




FIRST PERSON

Guided Reading: How to Make Kids Hate (or Love) to Read

By Justin Minkel

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Imagine yourself curled up in your favorite chair by the fireplace, a mug of cocoa  [Back to Story](#) spiked with Bailey's within reach. Open the book you've been waiting all day to read, a tale of adventure and intrigue that takes you out of yourself and your everyday world for a couple of precious hours.

Now go through your book and highlight all the words with the long "o" sound. Search for the answers to five "right there" questions that have nothing to do with the heart of the story, like "What color shoelaces was the villain wearing?" Get your significant other to sign off on your reading log as proof that you did your nightly reading, then provide a written response to a prompt about the novel, wrapping up with the inevitable conclusion, "As you can see..."

School has a way of messing up even the inherently joyful act of reading a good book.

If I had to distill our job as elementary teachers to a few fundamentals, at the heart would be, "Make sure our students love to read." Here are four decisions that can determine whether Guided Reading nourishes a love of books or kills it.

1. Books vs. Not-Books

If you want your students to hate reading... Don't let them get their grubby little paws on any real books! Photocopy stapled packets, preferably decodable text with lines like "That bad rat sat on a black mat. Smack that bad rat!" and have them highlight all the words that follow consonant-vowel-consonant patterns.

If you want your students to love reading... Make sure they have real books in their hands.

The [Scholastic Reading Club](#) is a good source for finding Guided Reading sets that students will get excited about. Author Mo Willems' brilliant *Piggie and Elephant* series is both easy to read and hilarious. Sight words are also more fun to learn when the books feature superheroes like Iron Man or the Incredible Hulk.

There is a world of difference between commercial readers produced by textbook companies and sold only to schools vs., the kinds of books children might actually choose if they saw them in a bookstore. It's harder for kindergarten teachers to find those great books, because there just aren't as many for emerging readers. But they're out there and we need to work hard to get them into our students' hands.

If you can find the funding, have your students set up a [home library](#) in their bedrooms, and send home some of the books you read together for them to keep. Kids living in poverty often lack access to the books at home that middle class



families almost always have, and this "book gap" has a huge impact on reading development. If we put great books into our students' hands and homes, it can transform their world.

Digital texts are great, too, if you have iPads or laptops. There is an amazing array of free ebooks, like the initiative **Open eBooks** started by former first lady Michelle Obama. Apps like **Epic** read the

texts to the kids—just make sure they have earbuds or headphones so the noise level doesn't get distracting for other students.

2. Reading vs. Worksheets

If you want your kids to hate reading... Make sure they spend more time filling out worksheets about their books than actually reading them.

If you want your kids to love reading... Balance written responses with plenty of time to just enjoy their books.

Researcher Richard Allington **distinguishes reading from reading-related "stuff"** like copying vocabulary words. Time spent on true reading translates to accelerated reading development, and it builds a love of books that could last the rest of our students' lives.

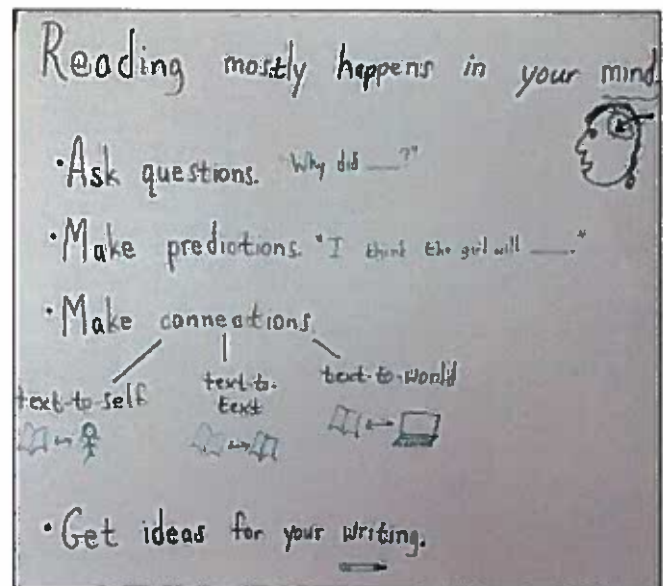
Children need to think while they read, so it's important to have them predict, infer, make connections, and ask questions. I model "think-alouds" during both Guided Reading and Read Aloud to demonstrate the invisible parts of reading that happen in the mind, and I often have my 2nd graders do a brief written response before, during, or after they read. But the kids can also do that mental work in their heads, or talk about it with a partner, rather than always writing it down.

Even for the groups who aren't meeting with the teacher that day, most of their time should be spent truly reading: browsing digital texts on their iPads, reading a book on their independent level, or following along in a more difficult book at a listening center. Centers can be great, but make sure they're purposeful. They should engage kids in reading books they're excited about—not just keeping them quiet with busy work.

3. Conversation vs. Lecture

If you want them to hate reading... Talk in a sing-song lecturing voice, begin every question with "Boys and girls...," and approach your session with a group of five kids the same way you would treat a whole-class lesson.

If you want them to love reading... Make it a conversation.



I usually read aloud at least part of a book while the kids follow along, in order to model fluency, strategies for figuring out tricky words, and the mental work involved in predictions, connections, and inferences. But we spend a lot of time just talking about the story or topic we're reading about.

The kids often interrupt me in the middle of a sentence to tell me about a video they saw on YouTube or something that happened to them last week, and it's always relevant to what we're reading. Their eyes light up and they blurt out connections, facts they know about the topic, sudden epiphanies, or questions that had never occurred to them before.

A study with young children found that drilling them on letter sounds was useless for their reading development, while engaging them in conversation had a strong correlation to their strength as readers later in life. A conversation is fundamentally different from a lecture, and it's a huge reason that Guided Reading is worth the considerable prep time and management it takes to keep four or five groups engaged at once.

4. Depth vs. Frequency

If you want kids to hate reading... Rush all five groups through your 45-minute Guided Reading block each day, preferably with a loud bell to interrupt them from what they're doing every eight minutes or so.

If you want kids to love reading... Make time for a meaningful session, even if that means you don't meet with every group every day.

The speed-dating approach doesn't provide a lot of time for thoughtfully engaging with a book, and you bleed class time in transitions. I meet with my lowest group of readers four or five times a week, while I only check in with my highest group once or twice each week. The tradeoff is that each session lasts at least 20 minutes, which makes for a calmer pace and deeper conversations about what we're reading.

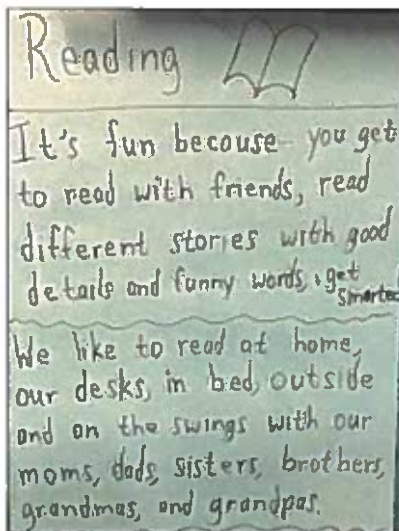
It takes time to teach 7-year-olds, let alone kindergartners, to work independently and stay focused for 20 minutes without the teacher there to guide them. Every day, I have students take "The Guided Reading Pledge": "I promise to use all my time to read, write, and think; to speak in a 12-inch whisper (a voice that can only be heard by someone 12 inches away from you); and to let Mr. Minkel work with his group." At the end of every Guided Reading session, they rate themselves with a thumb up, down, or sideways to show well they did at keeping each part of the promise.

Pleasure and Purpose

School is good at breaking complex abilities like reading down into various pieces. It's not always so good at giving students time to fit those parts back into a coherent whole.

Our students need to learn all kinds of things to become strong readers. But sometimes we make the process so cumbersome and artificial that it strips the joy from the act of reading.

As adults, we read for pleasure or purpose. We make inferences, connections, and predictions, visualize what the author describes, ask questions, and apply what we have read to our lives and our world. We also laugh, wonder, and feel powerful emotions. We combine dozens of mental processes in reading a single page—and we very rarely write all that mental work down.



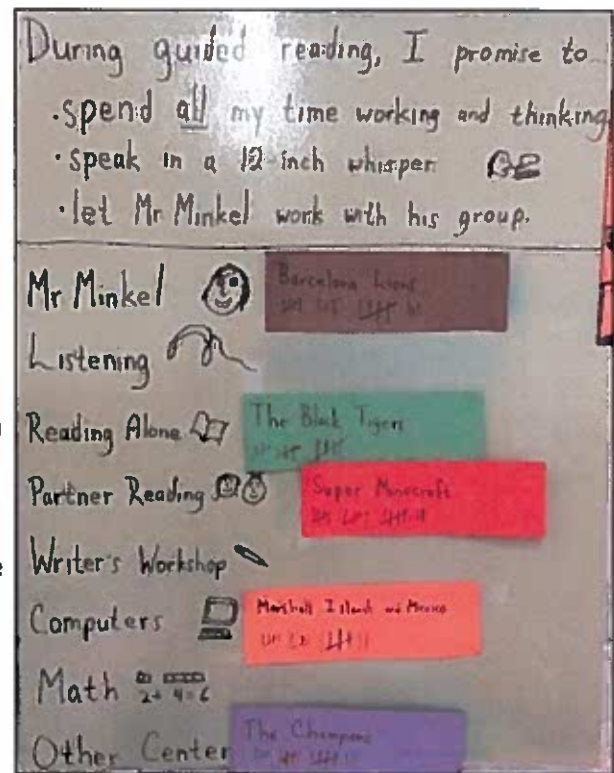
Teachers need to make sure students get plenty of time to experience the joy of simply reading a great book, free from the annoyance of an assigned task or constant interruption.

We might even consider installing a couch, end table, and lamp near the classroom library. A couple of fuzzy blankets, even a mug of cocoa from time to time, wouldn't be amiss.

Novelist and screenwriter William Nicholson wrote, "We read to know we are not alone." We also read for the same reason we swim in the ocean, run across a field, or splash in mud puddles: It feels good.

Let's make sure we don't sabotage that pleasure for the young readers in our care.

Photos taken by the author in his classroom.



Justin Minkel teaches 2nd and 3rd grade at Jones Elementary in Springdale, Ark., a high-performing, high-poverty school where 85 percent of the students are English-language learners. A former Teach For America corps member, Minkel was the 2007 Arkansas Teacher of the Year. In his instruction, he is focused on bringing advanced learning opportunities to immigrant and at-risk students. Follow him at [@JustinMinkel](https://www.instagram.com/JustinMinkel).

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