When the first edition of this book was published in 1996, Mike and Jim stated in the preface that they felt the subtitle should be “A children’s literature textbook for people who don’t like children’s literature textbooks.” Until that time, they had taught children’s literature at the university without using a textbook because virtually all the ones available were too expensive and too extensive for an introductory course. They owned and regularly consulted the available texts, but they seemed more like reference books. The biggest concern, though, was neither the cost nor the length but the hours stolen from students when they could be reading actual children’s books. The focus of a children’s literature course should be on those marvelous children’s titles. They are more important than any textbook, including this one, and they originally wrote this book on that assumption.

Since that time, two additional authors have been added to this textbook, bringing fresh and additional perspectives to the field of children’s literature and to the pages of this book. Though the massive children’s literature tomes are still around today, a variety of shorter texts are now available. As with the authors of competing textbooks, we have written our book as an overview to shed light on children’s literature and its use with young readers. However, one way in which ours may differ is in its conversational rather than academic voice. We have made an effort to make the reading as enjoyable as possible, while still providing all the pertinent information and ideas relating to the topic.

Our job as teachers, whether university or elementary, is to introduce children’s books and illuminate them for our students. These books can offer insight and pleasure without having to be explained, analyzed, or used as objects of study. Yet appropriate commentary, if it is secondary to the books and doesn’t become too self-important, can help both teachers and children find their own ways to the rewards of reading.

The goal of this text, then, is to provide a practical overview of children’s books, offering a framework and background information while keeping the spotlight on the books themselves. That’s why we kept the textbook itself and each chapter short.

And that’s why we limited the book lists. The world of children’s literature offers only one completely dependable book list—your own. Throughout the following chapters, we present ours, absolutely trustworthy in every way—to us. You are allowed to harbor serious doubts about our choices, but the value of the lists is that they may save you time wandering up and down library aisles.

We organized our book lists at the end of the chapters under five different headings. It is important to note that the titles we suggest are mostly for young readers up through eighth grade (age 14).

1. *Fifteen Timeless Gems.* The 15 books listed at the ends of Chapters 7–15 are terrific reading. These lists are short, the result of much negotiating, often emotional, but largely friendly. The purpose of the 15 is to provide solid suggestions for those who wonder where to find a good book. Each title is annotated to give a brief idea of the content.
2. *Fifteen Gems of the New Millennium.* These books are, again, terrific titles but in this case, all are books published since 2000. Each title is annotated to give a brief idea of the content. We included this list because we realize that even great books like some on our “Timeless Gems” list sometimes do go out of print. Being more recently published, the New Millennium titles are perhaps easier to locate and, arguably, might have greater appeal for some modern readers.

3. *Others We Like.* These titles (generally around 30) also are annotated. Each is a book we like very much. Don’t be surprised if you find some of them more appealing than the *Fifteen Timeless Gems* and *Fifteen Gems of the New Millennium.*

4. *Easier to Read.* Next, we have added 10 to 15 titles that are shorter and appeal to children who are struggling to make reading a rewarding pastime.

5. *Picture Books.* In most genre chapters, we have included 15 to 20 picture books we consider excellent. Not all of these titles are for use exclusively in the lower grades; many are appropriate for the upper grades as well.

**New to This Edition**

Dr. Terrell Young from Brigham Young University and Dr. Gregory Bryan from the University of Manitoba have taken a larger role in the preparation of this edition of the textbook, further adding their expertise as well as their preferences and perspectives. In revising the previous edition of *Children’s Literature, Briefly,* we continued to concentrate on trying to achieve greater clarity—making this book as user friendly and understandable as possible. This required us to constantly reflect on literature, reading education, and education in general. Though our philosophies have remained mostly unchanged, we believe that we understand them better than before and therefore have been able to communicate them more clearly and effectively.

Besides the changes mentioned already, we have made a number of other alterations, including the following:

- We have added a poem at the start of each chapter. These poems provide a good starting point to think about and discuss before beginning to read the chapter material. We believe the poems serve to “prime the pump” and get people thinking and talking about the topic suggested by the chapter heading. This will help prepare readers for the chapter ahead.

- Each chapter now begins with a list of learning objectives. These will help to guide readers as they proceed through each chapter, alerting them to what we consider to be some of the key material.

- At the end of each chapter, we have also included a brief chapter summary. Each summary will remind the reader of some of the main points from that chapter, helping readers to recall important details.

- We amalgamated what was previously the first and last chapter of the text. Bringing that information together into our new first chapter, we feel we more succinctly and more clearly explain the importance of reading and how best to help children become lifelong lovers of reading.

- We added a new list of favorite titles—the *Fifteen Gems of the New Millennium* referred to previously. As explained, we believe this increases the likelihood that our readers will
be easily able to find the books we recommend as great titles likely to appeal to today’s children.

• Whereas in previous editions of this textbook our lists of favorite titles have been restricted to chapter books (completely separate from the lists of picture books), we have now added picture books to our “favorite 15” lists. We feel that when identifying our favorite titles, it is most accurate to include a mix of chapter books and picture books.

• Throughout the textbook, we have updated examples and included new research findings. We want this book to remain relevant and up to date so that our readers can feel secure in the knowledge that they are gaining exposure to the newest children’s literature titles and being informed by the latest research findings.

• We have continued to place greater emphasis on modern publishing trends. For instance, things such as graphic novels, novelized versions of traditional fairy tales, and free verse novels all have a greater presence in this edition of the textbook. In our discussion of picture books, for instance, we have added a new section on graphic novels and we have also added a whole new list of recommended titles to that chapter—a list of our favorite graphic novels.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the reviewers of this edition of our manuscript for their valuable insights and comments: Catherine Kurkjian, Central Connecticut State University; Mary Napoli, Pennsylvania State, Harrisburg; Barbara A. Ward, Washington State University; and Teresa Young, Xavier University, Ohio.
Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student will be able to:

- Summarize the immediate and long-term benefits of engaged reading.
- Describe the role of the teacher in engaging students in reading.
- Differentiate between extrinsic and intrinsic incentives for students to read.
- Describe how each suggestion for organizing the classroom would contribute to a student's motivation to read.

Why Read?

by Kate Coombs

Why breathe? Why know that the shape of the world is a story, a big story full of little stories, like a great bird wrapping its bright wings around small fluttering chicks?

Why Read?

by Kate Coombs

It begins with goodnight, the story at bedtime—it begins with three goats, three bears, three pigs, three wishes. If you’re lucky the stories keep going and the marks on the page like a scattered ants’ nest become words.

Reading is important. Period. Even in today’s climate of constant controversy and limitless lawsuits, where no one appears to agree with anyone on anything, reading receives unanimous support. An anti-reading position has no voice, claims no champion, and gets no press. No magazine or newspaper prints an article about the evils of reading or how time spent with print is wasted. The push is always toward more reading. So why is reading universally acclaimed and, given the support for reading, how can we motivate children to read?
Chapter 1

Benefits of Engaged Reading

Engaged Reading—Immediate Benefits

Engaged reading, like eating healthy food, simultaneously yields both pleasure and benefit. When we chomp down on a juicy red apple, nibble on fresh green salads, or dine on delicious pink salmon, the delightful taste rewards us right then. No one needs to confirm the results; from our own personal taste buds, we know immediately that the bite is satisfying. In addition, our digestive system then turns the food into nutrients that keep us going. Benefits—energy and good health—automatically follow the pleasing food, but the primary reason for eating is the immediate reward of tasting good and satisfying our hunger.

*Immediate* is the operative word. At the very moment their eyes pass over the words, engaged readers are personally motivated, focused, and involved. They have their reward as soon as they are drawn into the subject, thinking of nothing beyond those sentences, paragraphs, and pages, even the reading process itself. Engaged readers don’t even see words after the first line or two. In a story, they see scenes, people, and action. In nonfiction, they test theories, think of applications, or chew on the facts.

When we already have an interest in what we read, engaged reading comes naturally. No one wonders if the instructions to assemble a swing set for a much-loved but impatient 3-year-old will make good reading. The purpose is determined, and the reading engages immediately. Before the first word is read, we know the instructions are worth it. At a bookstore sale table, a Civil War buff picks up a book on Stonewall Jackson and is likely to buy it. A child with an interest in dinosaurs is drawn to a book on the subject. Even when a book is not particularly well written, the person who is interested in the topic becomes an engaged reader without persuasion or effort.

If a reader does not display a specific interest, some books create that interest. The opening scene in *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008) often entices readers to turn the next page, and the next, and the next.

> There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife. The knife had a handle of polished black bone, and a blade finer and sharper than any razor. If it sliced you, you might not even know you had been cut, not immediately.

> The knife had done almost everything it was brought to that house to do, and both the blade and the handle were wet. (pp. 2–5)

Readers are left breathless at the conclusion of that opening scene… a family slaughtered in their own home, a toddler somehow fleeing the house and escaping the murderer, if only temporarily, and the knife-wielding assailant hot in pursuit of one more victim.

Nonfiction can have the same immediate attraction. In *When the Wolves Returned* by Dorothy Hinshaw Patent (2008), the opening page consists of a full-color photograph of a landscape containing thick green forests, rolling hills, a meandering river, and steam billowing from geysers. The text begins:

> Yellowstone is a very special place.

> Imagine a land where giant geysers blow jets of steam hundreds of feet into the chilly evening air, and large herds of elk graze along the river shore. (p. 3)

Immediate reward, a dependable criterion for determining why people choose to read, is difficult for others to predict. Yes, we can choose books that reflect the interests of a reader, and yes, we can recommend books that are pleasing to us. But only the individual reader knows what is personally attractive and satisfying and to what degree.
When we look only for specific information—the sodium content in a frozen lasagna, the definition of *arcadian*, or what a teacher said in the note a student brought home—it is essential that we get the facts but not essential that we read them ourselves. Seeking information from print indeed can be engaging, but if someone else reads and tells us what we want to know, we generally can be satisfied. In her transactional theory of literature and reading, Louise Rosenblatt (1978) calls this reading for facts *efferent* reading. We are engaged and motivated to acquire that knowledge, but it is not imperative that we discover it with our own eyes.

*Aesthetic* reading is different from efferent reading because the goal is not to acquire facts but to participate in an experience. In aesthetic reading, readers focus on what they are experiencing as their eyes pass over the words. This kind of reading cannot be summarized by another but must be done personally because it is not centered on data. The facts are not the most important part, engagement with the experience is. Knowing the plot of *The Winter Pony* (Lawrence, 2011) and the eventual outcome of the ill-fated Terra Nova Expedition is not the same as experiencing with Scott of the Antarctic the difficulties and deprivations of the race to the South Pole in 1911–1912. Being told that the protagonist in *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000) shakes up the social structure at school with her honest but unorthodox views of life comes nowhere close to being with her as she brings her ukulele and white rat to class. Reading for experience—aesthetic reading—can no more be done by someone else and then reported to us than another can do our eating. We don’t want information on food flavors; we want those flavors to flow over our own taste buds. When we read for experience, simply knowing how the book ends doesn’t satisfy us. We want to make that journey to the final page ourselves because when we have lived in a wonderful book, we are never quite the same again.

In short, engaged readers—those who read for personal reasons—know the satisfying feeling of finding pleasure in print and being rewarded in two areas: locating information and gaining experience.

**Engaged Reading—Long-Term Benefits**

In addition to the immediate rewards offered by engaged reading, a stunning number of benefits accumulate over time as by-products of reading for personal pleasure. Among other benefits, those who read satisfying books of their own choosing with some regularity can expect the following.

- Increased automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. We simply learn to read faster (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).
- Gains in reading achievement (Mol & Bus, 2011).
- Improved reading comprehension abilities (Diego-Medrano, 2013).
- Increased verbal fluency (Cullinan, 2000) and reading fluency (Wilfong, 2008).
- Increased knowledge of various topics (Neuman & Roskos, 2012) and higher scores on achievement tests in all subject areas (Krashen, 2004).
- Greater insights into human nature and decision making (Bruner, 1996).
- Better understanding of other cultures (Short, 2009).
- Higher scores on general knowledge exams (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).

Remember that all these benefits arrive naturally as we continue to read personally pleasing materials. The focus of that reading is still on the immediate rewards—we pick up books because they are interesting and satisfying—but unmistakable growth and development comes as we spend time with books we like.
The Teacher’s Role in Developing Engaged Readers

Reading Role Models

One concern is that teachers are not sufficiently strong reading role models. Recognizing the importance of teachers as role models for their students, Applegate and Applegate (2004) coined the term Peter effect. In the Christian bible, when a beggar asked Peter for money, he replied that he could not give the beggar what he did not have. Applegate and Applegate contend that a teacher who is not an enthusiastic, engaged, motivated reader cannot model for children reading enthusiasm, engagement, and motivation. In one study, more than half of the 195 preservice teachers were classified as “unenthusiastic” about reading. Only one-quarter (25.2%) of the preservice teacher candidates were classified as reading “enthusiasts,” of which only 6.7% were identified as being “avidly enthusiastic” about reading.

Teachers can help create the desire to read when they introduce and read from a variety of children’s books they personally like. Although no method is foolproof, choosing personal favorites to recommend to children seems likely to be at least as successful as any other way of selecting titles. When teachers introduce and read from books they genuinely like, students are more likely to be motivated, for two reasons:

1. Those books generally are good books. They usually are more solidly crafted and contain more levels on which children can make connections.
2. When teachers recommend books that are personally meaningful, a genuine and irresistible enthusiasm accompanies their words. When people talk about books they like, those who listen are often influenced by their sincerity and conviction.

Insofar as reading is concerned, nothing we offer children is more important than an adult who reads. Children end up doing what we do, not what we say, and all the admonitions about the importance of reading in their lives will fall on deaf ears if they view us as people who don’t take our own advice. Students need to see their teachers reading and hear them talking about books. During the time when the whole class is reading self-selected books, teachers should often be reading, too. At other times, they should talk with students who are having trouble engaging in reading, helping to motivate them. A teacher also might begin the day by briefly sharing with students something interesting from his or her personal reading.

Without such overt and honest examples, the power of a teacher’s influence is, to a great degree, lost. A graduate student wondered why her example of being an avid reader didn’t rub off on her children. She finally realized that she hadn’t provided a reading model for them because she did her reading in the bathtub or after they were asleep. They never saw her with a book.

Learning from Motivated Readers

A group of college-aged Americans living in Germany was trying to learn German but making slow progress. An old hand offered a piece of advice that made an enormous difference: “If you want to speak like the Germans, listen to the way Germans speak.” Embarrassingly simple and obvious, this advice changed the course of the Americans’ learning, which until then had been too formal and academic.

We adapt that advice to reading: “If we want students to be motivated readers, we must look at how motivated readers read.” Teachers sometimes believe that students need careful preparation to read a book or that they have to be bribed or prodded into reading. Yet some children jump
right into books, reading without the benefit of preparatory steps or the intervention of either a carrot or a stick. Two principles underlie the motivation of these eager readers: (1) Reading is personal, and (2) reading is a natural process. The following common characteristics of motivated readers reflect these two principles:

1. Motivated readers don’t read for others but rather for their own purposes. They read what is important to them and know that real reading isn’t done to answer someone else’s questions or fill out a worksheet.
2. Motivated readers have personal and identifiable likes and dislikes in books: subject matter, authors, illustrators, formats, styles, and so on.
3. Motivated readers feel rewarded during the reading process. They find immediate pleasure in the book and don’t read simply because they will need the information next year.
4. Motivated readers don’t feel trapped by a book. They can put it down without guilt when it no longer meets their needs.
5. Motivated readers aren’t hesitant about passing judgment on a book. They have their own viewpoints and don’t apologize for them.
6. Motivated readers read at their own rate. They skip, scan, linger, and reread as necessary or desirable.
7. Motivated readers don’t feel obligated to remember everything they read. They find reading worthwhile even if they can’t recall every concept or idea, and they allow themselves to skip over words they don’t know as long as they understand the idea or story.
8. Motivated readers read broadly, narrowly, or in between, depending on how they feel.
9. Motivated readers develop personal attachments to books they like.
10. Motivated readers find time to read regularly.

Motivated readers don’t look over their shoulders as they read. They are in charge. We adults shouldn’t get excited when students put down books without finishing them, when they devour what we think are worthless books, when their taste does not reflect our own, or when they read very narrowly.

After consulting the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for Adult Literacy, and the U.S. Census Bureau, Hedges (2009, p. 44) reported: “A third of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives, and neither do 42 percent of college graduates. In 2007, 80% of the families in the United States did not buy or read a book.” Unmotivated readers—the ones who can read but don’t—are sometimes called *aliterate*. The aliterate person has all the necessary know-how to unlock the meaning in print but chooses not to pick up books. Essentially, the ideal reader is a finely tuned balance of both “skill and will” (Applegate & Applegate, 2004, p. 554). Schools need to do more to address a student’s reading will or motivation.

People who continue to read when it is no longer required do so for personal and immediate reward. They read what already interests them. They also read to discover new interests through a skillfully written account that takes them places they never have been before. Author Gary Paulsen, whose early years in Minnesota were largely spent in the library, suggests we should “read like a wolf eats” (1987): in great hulking bites, with vigor, as often and much as possible. In the middle of this enthusiastic sampling of print, we will find those things that personally are worth it, while allowing the rest to slough off naturally. All the while, we increase our range of reading skills, build our general knowledge, and strengthen our education without being aware of our growth. The real benefits come predictably and automatically.

The more children read, the better readers they become (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001), opening up an ever-increasing reading ability gap over their
struggling and unmotivated peers. Stanovich (1986) has described this as the Matthew effect, whereby the rich (capable and motivated readers) get richer and the poor (struggling and unmotivated readers) get poorer.

**Connecting In- and Out-of-School Reading**

Some children don’t read outside school because they have negative experiences with reading inside school. At the same time, some children actually do read outside school but are considered nonreaders in school because of the types of reading required there (Booth, 2006; Forbes, 2008; Worthy, 2000).

Moje (2009) identifies a disconnection between in-school and out-of-school reading. This disconnection isn’t just in the texts children read in school versus out of school. Even with the same texts, the way that children read outside school is different from what is expected or, indeed, required of them in school. Moje argues that classroom reading often lacks the dynamic, authentic, functional, and social purposes of the reading that young people do outside school. She believes that schools need to do a better job in connecting reading to students’ interests and experiences, making reading more authentic and purposeful and thus reforming the schools, rather than attempting to reform the students.

**Authentic literacy** tasks are the types of activities that are practiced not just within the walls of a schoolroom but also for real-life purposes outside school (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). In many classrooms, however, reading instruction involves the liberal use of things such as worksheets and basal reader textbooks—the types of materials that are used only in schools. Indeed, Woodward, Elliot, and Nagel (2012) claim that 75% to 95% of classroom teaching is structured by textbooks programs (p. 24), what they characterize as a “heavy and pervasive dependence” on textbooks (p. 2).

It is important for teachers to be aware that authentic reading and literacy tasks increase students’ motivation to read (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009). Teachers need to listen to what their students have to say and to use that information to enhance the appeal and the effectiveness of classroom reading time (Moje, 2000). Teachers should use students’ out-of-school experiences to help to shape the in-school experiences that they provide for their students (Moje, 2000; Sanford, 2005–2006). In doing so, more positive readers’ identities might be developed.

When we ignore students’ interests or negatively judge their reading tastes, we run the risk of turning them away from reading altogether. Author and librarian Patrick Jones (2005) relates a story from his childhood. He was an avid reader of wrestling magazines. On one occasion, the 12-year-old Jones approached the librarian at a public library and nervously asked if the library had any wrestling magazines. Jones says that the look that came across the librarian’s face at the “mere mention of wrestling magazines in her library” was so sour that he thinks he might accidentally have asked the librarian to show “what her face would look like if she sucked on a lemon for a hundred years!” Despite the humorous way in which Jones relates the story, there is little humor in his concluding remark: The librarian “made me feel stupid, and I never went back” (p. 127).

Teachers (and librarians) need to ask, “Do the literacy practices of my classroom disempower some and empower others?” (Cairney, 2000, p. 63). Jones felt decidedly disempowered by the librarian’s reaction to his wrestling magazine inquiry and decided not to go back to the library. We need to be careful not to place negative value judgments on students’ out-of-school reading. It is far better for us to embrace children’s out-of-school literacies and to welcome
them into the classroom. We will not only do our students a favor, but we may be in for some pleasant surprises. One of the authors of this text, Gregory Bryan, remembers how a student challenged him to read one of Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants* books. Although Greg approached the book with reluctance, he enjoyed the slapstick humor. Another time, Greg turned to Gary Paulsen’s (1987) *Hatchet*, thinking, “There is no way this book can be as good as my seventh-grade students say that it is.” Ever since that first reading, *Hatchet* has been one of Greg’s favorites.

### Reading Incentives

There are basically two forms of motivation—intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation to read is that whereby reading is reward in and of itself. Extrinsic motivation involves reading being used as a means to another end, such as a reward or prize. Teachers sometimes use an incentive program to introduce children to books and to get them involved in reading. Reading incentive programs are of two types: teacher generated and commercially prepared. Either might result in intrinsically or extrinsically motivated students.

Teacher-generated reading incentive programs generally use a chart or other visual record to keep track of each child’s reading. Often thematic, the chart may be called “Shoot for the Moon,” with a rocket ship for each child lined up at the bottom and a moon at the top. For every book read, the rocket ship advances an inch. Or paper ice cream cones may line the back wall. Every time a child reads a book, the title is written on a paper scoop of ice cream and placed on the cone. When every cone has 10 scoops, the class has an ice cream party.

Commercially prepared reading incentive programs are available to schools and school districts. Although the specifics differ from program to program, they usually give point values to books, which can then be redeemed for prizes. To be sure that children read the books, a quick evaluation is included as a part of the program—usually, a multiple-choice quiz that requires the child to score within a certain range to get credit for reading the book.

Both kinds of programs—teacher generated and commercially sponsored—have the potential to be helpful or harmful. Given this, educators need to carefully consider the potential benefits and risks before they employ reading incentive programs (Fawson & Moore, 1999). Incentive programs are helpful if they actually aid children in finding and getting involved with books. Sometimes the extrinsic rewards offered in an incentive program will be just what children need to be encouraged to read when they otherwise would not. Once a child has taken the first step, he or she might then find enjoyment in reading and, in turn, develop into a genuinely engaged, intrinsically motivated reader. Yet teachers need to exercise caution about incentive programs. Some research shows that extrinsic rewards actually can hinder the development of intrinsic motivation to read (Krashen, 2004) and that such programs are potentially damaging in terms of their influence on the development of lifelong readers (Fawson & Moore, 1999).

When teachers offer a prize as a reward for reading, they must be able to determine when the prize overshadows the book. Research by Gambrell and Marinak (2009) suggests that if we are to employ a reading incentive program an important consideration should be the notion of *reward proximity*. If we want children to value pizza, then the reward should be a pizza party. If, however, we want children to value books, then we should give them books as reward for their reading. Unrelated rewards—what might be termed *tokens*—may actually undermine and decrease motivation to read (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009).
Although concerns exist with individual reading incentive programs, group motivation and group record keeping are largely positive and helpful. The teacher who requires students to keep records of their personal reading can tally each week’s reading and then display the increasing total—perhaps in a thermometer where the temperature rises with continued reading. Teachers sometimes use paper footprints, upon which each student records the titles of each book that he or she read. The footsteps are taped to the wall; as soon as the footsteps extend around the room, the students are rewarded with a party or celebration. These visual summaries provide bragging rights to everyone in the class, as opposed to the individual successes offered by the rocket ship or ice cream charts. When a goal is reached, everyone participates in the victory, even those kids who have read few or no books. No one but the teacher is aware of the amount that each child reads, so no additional stigma is placed on those who are not performing. This system gives the teacher the opportunity to work individually with those students who need extra time and attention.

It is important, however, to remember that one reward—and one reward only—keeps people reading over time: the reading itself. Over the long haul, people turn to books because books are worthwhile, not because they are the means to treats or grades.

**Organizing the Classroom to Encourage Reading**

Teachers desirous of making reading a prominent feature of the classroom landscape will want to plan so that books fit smoothly and easily into the school day and their students’ lives. Five areas to consider when organizing the ideal reading classroom are providing access to books, making time for reading, creating a reading atmosphere, working with parents, and choosing meaningful activities.

**Provide Access to Books**

The love of reading cannot be taught generally; it depends on contact with specific titles, certain subjects, and particular authors. To engage all students, a wide variety of books of different formats and levels of difficulty needs to be available in the elementary classroom. All grades need fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Every lower grade needs some chapter books. Every upper grade needs some picture books. The most sincere and devoted intentions to help children become readers turn to dust if books are not handy for teachers to read aloud and introduce to the class and for students to pick up for self-selected reading time.

Appendix A suggests specific ways to acquire books and build a classroom library. Appendix B lists some appealing magazines.

**Make Time for Books**

Put reading on the agenda. If reading for its own sake doesn’t appear on the daily schedule, the message to students is clear: “We do not value personal reading in this classroom.” After all, “a student doesn’t have to be particularly bright to conclude that reading can’t be very important if… little time is made for it during the school day” (Smith, Smith, & Mikulecky, 1978, p. 83).

Four useful ways to structure time for books are (1) reading aloud, (2) allowing self-selected reading, (3) introducing books to children, and (4) going to the library.
Make Time to Read Aloud

A recent study (Boyd, 2014) revealed that classroom read-alouds do not occur as often if teachers fail to schedule them into their daily teaching plans. Leaving read-alouds to occur only when time becomes available results in them being overlooked. Good experiences with read-alouds don’t just happen. They should be scheduled into a teacher’s lesson plan book because they are a critical component of a successful literacy program (Fox, 2013). They are also more likely to be successful when certain principles are followed:

1. Reading aloud at the same time every day has a number of advantages over working it in when convenient. Having a scheduled time:
   • Assures the teacher and the class that the reading will happen.
   • Legitimizes the activity by making it a regular part of the school day.
   • Allows the students to anticipate the experience.

2. Teachers should honestly like the books they read aloud. There is an enormous difference between reading a book aloud only because it’s handy and reading a book aloud because it’s loved.

3. Teachers should not read aloud unfamiliar books. The temptation is great to discover the contents of a book along with the class, but too many drawbacks can occur:
   • The teacher may not like the book.
   • The book may have unpleasant surprises: words the teacher isn’t comfortable saying aloud, a character with negative traits who shares a name with a child in the class, or something in the plot that’s inappropriate.
   • The teacher can’t dramatize or emphasize highlights because they are unknown ahead of time.
   • Most important, the teacher’s enthusiasm for the story will likely be weak because he or she is learning at the same time as the children.

4. Teachers should do the oral reading themselves. Even if a child is skilled enough to read the book aloud, the teacher’s participation carries a message: “Our teacher wants to be a part of this activity; it must be important.” In addition, students get to see a teacher’s personal involvement in books that, over time, generally will include both laughter and tears. Children benefit from much more than the story when an adult reads aloud.

5. Teachers should not expect all students to like every book. They should tell the class, “We will read many books in class this year. No one will like them all, but I expect everyone will find some they do like.”

6. Teachers should establish rules for read-aloud time. Some teachers allow students to draw; others don’t. Some are not concerned when children put their heads down on the desk; others are. If anything bothers a teacher, it must be fixed, or the distraction will weaken the reading experience.

7. Teachers should allow students access to the books they have already shared as read-alouds. After the teacher has read a book aloud, students will often want to read that same book. This allows students to revisit their enjoyment of the book, perhaps discovering details they may have missed during the class read-aloud.

Make Time for Self-Selected Reading

Students need time at school to read books of their own choosing (Krashen, 2004). In one study of 35 sixth-grade language arts teachers in nine different schools, all of the 35 teachers...
agreed that allowing self-selection is a good way to improve reading attitudes and achievement (Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998). Self-selection enables students to develop independence (Fresch, 1995). High interest and involvement in self-selected texts often allows readers to succeed with material that, for all other intents and purposes, would be considered well beyond their capacity (Hunt, 1996–1997).

During self-selected reading time, the number-one rule is simple: For the allotted time, everyone has the opportunity to read material of his or her own choosing. Other things to remember include the following:

1. Anything personally interesting is fair game. Where children are concerned, the important thing is not what a child reads but that a child reads. When children have positive and enjoyable reading experiences, they will more likely turn to quality literature when the time is right. While children are young, however, it is important to allow them to read the things that they enjoy. When forced to read certain texts, many children will resist the imposition and lose the motivation to read. But given the freedom to make their own reading choices, these children can become avid, deeply engaged readers (Worthy, 2000).

2. If someone starts a book and loses interest, finishing it is not required.

3. The teacher makes no written assignments for the books read during self-selected reading time.

4. At the end of the reading period, students may be given the opportunity to discuss what they have been reading during self-selected reading time.

5. The teacher should anticipate possible distractions or interruptions and let students know what to do about them. Fine-tuning the activity is inevitable—no one can consider every possible difficulty beforehand. But being clear on as many points as possible makes for a smoother reading time, for example:
   • What does a student do who finishes a book in the middle of a reading period? (Students should be sure to have at least one additional book in their desks, particularly when they are getting to the end of the one they’re reading.)
   • Do children have to stay in their seats during the entire reading time? (Some teachers allow students to get up quietly and find another book; others don’t allow them to wander about for any reason.)
   • What happens if a student took the book home last night and forgot to bring it back today? (A box or plastic carton of short books or magazines might be available so that appealing reading material isn’t difficult to locate.)

6. It isn’t necessary for self-selected reading to be conducted in absolute silence. A teacher calling out for silence is potentially more distracting and disturbing. Let’s not forget that outside school, very little of the reading that people do is completed in a setting in which there is total silence. There is a place for the helpful and motivating influence of reading conversations between students, if the talking is subdued enough not to distract others (Bryan, 2009).

Make Time to Introduce Books to Children

Simply releasing children into a world filled with books does not make them readers. If they have no interest in books, no reading habit, and nothing they are looking for, children can easily ignore a wealth of superb titles. It is up to the teacher to bridge the gap between book and child, and one successful way to do that is for the teacher to introduce new titles to the students.
There are many ways to introduce books. But all that’s necessary is holding up the book so students can see what it looks like while telling them something about it. Teachers are most successful when introducing books they have read and liked, but it’s possible to introduce books they don’t yet know. Reading the blurb on the back of a paperback or on the inside flap of a hardcover usually provides enough information to present the book to the class.

The time to introduce a book should be on the daily schedule, but the number of books shown to students can vary. For the first week or two of the school year, teachers may want to introduce as many as five or more per day to ensure that enough books have been presented to get the students started. After that, a book or two every day is fine. The point is to provide students with some titles they can look forward to trying out.

Make Time for Going to the Library

If the school has a library, teachers should plan to get their children there regularly. Some teachers elect not to sign up the entire class, but after a few introductory visits, they make a schedule for students to use the library singly or in pairs before and after school, at lunch, or during the school day. If the class visits together, the teacher should always stay in the library and circulate among the students, helping them find good books. The more titles they know and the more excitement that’s generated for books, the more successful the library visit will be.

Even with the teacher present in the library, students may wander aimlessly and create small disturbances. Giving them specific directions before entering can help eliminate trouble and streamline the process. These three directions from the teacher to the students work as well as any:

1. Try ’em on. “Your job is to find books that fit you. One way to pick a good chapter book is to turn somewhere near the middle and start reading. If you read two or three pages and find the story interesting, this could be a good choice.”
2. Check ’em out. “Check out the books that appeal to you.”
3. Read ’em. “Sit down and read your books until we all are ready to go back to class.”

Create a Reading Atmosphere

In light of the new literacy studies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Street, 1995), literacy is now recognized as a situated phenomenon. That is, the ways that people use and understand literacy vary according to the situation. With the new literacy studies, a shift in focus occurred, providing the genesis for an increased awareness and sensitivity toward the social and cultural role of reading and how these social and cultural interactions influence readers. Gee (2000) reasons that literacy makes sense only in terms of the context in which it takes place. A classroom context where reading is valued has an atmosphere that says “Books are important.” That message may be delivered in a number of ways:

- Make the emotional climate safe but exciting. Accept students’ reactions to books—never belittle them. Hope that students will catch your enthusiasm for books without expecting them to mirror your reading preferences.
- Promote the idea of a community of readers. Focus on developing a group attitude that reading is a pleasurable way of making discoveries about the world. Everyone in the community will have the chance to select reading materials that reflect his or her personal choices and interests.
• Liven up the room. Ask for old displays or posters from bookstores. Tack up children’s drawings inspired by books. Display books or book jackets. Write to publishers to ask for free, attractive materials—posters, postcards, bookmarks—to decorate the walls. (Check publishers’ offerings in the CBC Features brochure from the Children’s Book Council, mentioned in Appendix C.)

• Keep the classroom library visible, not behind locked cabinet doors. Have books become a part of the classroom’s interior decoration scheme.

• As your personality and classroom space permit, allow students to do self-selected reading in places other than at their desks. You may want to set up a reading center—a place designated for pleasure reading that may have pillows, a comfortable chair or couch, and other homey furnishings. But make sure everyone gets to use the reading center. If it becomes the domain of those who finish their work first, those students who need it most may never get the chance.

• Connect students and authors. Children are curious about the people who write their books. Enliven the literary atmosphere in the classroom by encouraging young readers to contact authors through their personal Web sites. Using the e-mail address usually available at each site, students can write to their favorite author. If an author doesn’t have a Web address, have students write letters to the author in care of the publisher. Publishers’ addresses are available on the Web or can often be found on the back of a book’s title page.

• Create an environment in which students have enjoyable, successful reading experiences. Bandura (1986) argues that the greatest single predictor for engagement in school tasks is success. His cycle of success suggests that as we enjoy success, we become more engaged. In turn, as we become more engaged, we enjoy more success. This notion is not dissimilar to the pleasure–practice–proficiency cycle (see Figure 1.1). Despite struggling with literacy, children can still be guided through positive, pleasurable reading experiences. And the more students derive pleasure from reading, the more likely they are to continue to read and to practice, which will in turn help them to develop into better, more proficient readers. The better we get at reading, the more pleasurable the pursuit becomes, and so the more we practice, and so on. Once students become switched on to reading, they will likely remain so.

Figure 1.1 Pleasure–Practice–Proficiency Cycle

![Diagram of Pleasure–Practice–Proficiency Cycle]
Work with Parents

Except at the often painfully polite back-to-school evenings, parents and teachers usually have contact only when there is trouble. As a result, teachers and parents have a natural hesitancy to communicate, much to the delight of many children, who prefer keeping their two worlds separate. The teacher who decides to bridge this traditional gap between school and home can do so with relative ease and much positive effect on children and their reading.

You need to initiate this contact, either through a letter or a meeting with each child’s parents. To gain support for your approach to reading, that contact should make two points: Let parents know about your emphasis on personal reading and request their support in helping it work.

Communicate with Parents

Communicate to parents the benefits of regular, year-long reading for their child, both in school and at home. Include your own views on the advantages of daily reading, and perhaps also cite research that supports those ideas (see Chapter 17).

Request Parental Support

Request parental support for each child’s personal reading at home. Parents can help their child in the following ways:

- Encourage the child to read regularly at home. Setting aside a certain time is helpful. (If you require students to read daily outside school, mention that and ask for parental support.)
- Talk with the child about the books being read.
- Read with and to the child.
- Buy books as gifts for birthdays and holidays, and allow the child to buy from school-sponsored book clubs when possible.
- Help the child create a place in his or her bedroom to keep personal books.
- Read where the child can see you.
- Periodically tell the child about what you are reading.
- Volunteer to come to the classroom and assist children with their reading.

Choose Meaningful Activities

The purpose of having children engage in an activity after reading a book is to enhance their experience, not to check their reading or to evaluate their comprehension. Chapter 17 describes activities, but the idea is noted here as one of the five areas to consider when planning instruction to highlight reading.

Remember that not every book a child reads must result in a written report or other learning activity. In fact, most personal reading experiences should not be coupled with an assignment. But when a learning activity does center on literature, children should be able to select from a variety of titles.

Teachers with the best of intentions can interfere with motivated readers. Often, the most difficult hurdle is simply getting out of their way. Whatever an adult does that keeps the child from becoming involved with the book is something to be avoided. We should always ask ourselves, “Are the things I am asking my students to do in response to a book adding to their enjoyment and understanding of that book?” Any practice for which the answer is “no” is a practice to be avoided.
Chapter 1

The ideas in this chapter come from years of classroom experience—both ours and others’. Unfortunately, following these ideas to the letter won’t guarantee that every child will become a motivated reader. No reading approach, person, or program has a 100% success rate with children. Simply expect that in every classroom, you will have some tough nuts to crack—children who will not fall in love with books no matter what you do. Implementing these ideas, however, will increase the odds that children will read more and read better.

Chapter Summary

The focus of this chapter included:

• In engaged reading, we can achieve immediate benefits, such as pleasure of reading and also some long-term benefits. These may involve faster reading, expanded vocabulary, improved comprehension, increased knowledge, improved decision-making skills, and so on.

• Teachers should be reading role models for their students. When they want their students to be motivated readers, they should know that for motivated readers, reading is personal and a natural process. Teachers should also try to connect their students’ in-school and out-of-school reading.

• There are basically two forms of motivation— intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is when reading itself becomes rewarding. Extrinsic motivation involves reading being used as a means to another end, such as a reward or prize.

• Teachers should plan so that books fit smoothly and easily into the school day and their students’ lives. Five areas to consider when organizing the ideal reading classroom are providing access to books, making time for reading, creating a reading atmosphere, working with parents, and choosing meaningful activities.
Chapter 2

What Is a Good Book?

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student will be able to:

• Understand the varied criteria by which adults choose books for children.
• Describe how the quality of the book and the taste of the reader become important in judging a book.

_Fishing for a Reader_
by Irene Latham

A good book hooks with a sharp first line.

Its plot wiggles and pulls and surprises.

Its characters are bait that wait for you to bite.

A good book reels you in with glistening language and a splash of style.

It soaks you with memories and new discoveries.

A good book holds steady through The End—

and then it lures you in again.

Choosing Children’s Books

When teachers and librarians select books for children, we want to pick good ones. The trouble is, we’re not always sure what “good book” means. Left to our own choosing, we thumb through titles, trying to find something that seems beneficial and desirable for young readers. We forge ahead, sometimes oblivious of the criteria we use to determine what is good. But we certainly do have criteria to figure that out.

All adults choose children’s books according to some kind of standard, even though we may be unaware of exactly why we pick one book over another. Our first responsibility when selecting
books, then, is to determine what guides our choices. For instance, some individuals select books because of:

1. The lessons they teach. We want children to learn the correct lessons about life. If a book teaches what we want taught, we call it a good book.
2. Their large, colorful illustrations. Young eyes need stimulation, and color provides more stimulation than black-and-white illustrations. Also, the pictures need to be large enough for children to see clearly.
3. The absence of harshness. Children will run into difficulty soon enough. Let them enjoy childhood. Protect them from the tough side of life as long as possible.
4. The absence of scariness. We don’t want to invite fears or nightmares.
5. The absence of swearing. We don’t want books to model inappropriate behavior.
6. Their short length. Keep the reading easy.
7. Simple vocabulary. We don’t want to frustrate or overpower children.
8. Familiar content. We think our child will respond to a book about zoos because we go to one often. If a book connects with a child’s experience, it will be a better book for the young reader.
9. Personal or social preference. We want the values and social views represented in the book to be what we consider appropriate.

One of the problems with the reasons just listed is that they are narrow and sometimes misguided; they focus only on the proverbial tree while missing the forest. If we want to create lifelong readers by choosing books that appeal to the greatest range and number of children, we need to view the book as a whole instead of focusing only on one of its small elements. The most trustworthy standard for viewing the whole book is to look at the experience it offers. Titles of lasting value can almost be defined as experiences that recreate the very texture of life.

Problems can arise, however, in trying to convince others of the power of that experience. It is largely human nature to think others will respond the way we do. When books please us, we think they are well written or have other measurable literary value that ought to be recognized by our friends. Works that leave us cold are somehow lacking in merit for most everyone. The following two cases illustrate this point:

**Case 1:** “*The Wind in the Willows* (Grahame, 1908) is a classic,” he said. “It has received critical acclaim for a century, and I loved it. If you want a wonderful experience, take it now and read it.” So she did. Her response was different, however: total boredom. How do we explain that a book of acknowledged literary merit can excite one person, whereas the friend he recommends it to finds the title definitely ho-hum?

**Case 2:** The librarian held up a book between thumb and forefinger like a 5-day-old fish. “The Nancy Drew books lack quality and merit. This series is predictable and weak.” Maria, a fifth grader, reads the beginning of a newly released Nancy Drew mystery and can’t put it down until she finishes. A trained librarian judges a title to be substandard literature, yet Maria considers it a good book. How can this be?

People often don’t see eye-to-eye when it comes to judging whether a book is worthwhile because *good book* is a common phrase with two different definitions, one based on quality and the other on taste.
Judging a Book: Literary
Quality versus Personal Taste

Quality

A good book is one created by a knowledgeable and skilled author in which the elements of literature measure up under critical analysis. Quality has nothing to do with how old or new a book is. Books from decades or centuries past are not necessarily better works—even some so-called “classics” may not be well written. Some people may be inclined to feel current books are stronger while not realizing their reactions may be determined by a variety of factors having little effect on the quality of writing. Modern themes, language, or societal issues may trump the author’s writing skill for some individuals—even if they don’t realize it. For instance, a novel that deals with an issue a person feels strongly about (child abuse, destruction of the rainforests, autism) may lead readers to confuse subject matter with quality writing. But it is, of course, not the issue or topic that makes for a well-written story but rather the craft with which it is told.

However, there is no exact recipe for solid writing; if there was, anyone privy to the formula could predictably crank out an award winner. As W. Somerset Maugham once said, “There are three rules for writing a good novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are” (Stephens, 1990). What we do know is that all writers draw from the same words found in the dictionary, make use of the same rules of grammar, and apply the same elements of literature (see discussion in this chapter). Yet it remains a mystery how one author can blend the identical raw materials into a veritable literary feast, whereas what another concocts is run-of-the-mill. The simple truth is: Some books are better written than others.

Although most of us are unable to create fiction like the masters of literature, we are still able to acquire the experience and skills necessary to recognize great writing. We have long used a variety of accepted rubrics to evaluate the written word, and although the evaluation process is still subjective, operating within the purview of these critical elements gives us common ground for making sounder literary judgments. For instance, style and language, character, plot, pacing, setting, tension, mood, tone, point of view, theme, and accuracy are the literary elements most commonly examined in judging excellence in fiction. (See Chapters 13 and 14 for characteristics of good nonfiction.)

1. **Style and Language.** How a story is told is as important as the story itself. Style is the way a writer manipulates all the facets of language—such as word choice, syntax, and sentence length—to tell that story (see Chapter 3). The language use in Tess Hilmo’s *With a Name like Love* (2011) helps readers visualize both the character and setting:

   The early evening light settled around Susanna Love’s shoulders, and streams of orange and scarlet danced in the sky above her head. Ollie noticed how mama’s long purple dress rippled around her thin legs in the breeze and couldn’t help but marvel at how beautiful the whole scene was. It was like living poetry. (p. 17)

2. **Character.** Good books must have characters that are unique and believable. People who live between the covers of a book must be as real as people who live across the street. It is impossible to identify with or have feelings for a person unless we know the individual, and it is the author’s job to show us the character’s personality in such a way that we can become involved with his or her life.

   Authors do not create all characters equal. There are many types of characters such as protagonists, antagonists, round, flat, static, and foils. For instance the main characters or **protagonists**
must be **round** or multidimensional so we know a great deal about them. Harry Potter is both the protagonist and a **dynamic** character—one that changes over the course of the story—in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (Rowling, 1998). Readers know little about other characters who are **flat**. For instance, Neville Longbottom is quite forgetful and obedient. Because we see little change in him in the first book of the series, he is both flat and **static**. Meanwhile, Draco Malfoy, a proud, arrogant student from a pureblooded wizard family, serves as the **character foil**, or character whose traits are the opposite of the protagonist. Moreover, we see Malfoy’s friends Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Doyle acting only as bullies under Draco’s direction so they are **stereotypes**. Finally, some books have a character that creates the major conflict in the story and is known as the **antagonist**. Lord Voldemort serves that role in the Harry Potter series.

3. **Plot.** A good plot shows what happens to the characters in such a way that the reader cares about the outcome. Every plot must have a conflict, and how that conflict is resolved carries the book to its conclusion. Well-defined plots introduce a question early on that will be answered yes or no by the end of the story. Such a question is referred to as the “major dramatic question” (MDQ) and is not asked outright but is clearly evident. The plot, then, is the series of events that lead to the yes or no answer. The MDQ of *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1941) is “Will the ducks make the trip safely from the Charles River to the Boston Public Garden?”

Similarly, in the 2009 Newbery winner, *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008), the toddler, who comes to be known as Nobody, survives the brutal murder of his family even though he is the assassin’s chief target. When the murderer, Jack Frost, realizes the child is out of his grasp, he sees it as temporary: “He had not failed. Not yet. Not for years to come. There was plenty of time. Time to tie up this last piece of unfinished business. Time to cut the final thread” (pp. 32–33). At the onset, the author leads his readers to wonder, “Will Jack eventually kill Nobody Owens?”, thereby creating the major dramatic question that drives the plot. The development of and growth in Nobody’s character come in part from facing the conflict (survival) implicit in the MDQ.

4. **Pacing.** Pacing is how quickly or slowly a story moves. Although most books tell their stories at a relatively constant rate, pacing can vary according to the author’s desire to linger over the content or move the story along. The author’s pacing can even reinforce a part of the story, as in Spinelli’s (1990) *Maniac Magee*, in which the short chapters and short sentences mirror the constant running and rapid movements of the main character.

5. **Setting.** The setting is where and when the book takes place. The place can be as vast as a planet or as small as one room. The time may be in the past, the present, or the future, or it may be unspecified in imaginary worlds. When detailed and fleshed out, the physical surroundings add credibility and depth to the story.

The setting may serve a number of functions. In the case of Gary Paulsen’s (1987) *Hatchet*, the setting serves as the antagonist. In other books the setting may clarify the conflict, illuminate a character, or act as symbols. In Jonathan Auxier’s (2014) *The Night Gardener*, the setting creates a scary mood that will make readers wonder what horrors lay ahead for the young protagonists Molly and Kip at sourwoods:

… At the far end of the lawn stood Windsor mansion. The house had obviously been left vacant for some years, and in that time it seemed to have become one with the landscape. Weeds swallowed the base. Ivy choked the walls and windows. The roof was sagging and covered in black moss.

But strangest of all was the tree.
The tree was enormous and looked very, very old. Most trees cast an air of quiet dignity over their surrounding. This one did not. Most trees invite you to climb up into their canopy. This one did not. Most trees make you want to carve your initials into the trunk. This one did not. To stand in the shadow of this tree would send a chill through your whole body. (pp. 13-14)

6. Tension. Fiction without tension is bland. Tension makes the reader want to read on to see how the conflict is resolved and what happens to the people involved in the problem. Even in picture books, tension—a close relative of suspense—is what piques and sustains interest.

7. Mood. The mood is the atmosphere evoked in the writing: spooky, hilarious, innocent, understated, exaggerated, caustic, and the like. In schools we tend not to talk a lot about mood. Most literary and literacy instruction focuses more on such things as character development, setting, and plot. Yet few people say things like, “I love books with such and such a character,” or “I love books with a certain setting.” Very often people will say things like, “I love funny books,” or “I love scary stories,” or “I love mysterious books.” Obviously, well-constructed characters, settings, and plots, help to establish the mood, but we must not forget how important—and appealing—the mood can be.

8. Tone. The tone is the author’s attitude toward the subject or audience in a particular book. Tone can reflect the range of human emotion: reverential, sarcastic, condescending, enthusiastic, and so on.

9. Point of View. The point of view is the position taken by the narrator. Most stories are told in first person (“I”) or third person (“he/she”). Some authors write a story from alternating points of view so that it is told from the first-person point of view of two or more characters as in R. J. Palacio’s Wonder (2012). In doing so, Palacio captures the voices of Augie Pullman, his fifth-grade classmates, his teenage sister, and her friends.

10. Theme. The theme is the story’s central idea. Themes are best expressed in complete sentences. For instance, “Friends often sacrifice for one another” is more powerful than the one-word topic “friendship.” Although activities and discussions related to one-word topics may be entertaining and promote learning, these types of topics are not substantive enough for students to make deeper connections to their lives and the world around them, therefore perpetuating a superficial treatment of theme.

11. Accuracy. Whenever books deal with real facts, whether centering on them in nonfiction or using them as background in fiction, they must be true. Writers need to do their homework to gain and keep readers’ trust.

To this point, we have focused on the written word. However, it is important to note that in judging a title’s overall quality, especially with illustrated books, we must go beyond the words by considering the illustrations, as well as the design and layout.

12. Illustrations. The art or photography in a book can strengthen and extend the content beyond the words. The marriage of illustration and text can yield an experience more powerful than either alone. (See Chapter 4.)

13. Design and Layout. All visual elements of a book—such as the cover, the colors, the margins, the spacing, the font style and size, and the positions of page numbers—are a part of the design and layout. Although word order is not affected by the design and layout, word placement on the page is—particularly in picture books. The visual appeal of a book can determine if a potential reader will pick it up or march right on by, and the look of a page can affect the reader’s desire to get into the content. In Tunnell’s (1999) Halloween Pie, for instance, the words shown on the next page undulate within a snaking current of steam carried by the wind. The steam—laden with...
the scent of freshly baked pie—and the text lead readers from the witch’s cottage to the cemetery, where graveyard creatures are focused by the tantalizing smells.

Soon the wind began to blow. It blew down the chimney. It blew out the window.

Of the 13 elements listed, 3 provide most of the information for judging the quality of fiction: style and language, character, and plot. When a book reveals its story in powerful language, contains memorable characters, and follows a compelling plot, the book generally can be said to have quality.

One additional characteristic of a quality book is worth noting: believability. The key to creating a good book is to make everything believable. We know that fiction is the product of an imagination. The people never lived. The story is made up. The setting often is invented. So why do we care about these people who never were, doing things that never happened, in a place that may not exist? Because the emotional reality is absolutely true. Because their imagined lives reflect the actual lives of living, breathing people. Because we can get genuine experience through living side by side with fictional characters while they endure their trials and enjoy their successes. We participate, we enjoy, and we learn—all simultaneously. Yet if anything in the book reminds us that what we read is invented, the story loses its power, much in the same way that the spell of a movie is broken when we notice a boom microphone hanging over the head of the police chief. All the elements in a story must be logical, sensible, and consistent.

Authors can disrupt the magic of their storytelling by becoming too enamored of their words or their ideas. The use of figurative and descriptive speech, for instance, should meld seamlessly into the narrative. A passage can be beautifully written yet be overwritten. The best of descriptive prose never points to itself as if to say, “Look how ingeniously crafted I am.” Such writing interrupts the reader, breaks the spell, and is considered by many to be a writer’s self-indulgence. When story telling, an author ought to stay out of sight, so to speak.

Yet a writer can pay careful attention to all the elements of fiction, skillfully and unobtrusively weaving together a praiseworthy book, and still not win the reader’s heart. Readers’ tastes also influence how they respond to books.

**Taste**

The second definition of a good book is simply “a book the reader likes,” quality notwithstanding. For instance, *The Wind in the Willows* is judged to be quality literature for children. This prototype of modern animal fantasy skillfully delineates the four main characters, contains satisfying action sequences, and is told in rich and varied language. But some children do not become engrossed in the story when they try to read it, nor do they particularly like to have it read aloud to them. The book has definite literary merit—it is critically a good book—but for those who are not taken by the story, it has no appeal. Conversely, the Nancy Drew books win no literary awards, yet they continue to be read by many who find pleasure in reading these tales of a young, independent woman who can always solve the mystery. Thousands of children sail through the series, reporting that each Nancy Drew title is a good book. Some adults may
What Is a Good Book?

think that children who read such formulaic, shallow stories should feel shame for doing so, but so far, no guilt has been detected in those who move quickly from one volume to the next.

So, when determining which books are good, a problem surfaces: The positive feelings a reader has about a book are the same whether they come from a quality book or one of low literary merit. As long as a reader likes a book, quality or not, it is called “good.” Were we able to identify precisely the sources of our positive responses, we would more accurately say, “I like this book because the author’s skill took me places and showed me things I have not previously thought about or experienced.” If the book is well crafted, believable, and supplies all the elements needed for a rewarding new experience, the author should take a bow. What the writer of the book brings to the work creates this “good” response. On the other hand, if we like a book because it serves as a link to something already a part of us, we might say, “I like this book because it connects me with something important in my life.” When the book presents us with a view or situation we are hardwired to like—reliving my summer with Grandma, supporting my view that society undervalues females, or illustrating how a selfish child learns kindness—credit for positive feelings toward the book belongs largely to the reader. When we like a book, we usually don’t examine the source of our responses. We don’t ask if the book takes us new places or connects us with the old. We just say it is a “good” book. We gain some insight by asking ourselves, “Does the ‘good’ feeling come because of the author’s skill, or does it come because of my background and expectations?” Figure 2.1 depicts the roles and meaning of “good” in book quality and reader response.

A book can be written well or badly, and a reader can respond well or badly to both strong and weak books. Quadrant 1 of Figure 2.1 shows that an author has written a book with literary merit, and the reader likes it. We have no problem with a reader who responds positively to quality writing. A well-crafted book deserves no less. Similarly, quadrant 4 presents no difficulty. The author displays little skill in producing a book of minimal merit, and the reader does not respond well to this flawed product. These two unshaded quadrants pose little problem for the teacher and student.

But problems may occur when a quality book is not well received. Quadrant 2 shows that an author has written a good book, but the reader doesn’t care for it. Teachers who recognize

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**Figure 2.1** Evaluating Books: Four Possible Outcomes

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quality may have a tendency to feel they are shirking their duty if children don’t respond favorably to a quality book. Teachers who redouble their efforts to convince the unbeliever that something wonderful is being missed usually drive the unbelieving student further from the book. In quadrant 3, the reader accepts a weak book with open arms. This scenario is often played out as a teacher tries to show the young reader just how poor the book really is. These sincere efforts are generally as successful as trying to dam the Mississippi River using a teaspoon. Attempting to convince enthusiastic young readers that a book is not worthy of devotion is foolish and often counterproductive. They have tried it and liked it. All we can do, and should do, is continue to mention and offer different titles that may appeal to those readers. Allowing individual response is wisest in the long run. (See the discussion of “engaged reading,” Chapter 1.) After all, if children read nothing, then our opportunity to broaden their taste and judgment about books is nonexistent.

In both quadrants 2 and 3, the teacher needs to accept the honest feelings of the reader, misguided as they might be in the adult eye, and continue to provide and introduce better books. Doing so carries no guarantee that young readers will like them, but it does increase the chances that this may happen. Direct attacks on positive responses to poor-quality books, however, almost guarantee that a rift will develop between teacher and student and, in the case of quadrant 2, between a student and a genuinely good book.

Understanding that a positive response can be a result of either the author’s skill or the reader’s individual taste and experience can help in solving some mysteries about how readers respond to books. When a class of 30 college students read a not-very-good biography about Maria Tallchief, an Osage ballerina who captured the attention of the dancing world in the early 20th century, all the students, except for five women, pronounced the book “mediocre.” That enthusiastic handful loved the book and couldn’t understand why the others were not impressed by this story that had meant so much to them. During the short discussion, the fact surfaced that all of the five young women had taken and loved ballet as children. When they read about Maria Tallchief, they were reading their own stories. For them, the book served as a link to a meaningful personal experience. The others, without ballet backgrounds, did not find enough to interest them in the shallow way the author presented Tallchief’s story.

As adults working with children, we spend our time more productively in quadrants 1 and 2 for two reasons. First, the more a book has to offer readers, the greater the chance the reader will respond. In *Julius, the Baby of the World*, Kevin Henkes (1990) identifies precisely an only child’s reaction to the arrival of a new sibling. The reader participates in Lilly’s jealousy, as well as shares her outrage when Cousin Garland dares to criticize her baby brother. The author’s range of emotion and humor is so broad that readers at a variety of age levels are able to respond. The second reason is that judging literary merit is easier than identifying specific reader idiosyncrasies that predict positive responses to books. We can identify a good plot and pick out a compelling character. But we have no way of knowing that five students will be linked by their ballet lessons to Tallchief.

This whole evaluative process is somewhat like examining two new couches, both with fabric upholstery and polished wooden trim. From a distance, they appear identical, but one reflects the true value of $2,200, whereas the other carries an honest price tag of $500. However, if allowed to inspect the couches at close range, even the nonprofessional should be able to determine which couch is of real quality and which is of lesser worth. We can determine the more expensive by examining the stitching, which should be close and even; the fabric, which should be tight and finely woven; the hardwood, which should be joined perfectly, well stained, and flawlessly finished; the padding, which should be thick and firm; the weight, which should
be heavy; and the comfort, which should be evident upon sitting. Once identified, however, the quality piece will not necessarily be welcomed into every living room. If its style—say Scandinavian Contemporary or Colonial—does not appeal to me, it is of no importance that I now have the $2,200 couch. I can recognize its fine craftsmanship and can see that its less expensive counterpart is lacking in quality, but that does not make me want to own the fine couch if my taste runs counter to its appearance. Ultimately, the piece must please the reader before it gets his or her stamp of approval.


Taste and personal response often determine an individual’s decision about the worth of a book. However, there are some generally accepted guidelines about quality writing. Some books simply are better constructed than others, offering a clearer understanding of the human experience and a deeper sense of pleasure. These quality books are the ones we need to introduce to children because they generally have more power to stir up interest and, over time, will provide readers with a more enlarging experience than will mediocre books. Yet we can’t force these quality titles on children; we can only offer them through enthusiastic sharing. To become truly engaged readers, children must have the freedom to accept or reject a title. Just as we can’t insist on a positive response to a book of quality, we can’t erase a positive response to a poorly written book.

In the end, the question of what makes a “good book” is one of respect: respect for the truly fine work of authors who pay their dues and create works of lasting value, and also respect for the response of individual readers who cast the deciding vote on a book’s personal appeal. There is, after all, only one list of good books that is completely dependable—your own. However, though your list may have books of both lower and higher literary merit, the quality titles will end up taking you (and your students) further. (See Appendix D for Book Award Lists.)

**Chapter Summary**

The focus of this chapter included:

* When adults choose books for children, they do it based on their own standards. These standards are narrow and sometimes could be misleading.
* The two criteria to judge a book are literary quality and personal taste. Adults should provide books of both lower and higher literary quality that children will read, keeping in mind that children should be given freedom to choose from these books. Eventually, children will develop their own personal reading preferences and tastes, and then, adults should respect their preferences.