

10 Questions About Independent Reading



Reading expert Jennifer Serravallo answers your tough questions on how to make the most of independent time. BY DANA TRUBY

TEACHERS KNOW THAT ESTABLISHING a robust independent reading program takes more than giving kids a little quiet time after lunch. But how do you set up a program that will maximize your students' gains? You have to know their reading levels inside and out, help them find just-right books, and continue to guide them during independent time, says reading expert Jennifer Serravallo.

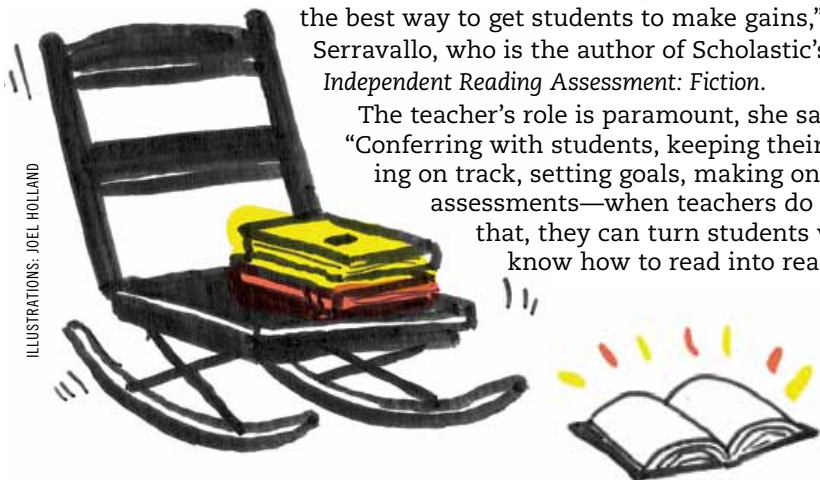
"When you give your students the chance to practice and strengthen their reading skills on high-quality, high-interest books that they can read with confidence and accuracy, they will make progress—in fact, studies have shown that independent reading is the best way to get students to make gains," says Serravallo, who is the author of Scholastic's new *Independent Reading Assessment: Fiction*.

The teacher's role is paramount, she says. "Conferring with students, keeping their reading on track, setting goals, making ongoing assessments—when teachers do all of that, they can turn students who know how to read into readers."

1 This fall, I'm looking to make free reading time a bigger part of my language arts curriculum.

I don't know where to start. What are the most important ingredients for success?

First of all, you need a well-stocked independent reading library so that students have a wonderful variety of books to choose from. Second, you need an assessment that you feel comfortable with, and that tells you accurately the level of material and reading goals for each of your students. And third, you need to teach during independent reading, to support students as they work toward their goals.



ILLUSTRATIONS: JOEL HOLLAND



INDEPENDENT READING



2 My administrator disagrees with setting aside time for silent reading during school. She wants us to assign independent reading for homework instead. What do you suggest?

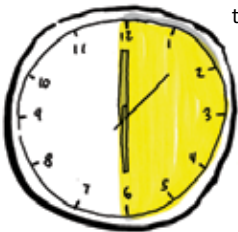
I'm sorry to hear that. Ideally, you should do both—have time in class and assign around 30 minutes of independent reading for homework. You might try sharing your strategies with your administrator. Explain that reading time also serves as instructional time during which you can work closely with students in small groups or individually to help them gain proficiency. Meanwhile, the rest of the class gets time to practice reading successfully.

3 How much independent reading time is appropriate at each grade level?

Your goal should be 30 minutes or more in kindergarten and the first grade and at least 40 minutes a day for second grade and up. That's uninterrupted reading—not counting any mini-lesson you might teach. You could start the year with half that, or split the

time into two periods. Teach strategies for building stamina (for example, students might place a Post-it several pages ahead and push to read to their goal before

taking a break). And teach students strategies like rereading to get back on track. Tell them: No runner starts with a marathon. It all begins with a 15-minute jog!



4 How can I help my students gain confidence about picking the right books for themselves?

Give them lots of chances to succeed. Let kids know what their reading levels are, and make sure all books are marked by level. Organize some of your library bins by level and others by topic, such as "Cool Girl Characters" or "Gross Things" or "Wild Adventures." When a student doesn't like a book, encourage him to ask why. Is it too hard? Is the subject not interesting? Does he prefer something else—nonfiction or first-person narration or fantasy? Help students figure out their own preferences, and they'll find more just-right books. And remember, when a kid seems fidgety and bored with a book, it might not be the subject matter but the difficulty. Make sure you've correctly assessed the level at which the student can read with a high degree of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

5 I'm a relatively new teacher and my classroom library is not that large. How can I make do with a small library?

If your classroom library doesn't have enough books to get every student through the week, there are a number of ways to supplement it. You could borrow books from your school library or swap part of your library with a colleague's—and freshen up both collections at the same time. Many teachers I know build their libraries through book club points and Scholastic warehouse sales. They also visit garage sales and book sales and look for sets of books on eBay and freecycle.org.



6 Every September, my library is perfect. By December, it looks like a storm blew through. How can I keep things running smoothly?

Have a plan for how kids will borrow and return books, and be ready for books to be taken home or to get lost or damaged. Try to be at peace with that, knowing it's a sign that kids are reading. Consider assigning a student the job of classroom librarian, and make sure books are clearly labeled so it's easy to refile them. You might give kids cardboard strips or paint stirrers with their names on them. When they take out a book, they put the marker in its place so they'll know where the book goes later on.





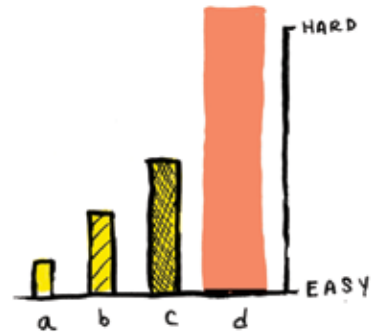
7 What are some informal ways to assess my students' independent reading?

Assessment should be taking place constantly. View every conference or small group as an opportunity. Listen to your students read aloud for a bit, ask comprehension questions, and try to find something to teach based on what you hear. For example, if you ask your students, "What are you thinking about the character?" and they reply with a particular trait, have them collect these traits across several chapters to see if the character always acts the same way or if there are times when the character surprises them. Ideally, both what you're looking for and what you're choosing to teach are informed by the goal you've set with the student, your current unit of study in reading, and your knowledge of text-level complexities.



8 How can I get kids talking about books with one another in an authentic way?

Offer children a chance to sign up for book clubs around a particular topic—such as football or natural disasters or even an "anti-princess" theme—and include a range of levels. Challenge them to read a certain number of books in the genre. Then, two or three times a week, set aside time for the clubs to meet and talk. If you have enough copies in your classroom library, give students the opportunity to read the same book. If you don't, they can read different books and then swap them before talking.



9 How can I tell when students are ready for harder texts?

Reading easy books isn't always a bad thing. In fact, research has shown that "easy" reading can actually help kids increase their reading level! Just be mindful of teaching them to do deeper comprehension work within those "easy" books. Students are ready to move to a new level when they've accomplished their goals within the current one. They should be able to handle the plot, character, vocabulary, and thematic challenges. Often, kids need to read many books at a given level with teacher support before moving on.

10 Should students be reading both informational and literary texts? Or can I let them choose?

Across the year, and across all subject areas, students are expected to have a 50/50 balance between informational and literary reading. But keep in mind that this ratio includes reading within the content areas. I think it's fine to let students choose what interests them. Many teachers find it helpful for students to keep a reading log so that they can self-assess their reading mix and maintain a balanced diet of genres. □



Jennifer Serravallo is a literacy consultant, researcher, and author. Her most recent book is *Independent Reading Assessment: Fiction*, published by Scholastic.