



# EL

EDUCATIONAL  
LEADERSHIP

## READING

~ The Core Skill ~

MARCH 2012  
VOL. 69 NO. 6  
[WWW.ASCD.ORG](http://WWW.ASCD.ORG)

ASCD



# Taming the Wild Text

*A top-10 list of strategies to help the struggling reader become fierce, unafraid, and strong.*

**Pam Allyn**

**W**e learn to do well what we learn to love; it's as true in reading as in anything else. For 10 years, I've guided a reading program for boys at the Children's Village, a residential school in New York City for children in foster care.

These boys have been through bruising school and home experiences that have made them feel extraordinarily vulnerable as readers. Many have told me that they've never once experienced pleasure in reading. But over the years, as we've built a culture for reading, I've seen many of these strugglers make a breakthrough; they stop seeing their struggles as a barrier to success and begin to see them within the larger picture of the challenges all readers experience as they learn to find pleasure in print.

One of my students told me that the first time he ever experienced joy in reading was when I read to him from *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. With his eyes full of tears, he said, "I feel a lot like Max sometimes, all alone. But he makes me feel brave again."

© CHRIS BUZELLI









The truth is, we're all struggling readers. At some time today or tomorrow, you'll be reading something and you'll feel the print sliding away from you, your sense of power over the page slipping, your comprehension becoming murkier as you press on. It doesn't feel good. There are children

who feel this every day, whether looking at a street sign or a simple picture book. When the world of print lacks deep meaning for a child, the reading experience becomes like wandering in an unfamiliar universe.

These are the kids in our classrooms who search hungrily for distraction. You

know them well. They'll look for any escape—using the bathroom or talking to a friend—as soon as reading time begins. Unlike Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, who stands with his sword ready to fight the wild things, these students avoid encounters with text at all costs.

For language is a wild thing. Whether the words are unfamiliar, the story unusual, or the text about complex and layered information, the wild elements of language present one challenge after another to a struggling reader.

It's vital that we nurture a love for reading in all children from a young age—especially those who find reading daunting—so we eliminate the danger of illiteracy for them. The National Center for Education Statistics notes that U.S. public school students who reported reading for fun almost every day scored higher on average on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress than did students who reported doing so less frequently. Students who reported never or hardly ever reading for fun scored lowest.<sup>1</sup> Adults who never become competent readers have difficulty not only with finding work or keeping jobs but also with writing letters or e-mails, filling out forms, and assisting their children with homework.

### Ten Actions for Creating a Reading Culture

From my observations at the Children's Village and my decades of work with vulnerable readers, I have built a top-10 list for how teachers can create a classroom culture that ensures that all students fall in love with reading. From that love, students will build reading muscles for lifelong strength. Through these actions, we can help each struggling reader arm himself or herself for the joys of engaging with the wild thing of printed text—and taming it.



### **1. Don't judge the reader.**

Environments that offer many reading materials at different levels and in different forms—without judging any form as superior—enable students to find the materials that work best for them. Today's reader is exposed to more media, in all forms, than any reader before. Avid readers, and some budding readers, will read anything: cereal boxes, magazines, posters, video game instructions, graphic novels. It's essential that teachers acknowledge these forms of reading as "real" and not simply validate and praise award-winning chapter books, for example.

Ask students to describe times when reading felt good to them, what they were reading at the time, and why it felt good. Don't dismiss their descriptions of the sports page, a great website, or a manual for how to build a castle. Embrace all these as signs of an inspired reading life.

Today's readers use different forms of media—e-mails, text messages, blog posts, and so on—to communicate. Name these communications as reading, too, and celebrate any minutes a child spends absorbing print. Using these methods of communication in the classroom can make the reader more aware of his or her ability as a literate person and spur confidence to read more.

Finally, never judge the older reader who needs to read books at lower levels to build stamina and fluency. Too often we fixate on titles read, when in fact the key to lifelong literacy is reading frequently and ingesting a high number of words.

### **2. Offer a range of materials.**

Students may be reluctant readers not because they lack basic skills, but because they haven't been exposed to materials suited to their interests, ability,

and temperament. A 2008 survey by Scholastic and Yankelovich<sup>2</sup> found that despite the abundance of information and reading materials out there, "55 percent of the children surveyed agreed with the statement 'There aren't enough really good books for boys/girls my age'" (p. 47). A key reason that children ages 9–17 don't read more books for fun is that they have trouble finding books they like. Only 15 percent said they don't read for fun because they "don't like to read."

## **Literature gives us all an opportunity to think about the world that we live in and react to it in a deeply personal way.**

These findings imply that we must introduce kids to a wide range of reading materials. Finding books and other reading resources that will match your most struggling readers' interests and passions might be easier than you think. Many educators have created websites, blogs, and Facebook pages that discuss ways to engage reluctant readers and suggest books to tempt them.<sup>3</sup> Looking at the websites of Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and indie booksellers, one can often find new titles. Local librarians—those trustworthy and stalwart supporters of reading—if asked, will also provide lots of guidance.

### **3. Provide time for dialogue.**

Just because students appear to be reading independently doesn't mean teachers can forsake the social aspect of reading.

Often, reluctant readers are given less time than fluent readers to be social and interactive about reading because

they're thought to need more practice time. The absence of this vital dialogue only contributes to struggling readers' feeling of isolation and rarely inspires them to pursue more challenging texts.

Dialogue is a window into another person's reading experience and is an effective way to get people excited about reading. And dialogue doesn't always mean traditional discussion about comprehension or plot summaries. It can also mean asking students what they're wondering about or what they're hoping

will surprise them as they read on. Or encouraging students to use Twitter or text messaging to share ideas from their reading. Rather than a dry Q and A with the teacher having the "right" answer and students guessing at it, dialogue should accomplish some genuine purpose.

With boys at the Children's Village, I led a unit of study on social issues and debate. Boys met in small groups and read articles on subjects that interested them; then each of them developed a question to pursue together, incorporating their different points of view.

When a teacher and student read together or talk one-on-one about a reading selection, they can enter into a safe, nurturing dialogue that builds a literacy bond. And one way to create dialogue among peers is to create text clubs. Talking about graphic novels, comics, short stories, or poems offers struggling readers a chance to explore big ideas in depth through text that's not necessarily "big."



We can model how we delve into text of all sorts and develop our own complex thinking through reading a few pages in a comic book or a one-page blog post. Read aloud from easier texts and celebrate the genius of Dr. Seuss or Arnold Lobel, valuing their sophisticated approach to language even in texts that are easier to read.

#### **4. Give readers a tool kit.**

Max's sword is his tool and his protection; he's ready to face the wild things because he's got what he needs. Our struggling readers often feel defenseless around print. Let's arm them with everything they need. We give vulnerable readers a chance to jump over hurdles when we equip them with resources like alphabet charts, word boxes, word walls, or a key ring holding cards printed with commonly challenging words and pictures or clues to meaning. Many digital devices can help, such as word lists and other reading-relevant applications on cell phones or smartphones, e-readers, and tablet computers.

#### **5. Let readers read at their comfort level.**

Too often, parents and teachers assume a student is at a certain reading level because of his or her age; they may even say things like "this is where he *should* be now." Instead, we should assess the independent reading level of each student and guide him or her to read texts at that level as well as texts at a slightly lower and slightly higher level. This practice encourages comfort with many different reading materials and validates the fact that authentic readers read at a variety of levels.

Books slightly below the student's reading level encourage that student to read faster and more confidently. Such books should never be underestimated,

and a student should never be ashamed to read them. Texts at a slightly higher level should be on subjects or by authors whom students truly love, motivating them to push themselves as readers and thinkers.

Students should never be locked into one level. In one classroom, I encountered a student unhappily reading the

students to sketch their response to one part that moved or inspired them and share the response with a partner.

Thoughtful dialogue makes the reading experience social and deepens comprehension. Challenged readers often welcome going through a process I refer to as the LitLoop: reading, writing, speaking, and listening—some

### **A key reason that children ages 9–17 don't read more books for fun is that they have trouble finding books they like.**

Junie B. Jones series. I asked him why he was reading it if he didn't like it, and he said, "It's at my level; it's all I'm allowed to read." This book is never going to motivate this kid. I'd much rather he read one book about something he loves, like sharks, skimming the parts he doesn't quite comprehend, to build his sense of himself as a reader who asks questions, gets excited about new information, and wanders through new territory.

#### **6. Dive deep.**

Literature gives us all an opportunity to think about the world we live in and react to it in a deeply personal way. Talking to students about their reactions allows them to express their feelings in safe and nonthreatening ways. Start by having students share their favorite reading places—and celebrate the sheer fact that they chose to read.

Struggling readers need ways to discuss books deeply with dignity; this helps them see that a text doesn't have to be super-long to be worth a deep response. You might read simpler texts aloud to demonstrate weighty thinking. For example, read from a picture book like *Fox* by Margaret Wild, then ask

of the time with others who are reading the same material. Rather than waiting for a show of hands from your active participants, let all students communicate about a book through journaling and blogging within your class or across different classrooms. This inspires reluctant readers to share ideas.

Two ways to engage readers are to highlight purpose (when reading feels hard, a struggler wants to know why he or she is doing it) and to broaden audience. Reading the same text with other students in different grades, schools, or countries and sharing experiences through writing (often using technology) combines both methods and is extraordinarily motivating. I've arranged for a class of students in Harlem, New York, to regularly chat through Skype with students in Kibera, Kenya. The New York students' motivation for reading their assigned poems is extremely high now because they know they'll be talking about these poems across many miles.

#### **7. Value browsing and rereading.**

Browsing and rereading are signs of a strong reader. Rereading builds comprehension; a person is reading differently



every time he or she comes to the text. Find moments to praise your students who spend time browsing, and compliment them on rereading.

Encourage learners to reread a favorite story in another form; for instance, many classics texts have been rewritten as graphic novels. Poems such as “Honey, I Love” by Eloise Greenfield have been retold in picture books. Finding stories told in different guises can appeal to the struggling reader who’s looking for ways to enjoy reading across multiple genres.

#### 8. Build stamina.

“Quick reads” give a challenged student a successful reading experience without making that student wait weeks to feel successful. Using a timer is a great way to get a resistant reader to commit to small increments of reading. For some reason, setting the timer to odd times, such as 13 minutes, really helps! And keep your commitment; don’t ever add time even if your readers seem totally settled in. The students will come to trust that you keep your word and will be able to add more minutes as they build their reading muscles.

Challenge reluctant readers to read further on topics they enjoy and have explored already rather than to try new topics, which requires wading through a lot of new vocabulary. Reading within one’s “passion zone” is motivational. Tell students that practicing reading fast will help them build stamina and that reading different texts on one subject will help them learn how people talk about the same ideas in different ways.

Kyle, one boy at the Children’s Village, loved cars, so those of us working with him created a collection of texts at different levels that reflected this passion—a poem, a magazine article, a website, and an excerpt from *The Phantom Tollbooth* in which the main



character sits in an amazing little car. Kyle read from that basket for hours.

#### 9. Teach students to curate their own reading lives.

In this era, reading is varied and rich with possibility. We should empower students to choose what they read and to see themselves as readers who sample widely across genres. Show kids different ways to keep a record of the material they read—from writing book lists on bookmarks to keep in their current paperback, to saving book titles in a computerized database, to creating e-files of books that include information about the author, characters, and other books in a series. Upload these files onto a wiki or class blog so others can dip in. Encouraging students to use their mobile devices to record the

authors and titles of books they liked (or didn’t) motivates them.

#### 10. Remember, joy matters.

Most reluctant readers have experienced a great deal of anxiety and stress around reading in their lives. What will it take for such readers to experience the joy of reading? Getting to joy is important, because the prize of reading competence comes at great cost. What too many challenged readers remember, even once they read well, is the hardship and loneliness of that long trek uphill.

Let’s create a world for all readers that’s full of the joy of discovery, imagination, and information. The only way to do this is to make the world come alive with stories students will love and texts that connect to their passions. Let’s hand reluctant readers the sword with which to conquer the wild things of language—and learn to love reading. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). *Reading 2011: National Assessment of Educational Progress at grades 4 and 8*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup>Scholastic & Yankelovich. (2008). *Kids and family reading report: Reading in the 21st century: Turning the page with technology*. New York: Scholastic.

<sup>3</sup>Anita Silvey ([www.childrensbookalmanac.com](http://www.childrensbookalmanac.com)); Leonard Marcus ([www.leonardmarcus.com](http://www.leonardmarcus.com)); Franki Sibberson and Mary Lee Hahn ([www.readingyear.blogspot.com](http://www.readingyear.blogspot.com)); and Mr. Schu (<http://mrschureads.blogspot.com>) are a few advocates with blogs or websites that provide guidance on children’s reading.

Copyright © 2012 Pam Allyn

**Pam Allyn** is executive director of Lit-World and author of many books on teaching reading and writing, including *Pam Allyn’s Best Books for Boys* (Scholastic, 2011). She founded Books for Boys, a reading program for children in foster care; [pam.litlife@gmail.com](mailto:pam.litlife@gmail.com).