

## Why Independent Reading is Exactly What Students Need Right Now



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As the school year approaches the half-way point, reflective educators everywhere are taking a close look at student growth, considering what next steps for each reader might be and making plans for relevant future instruction. Too often, this reflection is coupled with pressure to fit in all the units of study or to cover predetermined grade-level content. As a result, teachers are caught

between what their students actually need and what curriculum requires, (even when these two needs are at odds with one another).

This is why independent reading is exactly what you and your students need right now...and always. **Independent reading is a research-backed literacy practice that satisfies this balance while also nurturing the unique voices and purposes for reading of each student.** Independent reading time and again has demonstrated the potential/ability to develop reading comprehension ability, vocabulary, grammar and spelling (Krashen, 2004), spark critical conversations and actions for a more just world (German; Bomer & Bomer), improve reading fluency (Allington, 2014), nurture empathy (Laminack & Kelly, 2019), build content knowledge (ILA, 2018), and nurture resilience (Routman, 2002)...and that's just the start of the list. It doesn't get much better than that.

## Download a Sample from *Trusting Readers*

Protecting in-school time for readers to engage with texts of their choosing increases the likelihood that students will choose to read outside of school, creating lifelong reading habits. The research is simple and profound. As little as 15 minutes of daily independent reading significantly increases student reading performance at all levels (ILA, 2021) and serves to build habitual readers with conscious reading identities (NCTE, 2021).

As your school year shifts into its second half, shift your planning by building time for independent reading first. Devote the beginning of independent reading time to kidwatch and then make instructional decisions that center the interests, strengths and needs of the students in front of you.

### Why Relationships with Texts Matter

Like all relationships, students' relationships with text necessitate consistent maintenance and, at times, repair. It is during independent reading that teachers have the opportunity to observe, nurture and teach into how students might develop or repair these relationships.

So what exactly does it mean to have a relationship with text? Just as students develop relationships with their teachers and classmates over the course of a school year, students also develop relationships with texts. For those students who have developed a positive, trusting relationship with texts, this might mean that they have times when they have seen themselves in books, when they have felt connected to characters, when they have been wowed by information in books, have changed their opinion based on something they read, or when they have chosen to read simply because it is what they really want to do with their time. Yet, not all students have positive relationships with text; their relationships are negative or have been fractured by

troubling experiences.

Like our personal relationships with students, the individual and collective relationship students have to texts is foundational consideration. Yet, gauging a student's relationship with text is complex. It is complex because there may be visible and invisible signs of the form this relationship takes at any given point during the school year. Further, the relationship each student has with text will also develop in its own time, requiring a unique approach to maintenance and repair.

Initially, when students reveal to us that they have a negative relationship with texts, we might be uncomfortable or feel as if we have failed. It is human to have a moment of disappointment when a child says, "I don't really like reading. I don't see myself as a reader." When viewed another way, we can recognize a statement like this as a quiet act of courage that can only be made when an empathetic class culture exists. Statements like these are opportunities to gain a glimpse into a student's relationship with text and offer experiences to begin to repair this relationship.

Teacher support is a vital element of **independent reading**. What does supporting our students' evolving relationships with text look like in daily classroom practice? Here are some suggestions:

**Gauge current student reading engagement.** Reading engagement is not fixed; rather it can change from day to day or even within the same period of independent reading! Devote time to kidwatching during independent reading. Use our **Sample Reading Engagement Continuum** to guide your observations and data collection. Are there students whose current engagement reveals information about their relationships with text?

**Host one-on-one Discovery Conferences with students.** Similar to engagement, students' reading identities and relationships with text are not fixed. Devote time to hosting one-on-one **Discovery Conferences** with your readers, focusing on the question, Who are you as a reader now? Check out these **Re-Discovery** sample questions you can use to guide your conversations with students.

**Refresh the classroom library.** Engage your classroom in a library audit. What titles, topics, text types or genres are missing? Which has the class outgrown? What books go with an upcoming unit?

**Create fresh invitations.** Put all your kidwatching and conferring data together to determine what fresh text selections might reinvigorate student engagement and, if needed, repair or expand student's relationships with text. Partner with your school librarian or colleagues and expand your knowledge of texts at the same time. Here are some great suggestions for exciting invitations:

**Curate personal book stacks.** Present a student with a fresh stack of texts you curated with them in mind. The power of books to connect with our students serves to support both their relationships with texts and teachers.

**Encourage student-led book recommendations.** Providing models as needed, invite students to recommend their favorite recent reads with their classmates. If possible, have several copies on hand to support the rush!

**Intentionally select read aloud titles with independent reading in mind.**

Reading books aloud is a powerful method for introducing students to a genre, topic or author they had not considered before. Have additional copies or other selections from that author available in your classroom library to capitalize on the interest.

### Why Relationships with the Idea of Stamina and Joy Matter

Two terms are bandied about quite a bit in school talk about independent reading: **stamina** and **joy**. We want to make sure students can read for long stretches of time, can sustain their interest and comprehension through longer texts...this naturally leads to conversations about stamina. We also want to make sure that children are happy learners, and that the reading classroom is a positive environment in which all students can thrive...this naturally leads to conversations about joy.

Yet we grapple with both of these terms and how differently they are defined across various school contexts.

Ample research on independent reading connects reading growth with the volume of time spent engaged in reading (Allington, 2013). As a result, many classrooms measure **stamina** in terms of the number of minutes a class read, or the number of pages a child was able to read in a single sitting. Yet the word stamina troubles us; it feels synonymous with endurance, as if reading is something that students must endure until the time sounds. Our concern is that this definition of stamina is too narrow and leads to complaint or disengaged readers.

We choose to view **stamina** as a by-product of engagement. This opens up space to focus on the importance of meaning making, centering students' experiences as readers, as opposed to centering the literal number of minutes children spend "on task with their reading." This stance on stamina invites teachers to prioritize questions such as, "For how long are we students engaged in meaning making as readers today?" and "What did meaning making look like in our reading classroom today?" With this lens, reading becomes active, expands to include student talk and invites/welcomes/expands to include a wider range of visible engagement.

Often, as adults, we assume that the children in front of us understand exactly what we mean, particularly when we think we are being abundantly clear. And then, a student says something

that makes us aware that we need to dig a little deeper. Just a few days ago, we were talking with a group of students in a third-grade classroom about their joyful independent reading plans for the new year when one student asked us, *"I don't know what you are talking about. What does it mean for reading to be joyful anyway?"*

So we paused and asked ourselves the same question about **joy**. Of course, we have some sort of visceral knowledge that we want students' reading lives to be joyful, but what does that really mean? A quick bit of reading led us to a definition of joy that included but also extended beyond the feeling of happiness; joy is associated with increased engagement, feelings of self-efficacy and a desire to share one's thoughts and feelings with others.

**We began to brainstorm what this might mean for the reading classroom:**

***Joy is choice.***

***Joy is reading for long stretches.***

***Joy is reading with purpose - what purpose is up to you.***

***Joy is sharing your reading with someone who cares.***

***Joy is solving reading puzzles.***

***Joy is reading something that challenges you and feeling changed.***

***Joy is learning something new.***

***Joy is being seen.***

***Joy is seeing something another way.***

***Joy is reading with a partner***

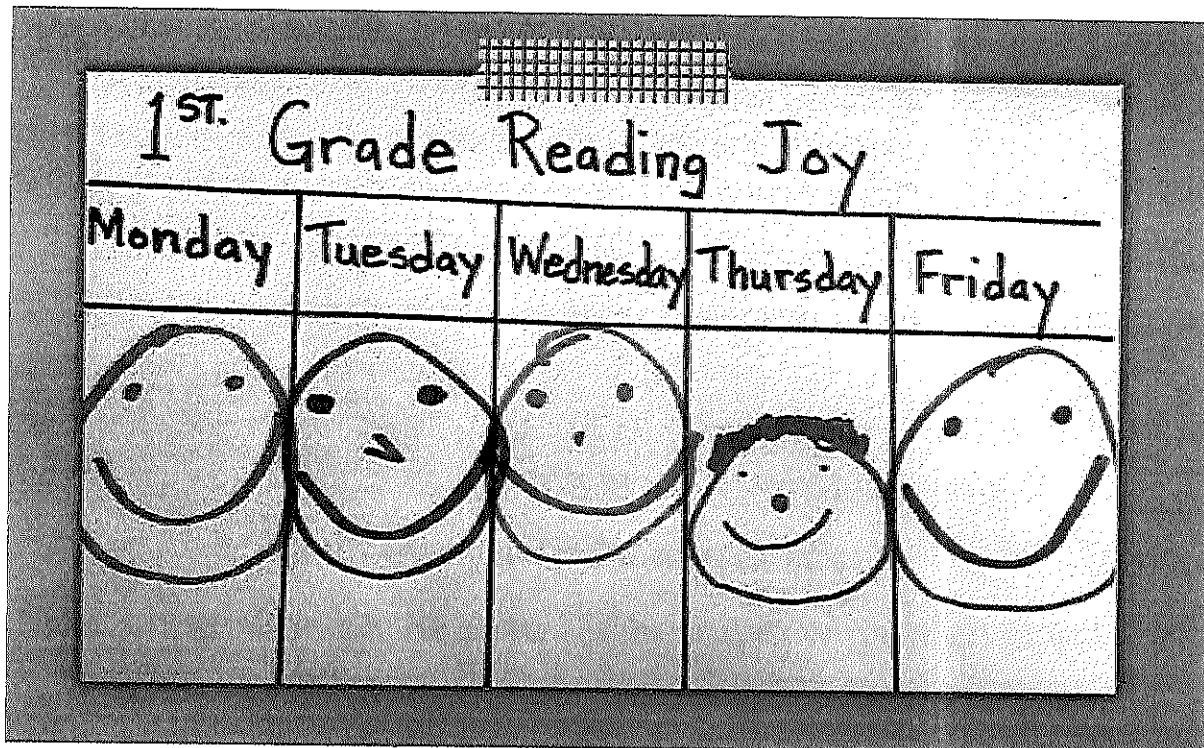
This wider stance on joy grants space to a wider range of experience with text as it includes the joy that comes from tackling something challenging to the joy of sharing a favorite text with a friend.

Consider how **stamina** and **joy** are discussed and are visible in your classroom. To reimagine their role in the classroom, here are a few suggestions:

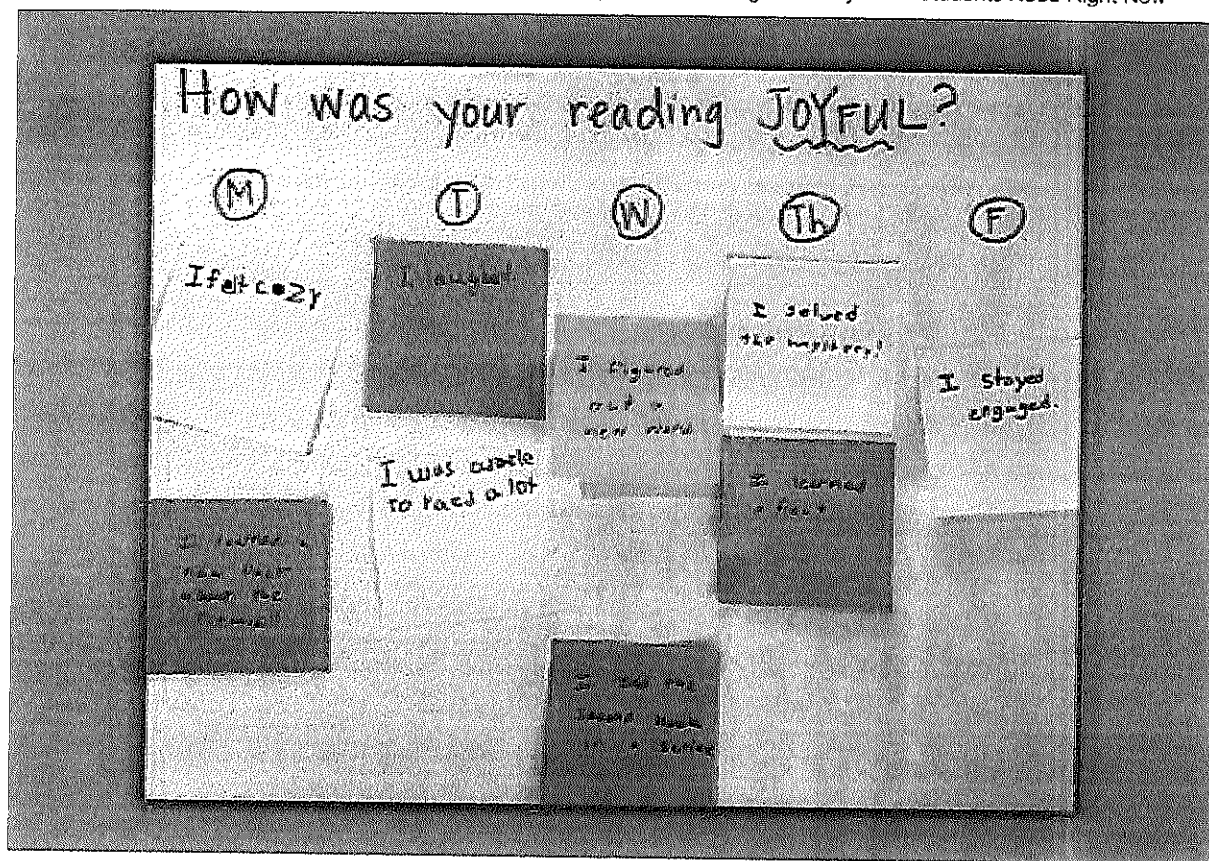
**Conduct a student inquiry.** Pose the question to your students: What can reading stamina mean? What can joy look like during reading? Over the course of a few days, challenge your

students to bring concrete examples and observations to this growing conversation.

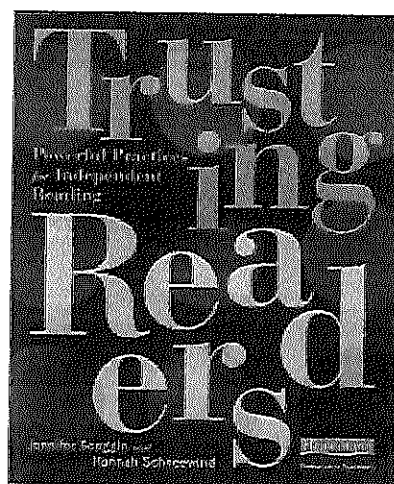
**Gauge joy.** Create a daily chart that allows students to track their level of reading joy over the course of a week. For younger students, that might look like this:



For older students, that same chart might extend to include examples:



As you reflect on where students are and how you want them to grow over the next few months, do not be tricked into looking for answers in a packaged curriculum or a worksheet. Do not fall into the trap of focusing on deficits. Instead, feel confident in the decision that all students benefit from Independent Reading. Use your energy to focus on student strengths, to nurture students' relationships with text and to frame a broader, more productive definition of joy.



To learn more about *Trusting Readers*, visit [Heinemann.com](https://www.heinemann.com).

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**Dr. Jennifer Scoggin** has been a teacher, author, speaker, curriculum writer, and literacy consultant. Jennifer's interest in the evolving identities of both students and teachers and her growing obsession with children's literature led her to and informs her work. Jen began her career teaching first and second grades in Harlem, New York. In her current role as a literacy consultant, Jennifer collaborates with teachers to create engaging literacy opportunities for children. She holds a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Teachers College, Columbia University and has previously published two books about literacy instruction and life in the classroom.



**Hannah Schneewind** has been a teacher, staff developer, curriculum writer, keynote speaker and national literacy consultant. She brings with her over 25 years of experience to the education world. Hannah's interest in student and teacher agency and her belief in the power of books informs her work with schools.

Hannah began her career as a first grade teacher at P.S. 321 in Brooklyn, New York, and her classroom was used as a model classroom for teachers around the city and country. The trust the administrators placed in her along with the culture of collaboration in the school formed her beliefs in the power and

possibilities of schools.

Together, Jen and Hannah created Trusting Readers, a group dedicated to collaborating with teachers to design literacy opportunities that invite all students to be engaged and to thrive as readers and writers. You can connect with them on Twitter at [@TrustingReaders](https://twitter.com/TrustingReaders).