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Reading: The Core Skill Pages 40-43

Opening the Literature Window

Carol Jago

With help from the teacher, students can read books they wouldn't tackle on their own.

I owe a refund to the first 8th graders I taught. Convinced then as I am now that reading was a key to success in school and beyond, I became obsessed with turning reluctant scholars into readers. I made it my mission to find books that I believed would do the work for me, scouring secondhand bookstores and garage sales for anything on skateboarding, surfing, whatever I thought would entice them. I filled my classroom with short, easy-to-read, funny books. Alas, this "build it, and they will come" approach didn't work. Students glanced at the books and told me in no uncertain terms that they hated reading. The only volumes that attracted any attention were *The Guinness Book of World Records* and *Name Your Baby*. It made no sense. I loved to read. Why didn't they?

Discouraged but determined, I continued to stock my classroom library with books like *Go Ask Alice*; *My Darling, My Hamburger*; and *The Outsiders*; but I turned for curricular guidance to the work of Lev Vygotsky (1962). Reading that "the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it" (p.104), I realized that I was confusing independent reading with literature study. If students can read a book on their own, it probably isn't the best choice for classroom study. For one thing, teachers run the danger of ruining novels like Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* with talk of fore shadowing and with reading-log assignments. Such books are best when swallowed whole and passed from reader to reader.

Young adult fiction offers mirrors wherein students see their own experiences and emotions reflected. These stories help young readers know they are not the first and won't be the last to feel as they do. Literature study, on the other hand, offers students windows to other worlds, other cultures, other times. It poses intellectual challenges, demanding that students stretch and grow.

In *The Anatomy of Influence*, Harold Bloom (2011) proposes three criteria for choosing works to be read, reread, and taught: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, and wisdom. These seem to me an obvious improvement over short, easy-to-read, and funny. But literature teachers must do more than simply hand out copies of *Romeo and Juliet* and expect 9th graders to be enthralled by its aesthetic splendor.

The Right Instruction

Making complex works accessible to young readers requires artful instruction. But what does such instruction look like? I have a few ideas.

1. Stop telling students that reading is fun.

Reading can be fun, but constant declarations about it put books in competition with video games and other activities that students find easier and more obviously appealing.

If students groan, "I can't do it. This is too hard" as you distribute copies of a 300-page novel, agree with them that it may be hard, but reassure them that with effort and your help they will be able to do it. Experience has taught teenagers that if they complain loudly for long enough, the teacher will often abandon a difficult text for something shorter, simpler, and more fun. Don't fall for it.

2. Tap students' prior knowledge.

An effective way to introduce the major conflict in Sophocles's *Antigone* is to have students write about a time they stood up to authority—preparing them for the argument between Antigone and her uncle, the king, Creon. On the other hand, it would not be particularly effective to prepare students for Lady Macbeth's "Out, damned spot!" speech in *Macbeth* by asking students to talk with a partner about a time they had a stubborn spot on their hands. Make sure that the prior knowledge students explore is relevant to an important issue in the text.

Deborah Wilchek, a teacher at Rockville High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, begins her unit on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by showing students various covers for the novel and

inviting them to analyze them. She asks students to consider the significant features of the cover, the key ideas that the images convey, and the possible audience for the book. Opening lessons like this point the way to the central ideas in the work.

3. Address, don't avoid, academic vocabulary.

Instead of looking for books without difficult vocabulary, complex syntax, or figurative language, teach students how to meet these challenges head on. As Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan explain in *Creating Robust Vocabulary* (2008), new words should be introduced in a meaningful context, instead of as a list that students study in isolation. Rather than preteaching all the hard words in a chapter, teach a few that are crucial to understanding.

For example, I have found that when I am teaching *Julius Caesar*, it is crucial for my 10th graders to grasp Brutus's motivations. Teaching students the meanings of *stoic*, *gullible*, and *idealist* and then asking them to do a close reading of Act 1, Scene 2 looking for evidence of these traits in Brutus's speech to Cassius helps lay the groundwork for later events in the play and deepens their understanding of the new words they are learning.

4. Teach students how to negotiate complex syntax.

Reading long, complicated sentences is a challenge for everyone, but particularly for students in the habit of skimming and scanning Facebook updates. Teachers need to help students slow the pace of their reading for literature and develop the habit of rereading when a sentence doesn't seem to make sense. Rereading difficult passages doesn't have a cool acronym or fancy graphic organizer, but it is the technique experienced readers employ most often. When was the last time you reached for a K-W-L chart when struggling through a challenging text?

Writers like W. E. B. Du Bois don't use complex syntax in books like *The Souls of Black Folk* to annoy their readers but to express complex ideas. And artful instruction doesn't rewrite difficult passages, casting them into simpler prose for ease of digestion, but rather assists students in parsing each phrase to discover the nuances in Du Bois's message. We can't do the work for students. They must do it for themselves. Selecting important sentences for pairs of students to translate into everyday language can be effective for helping students develop confidence with complex syntax. Telling students what Du Bois is saying only reinforces their belief that such reading is beyond them.

It is not possible to read an Emily Dickinson poem once through and understand its cognitive power and aesthetic splendor. However, no student I have ever met would comply with the instruction to read a poem five times over for homework. Artful teachers trick students into rereading. Elizabeth Nelms (1988) had her seniors read the same poem, Ted Hughes's "Deceptions," for homework from Monday through Friday and keep a log of their emerging observations about the images they found. Nelms explains, "As the days passed, the students' observations of the changing weather began to merge with the poet's images as he sought to capture the elusive nature of spring." She created a reason for students to reread and a framework for them to record the development of their own comprehension. I've used this strategy with success for more than 20 years.

5. Hold students accountable for their reading.

In an ideal world, students are motivated to keep up with the reading in order to participate in our rich classroom conversations. In the real world, we sometimes need to hold their feet to the fire. Even the most diligent students sometimes need the threat of a quiz to remind them to keep up with assigned reading. Unfortunately, quizzes are time-consuming to create, duplicate, and correct.

In addition, students who fall behind depend on online resources like SparkNotes to catch up. Rob Thais, a colleague at Santa Monica High School, devised an efficient way to check that students were doing the reading. He goes to the SparkNotes website, prints out the summary of the chapter assigned for homework, and hands it out when students come to class. He then tells students to write three things that occurred in the chapter that don't appear in this paragraph. This simple ploy achieves two purposes: (1) Students now know you are aware that some of them have turned to SparkNotes, and (2) the quizzes are easy to correct.

In too many schools, teachers have stopped assigning homework reading altogether, principally because students have stopped doing it. This is the path to perdition for literature study. If a teacher reads *Lord of the Flies* aloud to a class of 10th graders, the only person becoming a better reader is the teacher.

I sometimes hear that there aren't enough copies of the books to send home with students. In many one-to-one laptop or e-reader programs, the machines must remain at school. This is educational malpractice. Students need to develop the self-discipline and stamina necessary to read for extended periods of time on their own. How else will they be ready for college? In a College Board study of the class of 2010, 54 percent of students found their college courses more difficult than they expected (Hart Research Associates, 2011). This finding will come as no surprise to English teachers struggling to convince high school seniors to read 20 pages of assigned daily reading.

6. Teach cognitively powerful works.

Sandra Stotsky's (2010) research in *Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey* demonstrates that the literature taught in English classes has decreased in complexity over the past decade. In our effort to make literature study more contemporary and relevant, we have lost much of the rigor. It need not have been the case. Works by Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, John Edgar Wideman, Jorge Borges, and James Baldwin have all the cognitive power and aesthetic splendor of Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Henry David Thoreau. But because works by Morrison and others of her stature pose the very same textual challenges as the earlier works—difficult vocabulary, complex syntax, figurative language, and length—teachers often choose to teach simpler books.

The common core state standards attempt to remedy this downward trend by providing a list of text exemplars to represent the complexity, quality, and range of works students should be taught at each grade level. Critics decry the list as a *de facto* national reading list, but the Common Core State Standards Initiative (n.d.) states that the choices are meant only as guideposts to help educators select texts at a similar reading level.

One exemplar from the grades 2–3 list is William Steig's *Amos and Boris*. Notice the vocabulary and syntactical challenges this sentence from the story poses:

One night, in a phosphorescent sea, he marveled at the sight of some whales spouting luminous water; and later, lying on the deck of his boat gazing at the immense, starry sky, the tiny mouse Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast living universe, felt thoroughly akin to it all.

If students are reading such wondrous words at 8 years old, imagine what they will be capable of at 18.

Rigor for All

The United States needs a reading renaissance. Students need to stretch beyond what's comfortable to tackle challenging texts. They need to spend time reading material that requires focus and concentration, material that they might not attempt on their own. And they need the support and encouragement of teachers who help them open the literary window onto this new world.

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[Carol Jago](#) has taught middle and high school in Santa Monica, California, for 32 years. She is past president of the National Council of Teachers of English and author of *With Rigor for All: Helping Students Meet Common Core Standards for Reading Literature* (Heinemann 2011).

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