block based on an instructional model comprised of four segments. The block begins with a 20-minute whole-group teacher-directed lesson, followed by three 20-minute small-group rotations: one is teacher led, a second is technology based, and the third includes modeled and independent reading. Each block ends with a 10-minute whole-group discussion.

Through the use of teacher-directed instruction, interactive instructional software, and independent reading, teachers are able to meet the individual needs of their students. Student progress reports, based on the results of built-in assessments, are generated through the *READ 180* software component, thus allowing

teachers to continuously adjust instruction based on student performance. Positive effects have been found for *READ 180* in comprehension as well as general literacy achievement (U. S. Department of Education, 2009a).

### ***Implementation and Cost***

Scholastic will meet with school district representatives to develop a professional development plan tailored for the district needs. The cost of *READ 180* depends on the level of implementation. For current pricing information, please contact Scholastic at <http://read180.scholastic.com/>

## **Reading Apprenticeship®**

### ***Program Description***

*Reading Apprenticeship*®, an instructional approach used in content-area middle and high school classrooms, focuses on developing students' skills and knowledge to improve their engagement, fluency, and comprehension with content-area texts and materials. This approach emphasizes teachers as being expert discipline-based readers, placing them in the role of both model and guide for students. It aims to make reading processes and knowledge visible for students and teachers by involving both in "metacognitive conversations—conversations about the thinking processes students and teachers engage in as they read" (WestEd, Reading Apprenticeship Framework, para. 4).

The *Reading Apprenticeship*® framework also incorporates four interacting dimensions of the classroom that support reading: social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge building. These dimensions are woven throughout the conversations and extensive reading included in the approach. The approach also encourages teachers to develop classroom routines for building students' literacy skills in the content areas. Research examined by WWC showed that this instructional approach produced favorable results in comprehension for adolescents (U. S. Department of Education, 2010b).

### ***Implementation & Cost***

Due to the nature of this instructional approach, WestEd offers extensive and intensive

professional development to districts and schools. *The Leadership Institute in Reading Apprenticeship*® is a two-part, eight-day training workshop. The cost of *Reading Apprenticeship*® depends on the length of the training, but ranges from \$15,000 for two days of training for up to 40 people to \$50,000 for seven days of training. Additional information can be found at <http://www.wested.org/sli>.

## **Reading Mastery**

### ***Program Description***

Published by SRA/McGraw-Hill, *Reading Mastery* is a direct instruction reading program designed to meet the needs of students up through Grade 6. Originally published under the name DISTAR (Direct Instruction System for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading), the *Reading Mastery* program can be used in several instructional capacities. Based on the results of program assessments, students are grouped by reading level. Lessons are scripted and designed to be fast paced and interactive, with the duration of a typical lesson being between 30 and 45 minutes. Instruction is delivered in a systematic and explicit fashion, incorporating the use of teacher modeling and guided practice followed by individual practice. Early lessons focus on letter recognition and letter-sound correspondence and then progress to word reading, including lessons for blending and segmenting. Later lessons focus on the development of fluency and vocabulary, as well as comprehension.

Also included in the *Reading Mastery* program is a continuous monitoring component. Potentially positive effects were found for *Reading Mastery* in the area of fluency (U. S. Department of Education, 2006).

### ***Implementation and Cost***

SRA/McGraw-Hill offers a variety of consultant-led professional development opportunities. In addition, supplemental training materials such as CDs and videos are available. The cost of student materials associated with the implementation of *Reading Mastery* ranges from \$200-\$300 per student and includes textbooks, workbooks, and test books. At the onset of

implementation a one-time purchase for a full set of teaching materials is required. The cost range for these materials is \$650-\$1,000 per grade level. Additional costs related to professional development may be incurred. Prices regarding additional costs may be found at the company's website: [www.mheonline.com](http://www.mheonline.com).

## **Reading Plus®**

### ***Program Description***

The goal of *Reading Plus*® is to provide individualized silent reading practice to students from third grade through college. This computer-based program is designed to improve students' silent reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Students take two assessments prior to beginning their individualized program. Once they are assessed, each 45-minute session includes a warm-up, silent reading, and activities that focus on visual and perceptive skill building, vocabulary and contextual analysis, and comprehension skill building through explicit instruction. The silent reading portion of the lesson is structured to provide students with modeling and guidance. The program adjusts the level of difficulty based on students' needs and tracks 25 comprehension strategies. Research examined by the WWC showed that this computer-based program produced favorable results in comprehension for adolescents (U. S. Department of Education, 2010c).

### ***Implementation & Cost***

Taylor Associates provides implementation support, differentiated activities, assessments, progress-monitoring tools, and supplemental offline activities that can be used in the classroom. Teachers are also provided with guidelines for small and whole group instruction based on students' progress with the program. The price of the program is based on the number of participating students, ranging from \$15-30 a student. Additional information can be found at <http://www.readingplus.com/>.

## **SuccessMaker®**

### ***Program Description***

This computer-based supplemental reading instruction program for students in K-8 provides

tailored instruction at students' various levels in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and print concepts. Pearson Education provides two programs of courses: (1) *Foundations*, which seeks to help students develop and maintain reading skills, and (2) *ExploreWare*, which provides open-ended instruction and develops analytical skills. Students begin with an initial placement assessment, which identifies their starting point in the program; then they work at their own pace. The program addresses multiple learning modalities and thus uses many game-like formats to engage students. Additionally, the program utilizes middle-school-aged "hosts" to provide short instructional segments and has students select an avatar to act as a peer-coach.

The program analyzes students' skill development and assigns them specifics of the program based on their individual needs, periodically checking students' mastery of previously taught material. Research examined by the WWC showed that this computer-based program produced favorable results in comprehension and general literacy for adolescents (U. S. Department of Education, 2009b).

### ***Implementation & Cost***

Pearson Education provides multiple professional development options to help teachers implement *SuccessMaker*® in the classroom, including on-site, on-demand, and virtual instruction. Progress monitoring is also included in the program. The price of the program varies depending on the level of implementation. More information can be found at [www.pearsonschool.com](http://www.pearsonschool.com).

## **Conclusion**

A successful literacy intervention program begins and ends with excellent teachers and high quality literacy instruction. No program or professional development approach can take the place of high quality literacy teachers. However, excellent literacy teachers need support and assistance planning, implementing, and evaluating their intervention. We hope that this article can help adolescent literacy teachers select and use the most effective programs on

the market. To do otherwise is to do a disservice to teachers as well as students.

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# The Innovative World of Young Adult Literature

**Rachel L. Wadham**

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We could begin a discussion of the current innovations of young adult literature ruminating on where the genre started and on the twists and turns it has taken in its 50-year history, but that topic has already been fully covered by others (Bucher & Hinton-Johnson, 2009; Cart, 2010; Cole, 2008; Donelson & Nielsen, 2004). For this article it is sufficient to say that what young adult literature is today is very different from what it was half a century ago. Today young adult literature is a vibrant and innovative genre that has wide applicability for pleasure reading, but also for in-depth and exciting classroom experiences.

## **A Vision of Young Adult Literature Today**

It seems that in this regard young adult literature has always been on the cutting edge, which is really no surprise if you consider its target audience. Adolescents tend to be free thinking and innovative, and if you look at movements towards change, historically it has been the upcoming generation that really influences lasting transformation in the world. Consider Claudette Colvin, who at age 15 refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus (Hoose, 2009). Or look back further to Joan of Arc, who at age 17 led an army to victory (Demi, 2011). With the generations of young adults and their individualistic ideas influencing

the world around them, it seems to be no great surprise that the literature that attracts them is

also impacting the world of literature in unconventional ways.

The authors of young adult literature who are writing today are not only expanding the specific genre of young adult literature, but enlarging our fundamental idea of what literature is. Young adult literature today embraces a vision that is changing the way we look at story and the way both fictional and true narrative explain the world around us. The scope of these innovations is quite broad, and their many twists and turns cannot be covered fully, so this article will look at only three: innovations with illustrations, innovations for classic stories, and innovations in creativity, as authors create unique titles for reader enlightenment.

## **Innovations with Illustrations**

Narrative has long been a textual medium. Whether spoken or written down, narrative has the purpose of evoking images and pictures with words alone. This does not mean that illustration has not been a strong component of storytelling; one has only to look at the Lascaux Caves in southwestern France to know that pictures and stories do go together. In modern times we also see exciting ways textual narrative and visual images combine to convey wonderful stories. Looking at the thousands of excellent picture

books published each year, for example, shows us how an effective balance of text and images results in powerful storytelling.

But despite these strong connections, we seem to come to a certain time of life when we appear to divorce ourselves from the connections between words and pictures. Those who see teenagers looking at an illustrated novel, for example, and feel disdain for reading a “baby” book at that age are among those who see true literature as text only. This disdain is not justified, however, as authors of young adult literature are redefining how we approach text and illustrations in a novel. In one of the most interesting innovations in young adult literature today, we no longer see the inclusion of illustrations as indicating that the novel is of lesser complexity or quality; instead it embraces the full range of storytelling possibilities to generate narratives that are richer because of the inclusion of illustrations.

For example, young adult author Scott Westerfeld acknowledges the power of illustrations in his trilogy *Leviathan* (<http://scottwesterfeld.com/books/leviathan/>). Working with illustrator Keith Thompson, Westerfeld was adamant that the series be published as a set of illustrated novels so they would look as if they had been published in 1914, a time when illustrations were the norm for all novels for both young and older audiences. The illustrations not only give these books historical context, but through their intense details they bring the story to life with a power that can be accomplished only by words and images together.

Westerfeld’s use of illustrations may reach back to a previous age, but today’s authors have found additional ways of expanding their use. Novels like *Countdown* by Deborah Wiles (2010) and *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs (2011) show just how innovative illustrations can be. Set in 1962, *Countdown* takes the integration of text and pictures to a whole new level by using primary source documents to provide context to the fictional story. During the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, 12-year-old Franny sees tensions

not only in the world around her but in her own home. Using photographs, newspaper clippings, and other documents, Wiles shows the reader the historical context in which Franny faces her fears. This book provides an innovative look at a historical period that goes well beyond the facts a textbook might give and beyond the fictional context a work of historical fiction might offer by combining the real and the imagined into a complete whole. In addition to a gripping story, this novel provides a strong model of how historical fact could be combined with historical fiction in a classroom setting to make the study of both much richer.

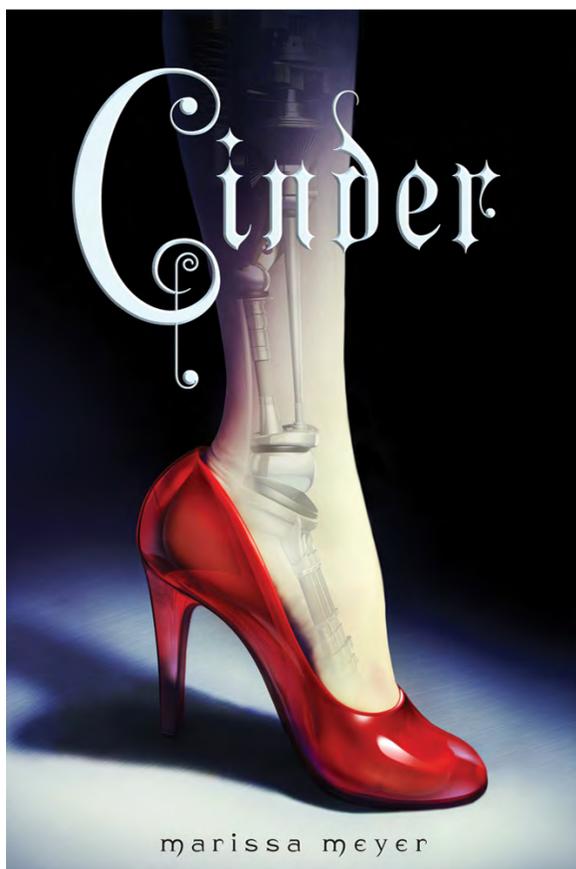
*Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* takes a completely different approach by using historical photographs to create a completely fictional story. Using vintage photographs collected at swap meets and flea markets, Riggs weaves a tale of how these photographs might have become a collection. Riggs’ use of real life to inspire art not only creates an innovative novel, but also provides an interesting opening for teachers of writing to show how their own students can use the world around them for inspiration.

The worlds of text and illustration are certainly colliding in new and interesting ways in young adult literature. If we expand our consideration into the world of graphic novels, which have more illustrations than text, by looking at novels such as Chris Wooding and Cassandra Diaz’s *Pandemonium* (2012) or Matt Phelan’s *Around the World* (2011), then the scope of these innovations becomes broader and more intricate. In our increasingly visual world, the innovations with illustrations we see in young adult literature are bound to continue.

### **Innovations for Classic Stories**

In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien (1965) expounded his idea of “the cauldron of story.” His contention is that bits and pieces of story, myth, and legend have been bubbling around in a great pot for centuries. For their writing, authors dip into this pot and pull out ideas to recombine and reinvent into something entirely new. While Tolkien’s focus

was on the creation of fairy tales and fantasy, we should contend that all stories, no matter their genre, were found first in the cauldron of story. As they come from a similar sense of psyche and imagination, all narratives, both fictional and real, are included in this bubbling pot. Authors of young adult literature have seen the potential of all the options of story Tolkien's cauldron has to offer, and they have long been dipping in to re-create existing stories into something new, fresh, and modern. The strong trend of retold fairy tales is our first evidence of young adult authors' visions of the cauldron's potential. Books such as Jessica Day George's *Princess of the Midnight Ball* (2009), a somewhat traditional retelling of the Twelve Dancing Princess, and Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), about a cyborg Cinderella, show direct connections to just the kinds of elements of story Tolkien seems to have had in mind.



One recent trend in young adult literature is the expansion of retellings into the realm of

mythology. For example, in the span of five years three series and one stand-alone novel have built off the Persephone myth. The stand-alone, *Radiant Darkness* by Emily Whitman (2009), tells a purer form of the tale from Persephone's point of view, showing why she was drawn into the darkness of Hades. On the other hand, the *Abandon* trilogy by Meg Cabot (2011, 2102, 2013) and the *Everneath* trilogy by Brodi Ashton (2012, 2013) modernize the story by telling of a normal high school girl who is captured and dragged into the Underworld, who must then return home to make her peace or break the bonds that threaten to return her to the world below. Finally the *Goddess Test* series by Aimee Carter (2011, 2012) moves the story into the future with Hades looking for a new queen to join him in ruling the Land of the Dead. Each of these retellings has clearly found its inspiration from the original but ultimately taken the story to new depths as the authors use their own style to re-create what has come from the cauldron.

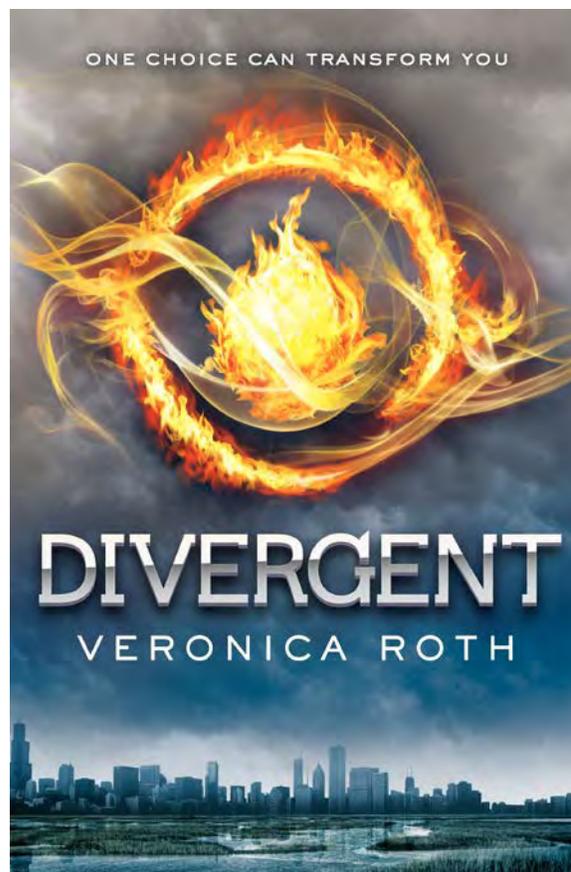
Authors of young adult literature have certainly found inspiration in our oral storytelling heritage; however, more and more they are finding it in our literary heritage as well. Another recent innovation in the field is the explosion of works that retell or reinvent classic pieces of literature. Works such as *The Dashwood Sisters' Secrets of Love* by Rosie Rushton (2006) and *Sass and Serendipity* by Jennifer Ziegler (2011), both modernizing the plot and characters of *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, bring new light to this classic story. Very few authors seem to be escaping this trend, with recent novels reinventing everything from Shakespeare to Shelley. Of particular interest are novels such as Stacey Jay's *Juliet Immortal* (2011) and *Romeo Redeemed* (2012), which explain the reasons for Romeo and Juliet's untimely demise in very different terms by continuing the story after their deaths in Verona. Shelly's gothic classic has also received a recent remake in Kenneth Oppel's *The Apprenticeship of Victor Frankenstein* series, which creates a prequel by telling the story of Dr. Frankenstein as a teenager. Shelly's story is then continued in *Dr. Frankenstein's Daughters* by Suzanne Weyn (2013), which tells the tale of the twin daughters of the Doctor. These titles serve as retellings or

expansions on the original, giving readers new insights into the world both sets of authors have created. One of the exciting things about such retellings is that they often lead readers back to the original sources for rereading or new discovery. Teachers can certainly build on this interest by pairing such works with their classic counterparts for classrooms study.

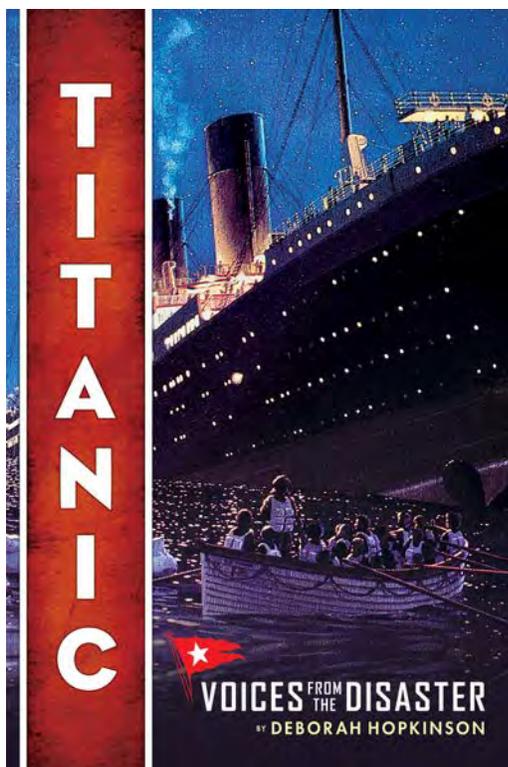
### Innovations in Creativity

Illustrations help us to see narrative in new ways, and authors re-creating stories dipped from the cauldron of story help readers expand their experience with story elements; in addition, authors of young adult literature are enlightening readers with their own unique creativity. Young adult literature has long had a history of exploring tough issues without pulling punches. Recently many have criticized the genre as being too dark (Dark Side, 2010), a characteristic that they feel has overwhelmed the genre in a negative way.

The finer points of this argument are addressed elsewhere; however, most readers of the genre will tell you young adult literature deals with the harsh realities of life with a hope and humor delivered in ways that other genres fail to capture. Authors of young adult literature want to re-create readers' visions of the world by telling them a story. The genres of science fiction and fantasy are particularly adept at doing this, for real issues seen through the lens of the imagination are made clearer and sharper than would be possible in life's messy realities. This may be why genres like dystopian science fiction are popular right now: not because they expose the darkness, but because they help us see the light of possibility. Through the imagination we take on issues like the power of emotions in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2012) or even more controversial issues like teenage pregnancy in Megan McCafferty's *Bumped* (2011). Both of these novels are innovative takes on what society could become, and through their futuristic settings they enlighten readers about current issues they are facing today.



Enlightening perspectives are not exclusive to fictional worlds; one of the strongest innovations we are seeing in young adult literature today is the development of strong voices in nonfiction literature written specifically for an adolescent audience. For example, *The Rise and Fall of Senator Joe McCarthy* by James Cross Giblin (2009) takes an important historical figure who has impacted our culture and politics in a way few modern teens understand and made him approachable for a young adult audience. Award winning books like Steve Sheinkin's *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon* (2012) and Deborah Hopkinson's *Titanic: Voices from the Disaster* (2012) offer fresh takes on important topics written in an engaging narrative style that will draw all types of readers into the text. All of these unique creations of young adult literature are building the entire genre as fresh new voices and styles enter the field to create books that enlighten and engage readers.



## An Age of Continual Change

Young adult literature is an expanding and changing genre. This discussion could be enlarged to include other innovations and trends. The explosion of debut authors, the use of innovative textual presentations such as printing text blocks in color, or even the engaging use of narrative techniques such as changing points of view throughout a novel all show how vibrant works of young adult literature are today. But even if we confine ourselves to the innovations in illustrations, in retellings, and in creativity that result in uniquely engaging works, the genre of young adult literature is certainly one that has great potential. From providing engaging personal reading for teens and young adults to offering complex concepts primed for classroom study, young adult literature has something to offer for every situation and season. Now is the time to dive in and explore the rich realm of young adult books.

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# Making Reading Accessible for Struggling Readers

**Dawan Coombs and Nancy Edwards**

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Recently tennis aficionados learned that tailoring the game of tennis to the unique needs of young players fostered children's engagement and long-term interest in the sport. For years these experts had watched children fruitlessly chase fast-moving balls around full-sized tennis courts with rackets disproportionately large for their bodies. The experts realized these difficulties discouraged, rather than encouraged, children to continue playing tennis, so they began rethinking the game for young children. This process of rethinking led to the creation of a new vision for youth tennis called "Ten and Under Tennis" (United States Tennis Association, 2012).

Ten and Under Tennis looks different from the traditional game in three main respects. First, shrinking the size of the court made it easier for children to get to the ball in time. Although this change doesn't guarantee success, the new size has made moving back and forth across the court more manageable and increased the likelihood of young players actually hitting the ball. Next, shrinking the size of the rackets to be proportionate to children's bodies helped young players to use their racket as a tool for achieving the ultimate purpose of hitting the ball. Finally, adding mass to the ball slowed the ball down and increased the child's likelihood of hitting it. Rather than feeling discouraged after repeated failed attempts to connect, children hit

the ball more often and experienced increased success with the game.

Although seemingly simple, these alterations literally and figuratively changed the game for young players. Modifying just a few elements helped reduce frustration with the game, boosted children's confidence, and encouraged them to stick with the sport long enough to eventually develop the skills to play tennis on a regulation-sized court using an adult-sized racket to hit a real tennis ball.

As literacy teachers and researchers, we advocate adopting a similar approach when working with struggling readers. Just as tennis experts found making a few small changes to the game increased the confidence and motivation of young tennis players, changing the contexts of the reading experience increases confidence and motivation of struggling and reluctant readers. Increasing confidence and motivation is key because these affective factors often determine whether or not children will continue reading in the future.

This article begins with a brief discussion of the role of affective factors in reading achievement. We then spotlight specific strategies that offer the scaffolding and support necessary for struggling readers to achieve success. Drawing on our own experiences as classroom teachers and facilitators of a

university-based reading clinic, we share how using strategies to help students overcome frustration and build their confidence as readers can help teachers make temporary adjustments that help struggling readers become proficient readers.

### **Affective Factors Associated with Reading Achievement**

Young tennis players became overwhelmed with aspects of the sport designed for people with bodies taller, faster, and stronger than theirs. They became frustrated with the game and lost confidence in their abilities to be successful. Students in our classrooms experience the same frustration and lack of confidence in their abilities as young athletes do. From our experiences, we found beginning and struggling readers may lack confidence that they will be able to read texts they perceive as created for more capable readers. We watched some young readers immediately turn for assistance when asked to read texts and others shy away from reading experiences in general. We saw struggling readers become easily frustrated with reading challenges and then shut down, refusing to continue. We could tell that their resistant behaviors were efforts to avoid engaging in reading activities (Hall, 2006; McTigue, Washburn, & Liew, 2009).

These affective factors—frustration and lack of confidence—make reading instruction challenging to plan. As teachers work to implement the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS Initiative, 2010), they are exposing readers to more difficult texts than they have had to deal with in the past. With increased text complexity, exacerbated by frustration and lack of confidence, teachers must rethink reading in their classrooms, much like tennis experts had to rethink their sport.

Rethinking reading means rethinking the instructional procedures we use when scaffolding student reading experiences in our classrooms and rethinking teacher behaviors that might influence these affective factors. By beginning with a strong understanding of our

students' social and emotional confidences and then using research-based strategies that work in developing students' cognitive and text confidence as readers, teachers can help students become proficient readers.

### **Self-Efficacy and Risk Taking**

Students who struggle with reading often have a weak sense of self-efficacy (personal belief in their own capabilities) and resist taking the kinds of risks required to practice and develop reading skills (Galbraith & Alexander, 2005). Therefore, fostering a classroom environment that offers a safe place to take risks can be key in helping build students' confidence and supporting their development of self-efficacy.

### ***Scaffolding Experiences With Texts***

A central component of a supportive classroom includes a variety of scaffolded experiences as students attempt to read texts. Fluency research shows teacher-assisted readings are more beneficial than rereading alone (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2009). Although the amount of scaffolding necessary to support student learning varies among individuals, those students with the least confidence and the highest frustration often require the most scaffolding. In our experience, the following sequence of scaffolded instruction has offered enough support to give even the most struggling readers the support they needed to be successful.

First, we began with modeled reading, with the teacher reading the text aloud and the students listening to the fluent reading of the passage (Tompkins, 2010). Beginning with this step also gave the students an opportunity to become familiar with the vocabulary in the text before reading it on their own. Next, the teacher and students did a choral reading of the text (McKenna & Stahl, 2009). Although the students and teacher read the text simultaneously, the students could still rely on the support of the teacher if they encountered an unknown word. After choral reading, the teacher and students would participate in an echo reading of the text (Tompkins, 2010). During this step the teacher

would read chunks of the text aloud, then pause and listen as the students read the same chunks aloud, echoing the teacher modeling. Finally, the students would offer an independent reading of the same text, for the first time reading the text entirely on their own (Tompkins, 2010).

Engaging in this set of scaffolded practices for an authentic purpose motivated students in our clinic to participate in these re-readings. In many instances the opportunity to perform in readers theatre provided a sufficient incentive (Black & Stave, 2007). Each semester two or three tutoring teams would get together to select a script, assign parts, and prepare for their performance. The bulk of their preparations involved students reading and re-reading their parts. Each student would first listen to the tutor read the part, modeling a fluent reading of the lines and providing opportunities to ask questions about unfamiliar words and pronunciations. Newkirk (2012) discussed the importance of letting students see others grapple with understanding complex texts in an effort to reassure them that the task of reading really is complex and requires working through confusion to be successful. As the students listened to their tutors read and discussed potentially challenging parts, they engaged in some of the conversations to which Newkirk was referring.

Next, the student and the tutor engaged in choral reading as they read the lines together. In between these re-readings, the tutor and the student often paused to discuss emphasis placed on particular words and expressions or deal with challenges the student encountered with specific words and phrases. After gaining confidence reading the lines with the tutor, the student practiced reading the lines independently. As the culminating celebration of their practice, the students came together to perform their individual parts in a readers theater performance for the other students in the clinic, reading with confidence the lines they had practiced. Some teams even produced audio recordings of their performances so parents and family members could share in the celebration (Vasinda & McLeod, 2011).

Whether using a section of a novel, a content area textbook, a short and engaging poem, or a readers theatre script, teachers offer support sufficient to help increase the risks readers willingly take with texts. In addition, positioning students as collaborators instead of competitors with their peers in reading tasks can increase their sense of self-efficacy (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). In the readers theatre experience, because students worked together to create a successful final performance, they encouraged and supported rather than criticizing one another. Providing these various levels of scaffolding for students gives them opportunities to practice reading texts they might not have tried on their own and helps them build confidence in their own reading skills.

### *Involving Students in Paired Reading*

Many tennis duos enjoy playing doubles because it allows them to work with someone else, with one person's strengths supporting the other's weaknesses. Together as a team the two athletes work towards a common goal. Similarly, positioning students as collaborators with their peers instead of as competitors on reading tasks can increase students' sense of self-efficacy (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). One strategy that encourages this kind of collaboration between readers is paired reading (MacDonald, 2010; Topping, 1987).

To begin the paired reading activity, the teacher pairs a struggling student with a more proficient reader, and they begin to read the passage together. When the struggling reader feels confident enough to read alone, he or she gives a signal and the more proficient reader stops reading. The struggling reader continues to read aloud, but on a difficult word, he or she can signal to the partner to resume choral reading until the cycle begins again. Paired reading shows struggling readers that it is acceptable to struggle with a word or phrase and that help will be provided as long as they know how and when to ask for it. It also shows them that they are capable readers in a supportive environment, which helps foster a greater sense of self-efficacy in terms of their reading ability.

In Dawan's work with struggling adolescent readers, she found designing paired reading

activities between her high school students and younger readers to be mutually beneficial for both. Her high school students, initially apprehensive to read out loud (even to younger students), began by reading and re-reading a picture book they selected independently. Then once they had practiced and felt comfortable with the text, the high school students partnered up with struggling students from a nearby elementary school. Together each pair began reading the book, with the younger student signaling when he or she felt confident enough to read independently. The high school student continued to read along silently, jumping in when signaled by the younger child, and the two ultimately finished the book.

Like the readers in Elliott and Paterson's study (2006), this exercise offered benefits for all the readers involved. First, the struggling elementary students experienced increased self-efficacy by reading with someone in a supportive environment and successfully conquering a text. But the high school students also benefited from the experience with increased confidence as they provided necessary support for another student, working through a text for an authentic purpose. Like the doubles team in tennis, two readers worked together to support one another's weaknesses and build on their strengths.

### **Student Ownership in Reading Experiences**

Readers need to feel ownership in their reading experiences. Struggling readers can gain confidence and reduce frustration when they feel personally vested in reading experiences at school. Teachers can help students feel ownership over their reading by basing instruction on students' needs and interests (Tatum, 2008; Miller, 2000). Simple ways to identify students' interests include the use of interest inventories (McKenna & Stahl, 2009; Atwell, 2007) and informal conversations with students. Results from these inventories and conversations can help teachers plan units of instruction based on topics students want to learn more about. Teachers should seek opportunities to fill their shelves with books

students are interested in and find ways to allow for student choice in reading selections throughout the day.

In the reading clinic we worked with several students who would not engage in reading, even when the texts were specifically selected based on their interests and they had choice in what they read. For those students, we found it useful to drastically alter the reading materials we presented to them. These students had experienced repeated failures when reading traditional texts, so we altered the experience by creating alternative texts for reading.

### ***Rethinking Texts for Small Group or Individual Instruction***

One way to alter the reading experience is to allow the students to write the texts being utilized for instruction. Language Experience Approach (LEA) offers a structure for allowing students to create texts that are meaningful and relevant to their lives. LEA occurs after the students and teachers engage in a shared experience (going for a walk outside, for example). After the shared experience, the students dictate text to the teacher as he or she writes the students' words on large chart paper or types them for displaying with a projector. This text is then utilized for instruction.

LEA was used successfully with a student who had attended the reading clinic for multiple sessions yet was still having difficulty overcoming frustration to engage meaningfully with texts. His teacher determined the student's need for a whole new reading experience and decided to use the student's interest in science as a basis for reading instruction. Each day the teacher brought in a simple science experiment for the child to conduct and observe (Wellnitz, 2000). After the child completed the experiment and discussed it with the teacher, they engaged in LEA. After the text was created, the teacher used a gradual release of responsibility for the reading to ensure the student had enough confidence to accomplish the task. The process consisted of multiple steps:

1. The teacher read the text aloud multiple times.

2. The teacher read the text aloud as the student tracked the text with his finger.
3. Teacher and student choral read the text as the student continued tracking.
4. When the teacher perceived the student's confidence in his ability to read the text alone, the student took over the responsibility for reading it aloud.
5. The text was then sent home with the student so he could read it to his family with the goal of teaching them the experiment.

This extensive scaffolding, along with the sense of autonomy developed through the creation of the text, provided a beneficial reading experience for the child. Strategies for identifying unknown words were taught during this process, giving the student tools for success in other reading experiences. Increased word recognition allowed the teacher to continue focusing on comprehension instruction, as the student was less frustrated with the actual reading of the text.

### ***Adding a Digital Component***

A variation of LEA, Digital Language Experience Approach (DLEA) (Labbo, Eakle, & Montero, 2002), is also a viable method for altering the texts students are asked to read. DLEA allows for the creation of student-dictated texts using technology. Nancy used DLEA with a fifth-grade student who was reading on a first-grade level. The project began by encouraging the student to use a digital camera to take pictures of things that were important to him. Nancy then used those photos to create a slide show in PowerPoint, uploading one photo per slide. The student became interested in the slide show and was willing to dictate text for the photos. This text became an instructional tool for word identification and comprehension strategy lessons.

Through DLEA, the student had full autonomy for the published work, developed a sense of confidence through scaffolding, and was finally able (and willing) to engage with written text without frustration. Finding the right text to use was pivotal for providing instruction,

as was developing a relationship based on taking an interest in the student's outside life.

As demonstrated by these examples, DLEA and LEA offer teachers ways to drastically change the experience in terms of reading instruction. Just as tennis experts took drastic measures and reduced the court size to increase a child's ability to play, teachers can take similar measures to make reading look and feel different for resistant readers. DLEA and LEA are not the traditional books struggling readers have experienced multiple failures with in the past. DLEA and LEA offer a format for creating a new reading experience that leads to successful reading instructional opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

After her victory in the 2011 US Open, Australian tennis star Sam Stosur explained,

You've just got to get over that mental hurdle and those battles in your own head during matches when things aren't going so well. It takes time. It's probably all things I already knew, but for someone to talk about it maybe in a different way makes you realise things. (as qtd. in Tan, 2011)

Her words apply to her tennis victory, but in the context of this analogy they offer insight concerning the needs of struggling readers. Becoming a reader involves overcoming not just cognitive hurdles, but motivation and confidence hurdles as well. However, when the reading experience is framed in terms that feel manageable for struggling readers, they too realize their potential for success.

Customizing reading instruction in our class to foster a sense of self-efficacy, increase student autonomy, and promote willingness to take risks involves game-changing moves that scaffold the reading experience to meet students' unique needs. Strategies such as scaffolding reading opportunities with levels of support provide students with the practice they need to ultimately read independently. Similarly, strategies such as LEA and DLEA

incorporate student interests into reading activities. As teachers work to include these kinds of strategies into their curriculum, they help struggling readers engage in practices that build autonomy, self-efficacy, and reading skills.

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# Bookmark Technique: A Teaching Essential

**Maureen McLaughlin**

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I imagine that all of us at some point have asked our students to read a text in preparation for discussion in our next class. I also think that many of us have had the experience of facilitating wonderful exchanges of ideas among our students. We may also have known the disappointment of a discussion that just fell flat. I think one reason for the latter is that there are times when students who are asked to read outside of class simply choose not to read the designated text.

When I was writing the very first *Guided Comprehension* book, this was a point of concern. I wondered what we could do to encourage students to read in preparation for class discussion. I contemplated what we could teach to help motivate students to read when working independently. I also considered what we could do that would entice the students to engage with text—whether in class or outside of it. Bookmark technique emerged as one method that accommodates all three of these concerns (McLaughlin & Allen, 2009).

Bookmark technique is a strategy that has students monitor their understanding and make evaluative judgments about aspects of text. Typically employed during and after reading informational text, it provides support to guide students' thinking.

There are four bookmarks: Bookmark #1 focuses on what students found most interesting. For Bookmark #2, students choose a vocabulary word they think students in the class need to discuss. When completing Bookmark #3, students select an illustration, chart, map, or graph that helped them understand what they read. For Bookmark #4, students note something in the text that they found confusing. As an alternative mode of response, students can also sketch their responses when using bookmark technique.

At the bottom of each bookmark, students indicate the page on which the information appears and the paragraph in which it is featured. In the bookmarks shown in the figure, Ray, a middle school student, shares his responses to an article he read while researching Mars for a class project on the solar system. The text, which appears on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration website (<http://solarsystem.nasa.gov/planets/profile.cfm?Object=Mars>), provides detailed facts about Mars, including a general description, the source of the planet's name, and information about its polar ice caps, volcanoes, canyons, and weather.

When students complete the bookmarks, they each have four pieces of information to contribute to discussion. Students appear to be motivated by the opportunities bookmark technique offers to express their thoughts about

what they find most interesting, to choose a vocabulary word to discuss, to select a visual support, and to explain what they found to be confusing. The finished bookmarks are also evidence that the students have read the assignment.

Students share their completed bookmarks in either whole-class or small-group discussions, contributing to socially constructed meaning. Bookmark Technique is a strategy application we can teach our students that will help them to comprehend as they make personal choices about the text they are reading.

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Name *Ray*

## Bookmark One

The part I thought was most interesting was

*that Mars has seasons and that there were volcanoes on Mars a long time ago. Both ideas reminded me of Earth*

Page \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph \_\_\_\_\_

Name *Ray*

## Bookmark Two

A word I think the whole class needs to discuss is *speculated*

I think it means

*guessed*

because

*It says that "people speculated that bright and dark areas on Mars were patches of vegetation." That means there could be life on Mars.*

Page \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph \_\_\_\_\_

Name *Ray*

## Bookmark Three

The illustration, chart, map, or graph that helped me understand what I was reading was

*A Martian panorama that was taken by the Mars Exploration Rover*

It helped me because

*It provided a big view of the surface of Mars and I was able to better understand how big Mars is and how different parts of its surface look.*

Page \_\_\_\_

Paragraph \_\_\_\_

Name *Ray*

## Bookmark Four

Something that confused me was

*The article said that Mars looks reddish because its surface has iron-rich minerals that oxidize and that when the mineral dust is kicked up into the atmosphere, the atmosphere also looks red.*

I thought this was confusing because

*There is a picture that shows dust on Mars, but there is no red in the picture.*

Page \_\_\_\_

Paragraph \_\_\_\_



# Reciprocal Teaching: Powerful Hands-on Comprehension Strategy

**Lori Oczkus**

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Teachers everywhere are concerned about their students' reading comprehension. Many teachers complain that students are not engaged with texts and that they cannot remember what they have read. Reading research suggests an urgent need for educators to teach comprehension strategies at all grade levels from the very youngest children to high school students (Pearson & Duke, 2002). Many of our students could use a reading vitamin boost from reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1986), a research-based comprehension technique with over 25 years of success. Reciprocal teaching is an ideal strategy to use to strengthen comprehension while implementing the Common Core State Standards.

## The “Fab Four”

Reciprocal teaching is a scaffolded discussion technique that involves four strategies that good readers employ when they read: predict, question, clarify, and summarize. “The Fab Four” (Oczkus, 2010), the kid friendly name for these strategies, may be used in any order. Each is first modeled by the teacher, then practiced by the students with one another, and finally individually applied. For best results, four foundations must be in place: think alouds,

cooperative learning, scaffolding, and metacognition.

For example, during a read aloud a third grade teacher pauses every few pages to model one of the strategies. The discussion is scaffolded as she models first, then asks students to turn to a partner, and finally discusses the strategy as a group. At the end of the lesson the teacher asks which of the Fab Four strategies helped the students the most for that session—predict, question, clarify, or summarize.

During a social studies lesson in sixth grade, the teacher asks teams of students to take on the roles of predictor, questioner, clarifier, and summarizer as they read the assigned chapter. Each team fills in a chart with their responses, and individuals mark their texts with sticky notes to track their individual reactions. The teacher periodically stops to model how to clarify difficult words and concepts and how to ask relevant questions. The class works together on a “twitter” (short summary) that they will post on the class blog along with student illustrations. Reciprocal teaching is a collaborative hands-on strategy that works well in any grade level K-12 and in a wide variety of settings including whole class, guided reading, and literature circles.

Researchers Ann Brown and Ann Palinscar developed the technique in the 1980s in their work with struggling middle school students. Their idea was to pare down the number of reading strategies to just the essential four and then ask students to read a chunk of text and rotate through all four strategies with that bit of text. Readers actually employ multiple strategies in the reading process (Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005), so using all four is natural. Since the two Anns (Palinscar & Brown, 1986) came up with reciprocal teaching, the power package has been implemented successfully through all the grades from primary to high school and even with adults. The possibilities for implementation are creative and endless (Oczkus, 2010). The results are evident in just a few weeks or months.

### Powerful Results

When I began using reciprocal teaching as an intervention for struggling intermediate readers at an urban school, I was amazed when our students went from reading at the second grade level to the fourth grade level in just three months!

The results were consistent with the research findings on reciprocal teaching, which promise one to two years growth in three to six months. I was a convert and began trying reciprocal teaching successfully everywhere I went, from urban schools to suburban schools, with a variety of grade levels. Second language students benefited from the consistent use of reciprocal teaching as well as struggling readers.

Here are some of the research findings:

- In 15 days students are more confident (Palinscar & Brown, 1986).
- Low-performing students do well with reciprocal teaching (Carter, 1997).
- Struggling readers grow 1-2 years in 3-6 months (Cooper, Boschken, McWilliams, & Pistochini, 2000).
- In 16 studies reciprocal teaching proved consistent and effective (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

### Reciprocal Teaching and the Common Core

Reciprocal teaching strategies help teachers to effectively teach the type of close reading called for in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010). These strategies may be applied to all texts and are especially effective with informational texts. Since reciprocal teaching is a discussion technique, Common Core State Standards for listening and speaking are met as well, particularly the standards calling for students to prepare for conversations and collaborative discussions and to sometimes take on roles in discussions.

During reciprocal teaching discussions students run through the strategies with partners or group members, sometimes specifically taking on the roles of the strategies themselves as the predictor, clarifier, questioner, and summarizer. Common core standards also call for students to use evidence from the text when determining themes or drawing inferences as they ask and answer questions (National Governors Association, 2010). During reciprocal teaching lessons, students summarize texts in varied ways; thus each of the four strategies helps students to meet common core expectations.

- **Predict.** Students draw inferences and use evidence from the text throughout the reading process.
- **Question.** Students ask and answer questions to understand the text. They draw on multiple sources, including digital items, to answer questions.
- **Clarify.** Students know and apply grade level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words in texts. They also use context to confirm or self-correct, and they reread when necessary.
- **Summarize.** Students can identify main ideas and details in paragraphs and in multiparagraph texts. They also compare and contrast the overall structure of a text. Students determine themes and summarize poems, dramas, or literature.

## Favorite Tools for Interactive Lessons

When you use a variety of hands-on tools, reciprocal teaching becomes truly student centered, interactive, and memorable. Here are some of the props and other manipulatives that can bring comprehension alive for students (Oczkus, 2010). For each hands-on tool you will find a quick adaptation for various grade levels.

**Fab Four characters** (Oczkus, 2009, 2010). Metaphors are a meaningful way to teach students of any age (Wormelli, 2009). Using characters for each of the strategies makes learning about them memorable and brain compatible (Oczkus, 2010). On the “scale of kookiness” you can dress up as the characters and use special voices and mannerisms, use hand gestures, hold up props, or just show pictures of the characters.

Paula the Predictor is a fortune teller who uses pictures and words as she rubs her crystal ball to make powerful predictions. Quincy the questioner is a talk show host who rattles off questions rapid fire for students to answer as he whips out his microphone. Clara Clarifier is a fancy, boa-sporting little lady who says “darlings” often as she pauses to clarify words and concepts she does not understand. Sammy Summarizer is a cowboy or cowgirl ready to rope up the main ideas in the reading.

I have had great fun with these characters over the past ten years of using them. From a puppet kit for primary (Oczkus, 2008; [www.primaryconcepts.com](http://www.primaryconcepts.com)) to skits put on by teachers or students, classes embrace the characters and make learning come alive. At one school some of the teachers even dressed up as the Fab Four for Halloween. No wonder smiles break out when the characters come to reading lessons, and students easily remember the strategies.

**Hand motions to show strategy use** (Oczkus, 2009, 2010). Using hand gestures along with the metaphors actively engages students in a nonlinguistic representation for their thinking (Marzano, 2004). Students become more independent in their strategy use

when they employ the hand gestures. For predicting, students pretend to rub a crystal ball. When they question, they make a fist for a microphone, and for clarify they make circles with their fingers for “glasses” to clarify. When students summarize, they pretend to wield a lasso around above their heads as they round up the main idea.

**Graphic organizers.** Graphic organizers are an effective means of helping students keep track of their reading and comprehension. Reciprocal teaching offers a logical graphic representation organized around the four strategies. Simply divide a paper or chart paper into four boxes and either serve as a scribe to write student comments or invite students to place sticky notes on the chart in each box during the lesson. During guided reading lessons, use smaller paper such as construction paper or a colorful file folder and pass it around the table, allowing students to add to it by writing on it or using sticky notes.

**Dice (Oczkus, 2010).** Run a discussion using dice. Students working in small groups or teams roll dice, and when they land on each number they read the text and respond accordingly: *1* predict, *2* question, *3* clarify, *4* summarize, *5* free choice, *6* free choice.

**Spinner (Oczkus, 2010).** Using a simple paper plate, make a spinner. Label the plate with all four strategies. Students may work in small groups, sometimes teacher led, to take turns spinning the dial and carrying out the strategy they land on.

**Music (Oczkus, 2010).** Try assigning popular songs to each strategy, such as “The Pink Panther” for predicting and “Rawhide” for summarizing. Play these for students or make up your own songs for each strategy using familiar tunes.

**Stick and sketch notes.** During independent reading, ask students to mark a spot where they used one of the Fab Four strategies and then share in a partner or class discussion. They sketch a symbol for the strategy—crystal ball, microphone, lasso, or pair of glasses.

## Common Questions Teachers Ask

**How do I start?** Read alouds work best, so you can do a think aloud for each strategy. Be sure to include partner turn and talk time frequently during the lesson. Use the props and characters during the read aloud.

**How many times per week should I utilize reciprocal teaching?** Just like dieting or anything else, once a week is not effective for reciprocal teaching to take hold! Reciprocal teaching yields the best results if students participate in the strategies at least twice per week.

I thought about calling this article “This Isn’t Your Grandmother’s Reciprocal Teaching” because even if you’ve been using reciprocal teaching for decades, when you mix these hands-on interactive ideas with the basic formula for reciprocal teaching, you end up with even more engaging lessons that improve comprehension for all students!

## Professional Development Resources

- [www.lorioczkus.com](http://www.lorioczkus.com) for books, sample video clips,
- <http://www.reading.org/General/Publications/Books/bk507.aspx>

Go to this page with IRA and click on FREE video clips and FREE study guide to go with the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Reciprocal Teaching at Work* by Lori Oczkus 2010.

*Lori Oczkus, literacy coach, author, and popular speaker across the United States (and sometimes Canada), has motivated tens of thousands of teachers who have attended her fast-paced workshops and read her best-selling books. Lori enjoys teaching every week. She is the author of Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension (IRA 2010).*

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# Using Word Clouds in the Classroom

**Karen M. Bromley**

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Words are the essential building blocks of comprehension and cognition. Research shows that students who have broad vocabularies achieve better scores on standardized tests and classroom assessments than students who have limited vocabularies (NAEP, 2011; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). These findings are reflected in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2011) in which vocabulary is considered basic to reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as other forms of language use. At the heart of the standards is the ability to read complex texts and learn from content materials, so acquiring general vocabulary and content-specific words is critical for students learning content and achieving the standards. The K-12 standards specifically require students to be able to acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases and to demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge.

Today technology, including digital media, has increasingly important roles both in and out of the classroom. Thus all students need opportunities to become proficient at using electronic tools (Lapp, Moss, & Rowsell, 2012). Like vocabulary, technology is one of the basic elements of the CCSS. The standards require K-12 students to use technology and media strategically and capably to enhance their language use in all forms and on all levels.

Students in Grades K-5 should explore and use a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing. Students in Grades 3-5 should be able to add visual displays in presentations. Students in Grades 4-12 should be able to use the Internet to produce and publish writing and should demonstrate command of keyboarding skills.

Thus both vocabulary and technology are important elements of the CCSS. This tip introduces an internet site that allows students to develop their vocabulary, technology, and presentation skills by creating *word clouds*.

Word clouds have great potential for motivating students to use technology and develop their vocabularies (Bromley, 2012). A word cloud is a collection of words related to a particular concept that have been taken from a text on the topic. The words in the cloud differ in print size, giving greater prominence to words that appear more frequently. You have probably seen a word cloud on the internet or in newspapers, magazines, or other print media.

You can make word clouds at *Wordle* ([www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)), a free internet program that converts text into a piece of digital word art. For example, I created a word cloud by cutting and pasting the text from this article into *Wordle* (see Figure 1). I chose the font Kenyan Coffee and the horizontal layout. Looking closely at the



post-reading lessons can promote your students' word recognition, usage, definitions, and



Figure 2. Tori, a third grader, used this word cloud as a handout when she gave a report to her class on eagles.

standard spelling. For example, to review material from a previously read selection, create a word cloud yourself and use it to reinforce key vocabulary. Or use a word cloud to introduce key vocabulary before students read a selection. Word clouds also make interesting bulletin board displays and can be helpful references for your students in their writing. They can be used as interesting gifts for parents or other family members when students use their own words to describe a particular person, place, or thing. For more ways to use word clouds in your instruction, visit “45 Interesting Ways to Use Wordle in the Classroom”

(<http://edudemic.com/2010/07/45-interesting-ways-to-use-wordle-in-the-classroom/>).

Word clouds are a motivating and creative way to involve students in identifying and learning key vocabulary as they use technology to explore language use. Word clouds are a unique way to enhance instruction and engage

students as they have fun with words. Challenge your students to try them!

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# Dear Literacy Coach: Argument Writing

**Gerri Hixenbaugh**

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*Dear Literacy Coach,*

*Though my students seem to have a multitude of opinions about everything these days, I feel very insecure about my ability to teach writing, especially argument (opinion) writing as required in the Utah Core (Common Core). The basic five-paragraph essay I used to teach isn't often used in the real world any more, and I don't know what else to do. Do you have any suggestions?*

*Sincerely,  
Un-opinionated*

Dear Un-opinionated,

I can relate to how you feel! I too had difficulty thinking of real-world ways for students to write their opinions and supply evidence to support them. One thing I discovered while looking for suggestions was to have students write reviews for books, video games, apps, toys, movies, etc. They definitely have strong opinions about these!

There is a wealth of free material available to provide both strong and weak examples of reviews that have already been written. Students often learn best when they are able to critique the work of others, which ties reading and writing together. You can go to sites such as

Amazon.com, the iTunes store, etc. to find a multitude of reviews.

A good way to begin is to print several different reviews, both negative and positive, of the same book. This could be a book you are about to read to the class. In groups of three or four, have the students look at the reviews, underlining the spots where the reviewer stated his/her opinion. Then have the students find and highlight the evidence the reviewer provided to support this opinion. Next have the students discuss which review was the strongest (most persuasive perhaps) and why. Finally, as the groups share their results with the class, you may want to list what the children felt made some reviews stronger than others. You could also have them vote on whether they think they will like the book (thumbs up or down) based on the reviews they read.

Read the book to the class the next day, and have them vote on how well they actually liked it. Taking the most popular opinion, write a book review with the class. Make sure the review states the students' opinion, lists reasons supported by facts and details in the text, and restates their opinion at the end.

Next, revise the review using the ideas the class listed the day before for making reviews stronger. You can even post the review on the website of your choice. The students will be

thrilled to see their class review on the web!  
After this group process you can have your students write reviews in small groups or pairs until they have solidified the process; then you can have them write independently.

As you can see, writing opinion pieces can be fairly simple (and fun!) when support and examples are provided along the way. Best of luck to you!

*Gerri Hixenbaugh is currently a BYU intern facilitator with a passion for literacy. She has also served as an adjunct professor at the University of Utah (just a small conflict of interest!) and as a Jordan School District literacy specialist.*



# Selected Reviews from Children's Choices 2011 and 2012

**Lauren Aimonette Liang with Jacinda Bachus, Mercedes Barica, Raven Cromwell, Natalie Delphenich, Kaylie Heier, Lisa Johnson, and Adrienne Lowe**

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Every year over 10,000 children from across the country participate in selecting the top 100 children's books for the International Reading Association's annual "Children's Choices" reading lists. Newly published books donated by U.S. publishers are distributed to regional teams of children, Grades K-6, who read and vote for their favorites. Votes are tallied, and IRA releases the official Children's Choices lists in the fall, with downloadable bookmarks and annotated bibliographies posted on the IRA's website at <http://www.reading.org/resouces/Booklists.aspx>.

This list reflects one of the most purely "child-selected" children's literature awards in the United States. Unlike many state children's book awards involving child voting, the Children's Choices books are not pre-screened by an adult committee to present a limited number of candidates.

The Children's Choices program began in 1974 and was followed in 1987 by the Young Adults' Choices project (grades 7-12), a similar program involving 4,500 students who select 30 titles annually. Shortly thereafter, teachers

wanted to participate, and thus IRA began the Teachers' Choices program. Regional teams of teachers, librarians and reading specialists pick their top favorites of the year for students ages 5-15, settling on a list of approximately 30 titles each year. As one can imagine, there is some overlap between the lists, but each program does result in unique choices.

Students from Dr. Lauren Liang's graduate children's literature classes at the University of Utah recently explored titles on the 2011 and 2012 Children's Choices lists. These elementary and middle school teachers selected books from the list to review in more depth as they considered them for possible classroom use.

Editor's note: More reviews were submitted than we could publish in one issue. So we grouped the reviewed books by themes to divide between this and the following issue. Reviews included here are of books related to the theme *friends*—a critical aspect of any child's experience.

**Laminack, Lester L. *Three Hens and a Peacock*. Illustrated by Henry Cole. Peachtree, 2011.**

Have you ever wanted to trade places with someone? *Three Hens and a Peacock* is a beautiful book in which pictures and words come together to create a story with a moral that warns the reader against envying others. Laminack tells a story of a peacock whose sole job is to stand beautifully at the corner of a farm to lure customers—who wish to take pictures of the beautiful peacock—to buy eggs. The hens are upset that the peacock receives all the attention when they are the ones who lay the eggs. As far as they are concerned, their job is much more difficult. The story takes a twist when the hens decide to trade roles with the peacock for the day. Predictably neither the hens nor the peacock is successful at performing the other's role. The author leaves the reader with the inspiring message that everyone has an important role in life and cannot easily be replaced.

The illustrations and the text enhance each other in creating an exceptional story experience. Laminack narrates using the third person so that the readers feel like they are overhearing the animals' conversation. The chaotic tone of the story is intensified by the illustrations. The outline style of the pictures is created by watercolor, ink, and colored pencil. The text is as simple as the artwork; however, the word choice provides a rich vocabulary for young readers. The words appear both above and below the pictures so that the reader must pause briefly to appreciate the beautiful art. Words are also italicized and creatively placed around the illustrations to help in reading this book with emotion. *Three Hens and a Peacock* is a beautifully written and illustrated book that will help readers understand that their occupation in life is significant and that they cannot easily be replaced. *Reviewed by Jacinda Bachus*

**Dewdney, Anna. *Roly Poly Pangolin*. Viking, 2010.**

Even the most tightly rolled up little students will enjoy the rhythmic rhymes of Anna

Dewdney's book *Roly Poly Pangolin*. Like some young readers, Roly Poly is just discovering the big world around her. The unknown can be a very scary place, especially for endangered animals such as the unusual pangolin, a *real* rare animal that is a cross between anteater and armadillo. Many students, especially those new to a classroom, can identify with Roly Poly's feelings and experience.

Everything is new to little Roly Poly, from the sounds in the forest around her to the ants and slugs she is to eat for dinner. When she wanders too far from her mother one day, she is alone and very frightened. Roly Poly discovers she can roll up into a safe ball. She "hears a call" throughout the book, but is too scared to uncoil. When she finally gets the nerve to come out of her ball, she sees another pangolin staring right back at her. They begin to play together, along with another friend from the forest, happy and fearing nothing at all because "Sometimes new things can be fun when you're not the only one."

For all those Roly Polys in the classroom who don't like new things at all, this story has a simple, straightforward lesson: It is easy to fear the unknown, especially when your imagination can sometimes take you to very scary places. But with help from friends, things can seem a little less scary.

Students familiar with Dewdney's *Llama Llama* series may recognize the author's easy-to-follow rhyming patterns and illustrations. The cartoonish Roly Poly is texturized on each page, making her the focal point so readers can literally "feel" Roly Poly and identify with her unease. Words such as "Oh no!" and "Go, Go, Go" are highlighted to illustrate Roly Poly's inner monologue as well as guiding the reader's intonation. The repetition of text will have timid developing readers chiming in as Roly Poly discovers two is always better than one. *Reviewed by Mercedes Barica*

**DiPucchio, Kelly. Illustrated by Scott Campbell. *Zombie in Love*. Atheneum, 2011.**

Mortimer's body may be dead, but his heart is alive and well in this tale of a zombie who is looking for love. Mortimer is an average (dead) guy who needs a date to the dance. He tries all the stereotypical moves such as walking his dog and working out at the gym except, the illustrations let us know, with an undead twist. Finally, in desperation Mortimer places a personal ad in the newspaper and decides to wait at Cupid's Ball for his true love. As DiPucchio did in *Clink* and *Gilbert Goldfish Wants a Pet*, she once again touches on the theme that everyone, even misfits, can find the perfect friend.

The coffinesque shape of the book and the use of dark, muddy watercolors set the undead scene. Colors leak outside the lines as though Mortimer himself, who lacks fine motor skills, attempted to color them. Characteristically, Campbell's illustrations require the readers to spend more time on each page as they search through each picture for hilarious details. Readers can see the dead-themed products on Mortimer's shelves, spy the various activities of the friendly worms, and pick out the characters' delighted or upset faces in the background. Even if readers only have half a brain, they will find this book charming and witty. *Reviewed by Raven Cromwell*

**Scillian, Devin. *Memoirs of a Goldfish*. Illustrated by Tim Bowers. *Sleeping Bear Press*, 2010.**

A content yet monotonous goldfish fills his days swimming in circles. When a few unexpected intruders splash into his life, his monotony turns to neurotic territorialism. His routine of swimming around the bowl once and swimming around the bowl twice has been replaced with untangling Mr. Bubbles from the plants that need watering, making sure sunscreen is applied to Cha-Cha, the fish from L.A., and hoping none of his fins are snapped off by the crab! Unsure of how to deal with the growing population in his once private abode, the newly cantankerous goldfish finds himself hollering at

his bowl-mates, "The whole bowl is my side of the bowl!" Just when he can't take another second, he is whisked away and placed in a clean, quiet, and solitary bowl. The initial thrill of having his own space back is quickly washed away when tides of worry roll in. What are all the other fish doing without him? Won't they need his help? Do they even miss him?

This story, with bold cartoon style illustrations that enhance the text, teaches us to be kind and accepting friends. Line is important to the complementary nature of text and illustrations. It allows us to see where the bowl's inhabitants have been swimming, and gives readers an understanding of how crowded the bowl becomes. The simple language picks up speed as it mirrors the fish's elevated emotions. While young readers will identify with our overcrowded goldfish as he tries to navigate an increasingly murky social scene, all readers can learn from the message of this book: Be friendly to everyone so that your friendships don't go belly up! *Reviewed by Adrienne Lowe*

**Wilson, Karma. Illustrated by Jane Chapman. *Bear's Loose Tooth*. McElderry, 2011.**

In *Bear's Loose Tooth*, Wilson has brought back the loveable fantasy characters Bear and his forest friends from her previous *Bear* series books (*Bear Sleeps On*; *Bear Wants More*) as they deal with Bear's loose tooth. While eating lunch one day, Bear worriedly notices something wiggling and wobbling in his mouth--a loose tooth. His friends all empathetically seek to assure Bear and offer to help him in removing this irritation. What follows is an engaging series of events in which Bear's friends try to help pull the tooth out, with little success. Readers are not really surprised when Bear finally uses his tongue to pull out his own tooth and is rewarded that night with a blueberry gift from a visiting fairy. The plot comes full circle on the final page of the book when Bear notices another loose tooth, leading the reader to contemplate what might happen with this new development in Bear's life.

Broad, feather-like strokes of acrylic paint create cartoonish illustrations on full-bleed pages that spread over the expanse of the middle spine of the book. These engage the reader and provide details into each character's actions and feelings throughout the story. In addition, the large-print text allows for small and large group readings, and the somewhat patterned and rhyming text focused on the developmental milestone of losing a tooth allow even the youngest of readers to be engaged in this book. *Reviewed by Lisa Johnson*

**Willems, Mo. *City Dog, Country Frog*. Illustrated by Jon J Muth. Hyperion, 2010.**

*City Dog, Country Frog* is a tender story about a dog's first adventure in the country and "off the leash." He meets a frog sitting on a rock. The two quickly form a unique friendship, sharing special experiences in each of the different seasons. As the seasons change, they both learn lessons about the journey of friendship, and by winter they experience the sadness that accompanies loss. As spring returns, so does the hope that comes with new beginnings.

Acclaimed author Willems and illustrator Muth combine their talents beautifully. In both words and pictures they magically connect these two characters to nature's life cycles. Willems, who usually illustrates his own books, has created meaningful text that blends with Muth's art to make *City Dog and Country Frog* endearing characters for readers of all ages.

The loose watercolor style used in the backgrounds contrasts with the vivid detail of the main characters in the illustrations. The color palate changes with the seasons and the mood of the storyline. With spring, bright greens and yellows portray the beginning of friendship between *City Dog* and *Country Frog*. By winter, the colors cool with the temperature to blues and purples, reflecting the emotions of loss and sadness.

*City Dog, Country Frog* is a wonderful read for addressing the issues of loss. It also allows readers to see how friendships may be enriched by getting to know and learning something new

from someone who is different from oneself. The characters highlight loyalty, companionship and love to which we can all relate. *Reviewed by Natalie Delphenich*

**Young, Judy. Illustrated by Andrea Wesson. *A Pet for Miss Wright*. Sleeping Bear Press, 2011.**

When you are a writer you may have many adventures on your computer screen as your characters face challenges and discover themselves, but typing alone in your office can be rather dull. It is in this dilemma that Miss Wright finds herself in Young's *A Pet for Miss Wright*. Her solution? To get a pet! However, what pet would be best? Will it be the hamster, the fish, or maybe the monkey? Miss Wright sets off eagerly to find out. However, just when she thinks she's found the animal for her, it manages to derail her writing and must be returned for something new. Readers will be captivated as they follow Miss Wright on her humorous experiment in trial-and-error to find the perfect pet. And a surprising twist in the end confirms that Miss Wright truly makes the very best decision.

Young's language is simple, yet rich with detail, perfectly describing Miss Wright's wish for companionship mingled with her frustration as she continually fails to find the right pet. Andrea Wesson's drawings, inspired by art nouveau, dance across the pages and are as charming yet quirky as our heroine and her menagerie of animals. Readers cannot help but become jealous of Miss Wright as they gaze at her Victorian beach house and are delighted by a pane of period wallpaper which boards every other page.

*A Pet for Miss Wright* is a delightful tale to read for enjoyment or to enhance learning. Teachers will appreciate the opportunities for prediction, problem solving, and insights into the writing and publication processes. Young readers will appreciate the unexpected problems that arise from simply acquiring a pet. There is truly something for readers of all ages in *A Pet for Miss Wright*. *Reviewed by Kaylie Heier*