There are, in the end, only two main ways human beings learn, by observing others (directly or vicariously) and by trying things out for themselves. Novices learn from experts and from experience. That’s all there is to it. Everything else is in the details.

—Deborah Meier

Recently I spent a week working with teachers and students in a large, diverse elementary school. Before I arrived, I was told how “far along” the teachers were, how much staff development they previously had, and how much money had been spent on materials. As I began working in classrooms and listening to teachers’ concerns, it was clear that they were looking for “experts” to show them “how to do it.” In spite of all the time that had been spent on staff development, these teachers lacked the connection between theory and practice that underpins all effective instruction. Instead of learning how to make decisions that were responsive to the children that they were teaching, most were still searching for the “right” activities and programs.

Most of us, myself included, have been in a similar situation at one time or another. We think that if someone would just tell us what to do, our teaching will improve. This Band-Aid approach never works for the long run. The history of reform in our schools makes it clear that without deep understanding and commitment of why we are doing what we are doing, things don’t change very much.

Before any of us can become professional, we need to examine and articulate our beliefs about learning and what those beliefs mean for teaching in the classroom. I used to think that first you had the theory and then the practice followed, but through years of teaching, I learned that theory and practice go hand in hand. Each continues to inform the other.

Being an effective teacher is not about having the right program and activities in
place. Effective teachers lay a foundation of “the basics” and integrate a variety of approaches while being constantly responsive to students they are teaching. By “the basics” I mean language and thinking. We model language—all aspects of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as well as other expressive modes such as drawing and dramatizing. We model thinking—as wondering, questioning, hypothesizing, analyzing, reflecting, and constantly inquiring.

WHAT’S BASIC?

I believe that questioning and investigation are at the heart of meaningful curriculum and learning. (See Chapter 12, “Curriculum Inquiry.”) A question-centered curriculum includes question-posing, exploring, negotiating, clarifying, extending, seeking, answering, all leading to more questions as students engage in authentic literacy activities—real work, not practicing skills in isolation. I believe it means we teach the essential basics to enable students to be able to move to exploring essential concepts and questions across disciplines.

Learning results from the interaction between what students already know and what we help them know. For instance, students need to know only a few letters and sounds to begin learning how to read and write. We don’t wait to give them real stories until they have learned all their “skills”: we give them real stories from the start so that learning the skills is part of meaningful reading and writing and makes sense to them. Unless we teach for understanding from day one, students are merely amassing skills in isolation.

An inquiry-based classroom does not mean that the teacher does no explicit teaching. Quite the contrary. In inquiry-based classrooms, students and teachers are clear about purposes, desired outcomes, and necessary skills, and direct teaching is part of making that all happen. As effective teachers, we thoughtfully demonstrate reading, writing, and thinking as we support our students in becoming highly engaged in challenging, relevant, interesting work.

The real “basics” go way beyond skills, although the skills are fundamental. Today’s “basics” also go beyond content and strategies. Our information age is ever expanding, and the definition of literacy expands with it. We must teach our students how to interpret, evaluate, analyze, and apply new knowledge and go on learning—starting in kindergarten.

How do we accomplish this? By thoughtfully applying beliefs and practices that are supported by research as well as by our own teaching practices and life experiences. While this chapter lays the groundwork by talking about the “basic” components of a comprehensive literacy program, these components can only be taught successfully based on a framework of beliefs and approaches that empower learners. Effective classroom management and the necessary social and emotional aspects of learning must also be present. These latter critical aspects of effective teaching and learning are addressed in Chapter 14, “Developing Collaborative Communities.”

WHAT ABOUT BALANCE?

In Invitations I wrote about a “balanced” reading and writing program, and I stand by what I wrote. I described a literacy program that included basic components and con-
texts for teaching and learning. By *balanced* I meant that all aspects of reading and writing received appropriate emphasis and that guided contexts were used to help readers and writers become critical thinkers, independent problem solvers, self-monitors, self-evaluators, and goal setters. The knowledgeable teacher was the decision maker who, based on students’ needs, interests, and experiences, determined when, how, and how much to intervene.

However, in the late 1990s, the word *balance* began to take on a curious and disturbing meaning. While the original intention of a balanced program—to provide a flexible and complete literacy framework—was a good one, in too many places, *balance* is being misinterpreted and misused. Instead of denoting a state of equilibrium between all the parts (a common definition), *balance* is now often synonymous with the belief that learning proceeds in a skills-based hierarchy (usually determined by a published program), a view not supported by research. Hand in hand with this disturbing interpretation, the teacher’s role as knowledgeable decision maker has been drastically reduced. Policy mandates at state and local levels often emanate from groups and individuals outside the classroom. Additionally, huge amounts of money are being spent on “teacher training” related to expensive programmed materials instead of on ongoing professional development for effective teaching—a situation that further constrains teacher decision making and teaching for meaning.

Therefore, in place of *balance*, I now speak about a *comprehensive* literacy program. Effective teaching draws on current research and practice and depends on the teacher as professional to provide learners the balance of skills, strategies, materials, and social and emotional support they need. Instructing, demonstrating, discussing, coaching, and discovering are all part of this model. In addition, teaching for understanding is integral to everything we do, beginning with our youngest learners.

Respected educator and psychologist Gerald Coles (1998) reminds us that any question of best is the wrong question. Instead of asking, *What is the best way to teach reading?*—which focuses narrowly on methodology—we should be asking, *What needs to be done to ensure that children learn to read?*—which includes methodology but also the critical emotional, political, economic, and social influences that exist inside and outside the classroom.

If we extend Coles’s thinking to all learning, the essential question becomes, *What needs to be done to ensure that children become literate?* Focusing on basic skills barely touches the surface. Teachers need to be intentional and knowledgeable as well as nurturing. We need to provide collaborative learning environments in which students are challenged to take risks (and feel comfortable doing so), follow their own questions, and explore rich literature on their journey to lifelong literacy. We need to respect students’ developmental levels while also maintaining high expectations. It is teachers as knowledgeable practitioners who determine the balance and basics of literacy.

My dear colleague and friend, kindergarten teacher Karen Sher, recently changed her thinking along these lines while reading *Leo the Late Bloomer* (Kraus 1971) to parents, as she does every year during open house. I’ll let her describe the experience in her own words:

> I read [the book] in past years as a message to parents not to push, to let children develop their skills in their own time. As the book says, “A watched flower never blooms.” This year, when I was going over the story, I felt uneasy. Neither watching passively nor overwatering a plant will nurture it. A flower grows when it is well nurtured by appropriate
amounts of water, sunshine, weeding, etc. Educators, parents, and children need to be knowledgeable about the actions that will help children thrive and those that won’t.

### USING OUR OWN LITERACY TO INFORM OUR TEACHING

My beliefs and practices about teaching and learning are greatly influenced and supported by my own literacy. That is, my own behavior—my thoughts, goals, and practices—as a reader, writer, listener, speaker, inquirer, user of technology, evaluator, all impact how and what I teach. It has taken me years to value and trust my own literacy and see myself as both an expert and a learner. In order to trust my own literacy, it is necessary for me to be highly literate. My literacy grows in relation to what I read; the professional development I undertake; my collaboration with colleagues, students, and parents; and the things I observe, evaluate, and modify in my classroom as I think about teaching and learning.

I share my reading and writing practices as a way for you to begin to think about and value your own literacy practices and to use them to inform your teaching: *If this is what I do as a reader and writer (or thinker, user of technology, evaluator), what does this mean for the classroom?* Or, put another way: *How can I make my classroom practices more authentic, that is, more like literacy practices and events in the world?* We are, after all, preparing our students to succeed in life, not just in our classrooms.

Research confirms that our personal literacy habits and the strategies we use impact what we do in the classroom. For example, teachers who do more personal reading use the library more often with their students, use lots of trade books in their reading program, promote more book talks, and value and implement daily sustained silent reading (Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard 1999).

The list below summarizes my reading and writing practices. Use them to trigger your thinking about your own practices and what they mean for your teaching.

- I read every day.
- I read what interests me.
- I read in many genres, but nonfiction predominates.
- I read a number of books and articles concurrently.
- I read for pleasure, stimulation, information, and relaxation.
- I rely on recommendations from colleagues and friends.
- I keep a record of what I read.
- I have a personal library that I value.
- I often browse in libraries and bookstores.
- I talk about books and belong to a book club.
- I monitor my comprehension.
- I write every day.
- I write about what interests me.
- I write in various genres.
• I write for a purpose and audience that matters.
• I write to think, discover, and communicate.
• I organize before I write and as I go along.
• I revise and proofread.
• I solicit responses to what I write.
• I work on more than one piece of writing at a time.
• I write lots of letters.
• I write poetry for myself and others.
• I keep a writer’s notebook.

As teachers we tend to devalue our own literacy practices. The pressures on educators have never been greater. It takes courage and knowledge as well as professional know-how to teach in a way that respects our own literacy practices, current research and educational theory, our own classroom experiences, and the students we work with.

MY ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING

Our beliefs about teaching and learning directly affect how and why we teach the way we do, even when we do not or cannot verbalize these beliefs. Therefore, it is important to articulate our beliefs and match them with our practice: If this is what I believe, how does that influence what I do in the classroom?

My instruction, including how I set up the classroom both physically and emotionally, is determined by my beliefs, my observations and experiences, how well I evaluate and know my students, my knowledge of relevant research and curriculum, and my ability to apply what I know and believe so that every student will achieve to the best of her or his ability. How I translate my beliefs into practice is what this book is all about. (Invitations, pages 8–22, sets forth my detailed beliefs about language learning.) I share these beliefs with you as catalysts for you to think about your own beliefs and how they impact your practice. (And even as I write about these beliefs, I continue to refine and rethink them.)

My Beliefs

• Teaching for understanding underpins all effective teaching.
• Skills must be taught as part of relevant and meaningful literacy events.
• Low-achieving students need the same meaning-based instruction as high achievers.
• Conversation, collaboration, and learning through others are integral to learning.
• Children’s oral language is the basis for beginning instruction.
• Effective teachers demonstrate, guide, share, celebrate, and evaluate.
• Effective teachers negotiate the curriculum with their students.
• Approximations and errors are a necessary part of all learning.
• Learners need a variety of engaging books and resources.
Teaching for Understanding
Underpins All Effective Teaching

Teaching for understanding means analyzing and interpreting information, applying learning to new contexts, evaluating what we’re doing, and setting goals. Teaching for understanding goes far beyond imparting the “basic skills.” Gordon Wells (1998) advises, “Our emphasis on knowledge puts the cart before the horse: what we should be concerned about is knowing and coming to know.” Our emphasis on possessing knowledge undervalues how we learn with understanding—through inquiring, discussing, doing, actively participating.

With regard to everything we teach, we must analyze and question:

• Why am I doing this? (curriculum requirements? student needs and interests?)
• What difference does it make? (How will this impact learning? So what?)
• How does this fit with what I believe about learning and teaching? (amount and quality of collaboration? guidance? support? feedback?)
• Are the purposes clear and relevant (to teachers, students, parents, administrators, and the community)?
• How will I know students have understood? (observation? monitoring? ongoing assessment?)

When I work with students, I am often amazed that they have no idea why they are doing what they are doing. Here’s a typical example. I am in a third-grade class, and the kids are creating story maps. The teacher has done a wonderful job demonstrating the process. On a big chart is a story map the teacher and class have done together. Kids are working well collaboratively. But when I ask students in their small groups why they are doing these story maps, they have no idea: it’s the teacher’s agenda. They say, “So we’ll know how to do them next year,” and “Because our teacher said to.” I’m sure the teacher’s intention is clear: she wants her students to have a greater understanding of how stories work so they can read and write stories with more understanding. But the kids don’t know this, so the activity becomes an exercise that is mostly a waste of time.

It is no accident that after more than thirty years and more than one hundred billion dollars, our federally funded Title I programs have been shown to have little impact on long-range achievement for our nation’s poor children (Rees 1998). The primary goal, as I witness it in Title I classrooms, has been increased test scores, not increased understanding. So the test scores go up, as students learn how to manipulate pieces of information in isolation, but teaching for understanding—through inquiry, dialogue—is not a major program emphasis.

Skills Must Be Taught as Part of Relevant and Meaningful Literacy Events

So much of what we read and debate today about our schools revolves around basic skills—reading and writing words correctly and automatically, being able to duplicate a simple schema, recalling facts, using conventions accurately—all of which are absolutely necessary. However, the “basics” don’t make sense to kids without a strong foundation of meaning. Without the latter, the former are useless. “Learning is not a linear process—with ‘basic’ skills preceding thinking skills—but, rather, proceeds in a cyclical manner,
with facts and skills accrued in the course of developing concepts and higher-order thinking” (Falk 1998, 58). Kids need to know how the facts and skills fit into the context of their lives. Unfortunately, focus on thinking, understanding, and applying new information has gotten short shrift.

Literacy is not an amassing of skills. Literacy is developed by engaging children in meaningful literacy events (reading and discussing favorite books, writing letters for relevant purposes and audiences) and in so doing helping them (through demonstrations, support, practice, celebration, and evaluation) become better readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. Minimum basic skills are taught to enable students to engage in meaningful learning. At the risk of misinterpretation, I do not mean that we teach minimum skills but that we teach just enough appropriate skills and strategies to propel children into real reading and writing.

My concern here is the growing trend to teach the basic skills first and then get to comprehension. Learning doesn’t work that way. The most effective teachers teach skills and strategies “in the service of acquiring content knowledge” (Pressley, Allington, Morrow, et al. 1999, 36). The basics and teaching for understanding must always go hand in hand. “Skill lessons apart from students’ work are useless, as shown by the extensive research on the effects of traditional instruction” (McIntyre, 1995, 232).

“Basic skills” are being used as a cure-all for reading ills. And, unfortunately, in the name of “basic skills,” we continue to put many of our struggling readers at a terrible disadvantage. Noted reading researcher David Pearson (1993) comments:

Minority students suffer from what might be called, in the spirit of . . . good intentions, a “basic skills” conspiracy—“First, you have to get the words right and the facts straight before you can get to the what ifs or I wonders.” Children of diversity are also quite likely to fall victim to what some have labeled the “extra help” conspiracy. . . . Ironically, many of them get a more intensive, almost caricaturized, version of the instruction that has already proved unsuccessful in the classroom. (505)

Low-Achieving Students Need the Same Meaning-Based Instruction as High Achievers

Evidence indicates that on average all students achieve more in reading, writing, and math when teachers emphasize meaning. The first large-scale study of instruction aimed at increasing challenging instruction for low-income students in grades 1–6 found that “low-performing children increase their grasp of advanced skills at least as much as their high-achieving counterparts when both groups experience instruction aimed at meaning” (Knapp et al. 1995, 770–776). An interesting hypothesis for future research might be whether these findings also apply to second-language learners.

Conversation, Collaboration, and Learning Through Others Are Integral to Learning

We need to set up our classrooms in ways that encourage collaboration and social interaction. Meaningful conversations (which must extend to our students’ families) are critical to all learning. Such conversations challenge and extend knowledge and ideas,
promote inquiry, introduce different points of view, allow collaborative decision making, support learning, and show respect for individual voices.

The types and depth of conversations and who’s doing the talking speak volumes about what’s going on in our classrooms. Historically, teachers have dominated conversations by telling. Instead, we need to restructure our classrooms to promote real discourse:

The essence of conversation is that it must allow interaction: among teacher and students and the texts they read or watch or listen to. If there is too much material to cover... dialogue is almost of necessity supplanted by monologue, in which the teacher reverts to telling students what they need to know... If we do not structure the curricular domain so that students can actively enter the discourse, the knowledge they gain will remain decontextualized and unproductive. They may succeed on a limited spectrum of school tasks that require knowledge-out-of-context, but they will not gain the knowledge-in-action that will allow them to become active participants in the discourse of the field. (Applebee 1996, 56–57)

Children’s Oral Language Is the Basis for Beginning Instruction

We need to respect the diversity, culture, and language of our students’ families. By valuing students’ language, experiences, and background—for example, by encouraging them to tell the stories of their lives, whether through dictation, writing, illustration, or dramatization—we blur the boundaries between home and school and make school part of life as a place for relevant learning.

Effective Teachers Demonstrate, Guide, Share, Celebrate, and Evaluate

These actions are part of the model of effective teaching and learning (see pages 22–25), which also includes self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-evaluation. Such a model builds on the learners’ strengths to instill in them independence, a desire to continue learning, and a lifelong love of learning.

Effective Teachers Negotiate the Curriculum with Their Students

We all learn better when we have some real choice and input with regard to the curriculum, the learning approach (both process and product), and the setup of the learning environment. There is no one best way or approach that works for everyone. Just as the best teachers tend to be eclectic in their teaching style and approaches, the best students employ a whole range of strategies and materials.

Negotiating the curriculum means that within required parameters—local and state standards, required subjects, obligatory evaluative measures—teachers and students col-
laboratively make responsible choices and decisions about what to read, write, view, study, create; how to question and learn; and how to show what they know. For students to engage in learning fully, they must actively be part of the creation, selection, and evaluation process. They must have genuine choices (that is, other than from a teacher-created selection) in constructing meaning. Negotiating the curriculum is best defined by educator Garth Boomer (Boomer et al. 1992):

Negotiating the curriculum means deliberately planning to invite students to contribute to, and to modify, the educational program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and in the outcomes. Negotiation also means making explicit, and then confronting, the constraints of the learning context and the non-negotiable requirements that apply.

Once teachers act on their belief that students should share with them a commitment to the curriculum, negotiation will follow naturally, whether the set curriculum is traditional or progressive, and whether the classroom is architecturally open or closed. (14)

**Approximations and Errors Are a Necessary Part of All Learning**

Students require a safe, comfortable environment in which they feel free to take risks—pose questions, invent spellings, work things out for themselves. Intrinsic to this belief is enough time, firm support, and gentle feedback—which sometimes includes “nudging” them forward—to let learners know they are, or are not, on the right track. If there are no errors, the learner already knew how to do the task and didn’t need to learn it. Think about anything new you have tried to learn. Trial and error has been inherent.

**Learners Need a Variety of Engaging Books and Resources**

These include but are not limited to well-stocked libraries overseen by knowledgeable librarians, all types of excellent fiction and nonfiction, useful technology and multimedia texts, and other adults and students to demonstrate, encourage, and support learning.

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**PUTTING MY BELIEFS INTO PRACTICE**

**Teaching Responsively**

Effective teaching is responsive teaching: we plan our instruction in response to what the child is actually doing and attempting to do. This instructional vision (of where we want the child to go) is in turn based on our knowledge of language and learning as well as the required curriculum and standards. Judy Wallis, a K–12 language arts coordinator, notes that only recently has she realized “how much kids teach us when we don’t just watch them but when we pay attention to what they’re telling us.” This is a
key insight. (The lesson I describe on pages 27 and 29, by a highly skilled kindergarten teacher, is a fine example of responsive teaching grounded in solid theory and beliefs about how children learn.)

A Model for Effective Teaching and Learning

The best teachers make tasks explicit through demonstration, shared demonstration, guided practice, independent practice, response and feedback, more demonstrations, and ongoing assessment. This cyclical model, which I use for all my teaching and which I continue to refine, is based on a model originally proposed by Don Holdaway. It gradually decreases teacher intervention and support while guiding the learner toward independence. Because the model is cyclical, not linear, the delineated components, strategies, and approaches intersect and interrelate; see Figure 2-1.

- **Demonstration** The teacher or other expert (a peer, an adult, a book, a movie, a video, a CD-ROM) performs the task (which must be relevant and purposeful to the learner)—thinking aloud, modeling, explaining, showing learners how to “do it” by making the thinking/doing process explicit. (For example, a teacher reads an article aloud, figuring out vocabulary, thinking aloud, predicting, summarizing, questioning, all in full view of his students.)

- **Shared demonstration** (optional) The teacher or expert works through the task interactively with the students, taking the lead and guiding the process. (For example, as the teacher reads an article aloud, he asks for and guides students’ thinking: How could I figure out what this word means?)

- **Guided practice** “Hand-holding” as needed, giving instruction, support, and encouragement while the learners attempt the task, either in pairs or small groups. When students are skilled, the teacher may guide one group while other groups work on their own as they document their thinking (a short summary, difficulties encountered, etc.).

- **Independent practice** The learner works on her or his own, with the teacher or expert close by to offer affirmation and support. (This is the trial-and-error stage: the learner has enough knowledge to solve problems independently.) This stage is essential if students are to take responsibility for their learning.

- **Response and feedback** The teacher or expert celebrates what’s been done well and analyzes what needs more work, conferring with students about what’s been learned, problem solving what went wrong, setting goals.

- **More demonstration**, if necessary.

- **Ongoing assessment**

Teaching and Learning Approaches

Teaching generally boils down to one of two major approaches: teacher-centered or learner-centered. “Essentially, there is the behaviorist approach (call it the teacher
As the learner gains more control over the task and is able to assume more responsibility, the teacher, though still present, gradually releases support. The model is cyclical; that is, response and feedback are continuous and determine the necessity—or not—of reteaching strategies within a curricular framework. Teaching components, strategies, and approaches intersect and apply across the curriculum. The model also assumes a well-organized, safe, risk-taking environment as well as a caring relationship between students and teachers.

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‘chalk-and-talk’ model, ‘jug to mug,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘teacher-centered’) and the *constructivist approach* (the ‘workshop’ model, interactive and dynamic, learner-centered, exploratory)” (Boomer et al. 1992, 222).

However, these approaches need not be in conflict, and in fact, both are necessary for optimal learning. While it is our job to teach directly and explicitly—and doing so involves teacher demonstration and explanation—at the same time, project-based inquiries provide the necessary “hands on” involvement learners require. Neither approach to teaching and learning is superior: without a clearly defined purpose that is understood and relevant to students, both the best lecture and the best “hands on” learning can be equally ineffective. And without feedback and support, neither approach will be successful.

Teaching for understanding, therefore, encompasses (1) direct instruction and demonstration, (2) coaching, hand-holding, and providing feedback, and (3) guided discovery and inquiry. Knowing when and how to incorporate and foster all three types of teaching, interactively, is key (Wiggins and McTighe 1998, 163). It is up to us as knowledgeable professionals to determine which approach or combination of approaches to use for particular students and particular contexts.

**Direct Instruction and Demonstration**

It has always been our job to teach directly and explicitly in response to students’ needs—carefully demonstrating, specifically showing how, clearly explaining. Whatever we want our students to do well, we first have to show them how. Of all the changes I have made in my teaching, adding explicit demonstration to everything I teach has been the single most important factor in increasing students’ literacy. But here, as in everything we do when we teach, we must define our terms very carefully. By direct instruction I do not mean having all students systematically follow a scripted program in which skills are taught in a hierarchical sequence. There is strong evidence that such “basic skills” approaches may produce short-term gains but fail in the long run to produce students who can think and problem-solve independently and who can work well with others (Weikart 1998).

It is simplistic to believe that any sort of direct teaching leads to learning. There must be a match between what we teach and the child’s needs, interests, engagement, and readiness to learn. It takes a knowledgeable teacher, not a program from a publisher, to determine and assess what needs to be directly taught and how and when to teach it. Even then, we don’t really know whether our teaching was explicit for the learner until she demonstrates that she can apply what we’ve taught. Until a learner can apply what has been learned to a new context, we cannot be sure understanding has occurred.

**Coaching, Hand-Holding, and Providing Feedback**

Offering appropriate and selective assistance and support are part of effective teaching. It is our job to make sure that teaching is in the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 1978): that is, with a scaffold (literally, a temporary but necessary support without which a task cannot be accomplished), the task becomes doable for the student. This
means that we provide the temporary assistance, the hand-holding, students need to accomplish an activity or task they cannot yet do on their own.

The trick is knowing how and when—and for how long—to provide just the right amount of support that allows the learner to assume increasing control of the task. Effective teachers and experts give just enough support so students will experience success and feel confident but not so much support that they take over and disempower the learner. It’s a gentle dance that requires careful leading, following, and (occasionally) sidestepping.

This does not mean that we see to it that our students avoid complex tasks. On the contrary. A task can be challenging without being overwhelming. By intervening and breaking up a relevant task; by demonstrating, sharing, and guiding; and by providing specific materials, information, and feedback, the teacher helps the learner meet with success. Gradually, as students become more competent, we reduce the amount of support we offer. As the learners’ need for assistance decreases, the teacher “hands over” to them more responsibility for structuring their learning (Smith and Elley 1994, 83, describing the “handover principle,” a term coined by Jerome Bruner).

**Guided Discovery and Inquiry**

When students uncover and discover patterns and relationships themselves, they remember them. One of the misconceptions surrounding learning through discovery, however, is that anything goes, that students work things out on their own. Not so. The expectations and goals of inquiry-based teaching are clear. Once we explicitly show students how to do something, we support them as they learn through practice, hypothesis, and discovery. We do not leave our students without structure.

Self-discovery and explicit teaching are not at odds. Students construct their own generalizations about how something works at the same time their teachers directly and systematically explain, demonstrate, and clarify. For example: students work out rules of phonics through invented spelling; at the same time their teachers, based on observation and past experience, teach the students what they will need to know to be successful. In a guided collaboration, educators, students, and parents all work together toward a common goal. Sometimes, the teacher leads and students follow. Other times, the teaching/learning responsibility is shared. But none of this works without student engagement. “Learners will work harder and learn better, and what they learn will mean more to them, if they are discovering their own ideas, asking their own questions and fighting hard to answer them for themselves” (Boomer et al. 1992, 16).

**Basic Components of a Comprehensive Literacy Program**

We integrate our beliefs and teaching approaches every time we teach. In creating a comprehensive literacy program, we work to:

- Establish a safe, caring, well-organized, risk-taking, collaborative classroom
- Demonstrate reading, writing, and thinking processes
• Promote and inspire inquiry across the curriculum
• Discuss outstanding literature in many genres
• Use resources—books, technology, librarians, colleagues, peers
• Provide useful feedback, response, and evaluation to students and all stakeholders
• Extend literature and curriculum through oral and written responses as well as through the arts
• Share, celebrate, and publish meaningful work
• Guide and support students in becoming independent, joyful, lifelong learners

To make these practices a reality, we rely on effective teaching within a comprehensive literacy program, which includes reading and writing aloud, shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, independent reading and writing, and opportunities to respond critically and thoughtfully to texts and learning (see Figure 2-1 on page 23, and Appendixes B-1 and B-2). These components are the foundation for everything we teach, and we gradually decrease our support as our students become increasingly competent. The amount of teacher guidance and support is therefore greatest at the top of the continuum, but independent readers and writers still require some support.

Since reading and writing, speaking and listening, and thinking underpin all we do, regardless of the age of our students or the subject we are teaching, begin by demonstrating these “basics.” Therefore, the rest of this chapter will focus on and describe the following reading-writing components that go across the curriculum:

• Reading aloud
• Writing aloud
• Shared reading
• Shared writing
• Independent reading

These first four elements that rely on teacher demonstration—plus a fifth, a well-monitored independent reading program—are great starting points for our teaching canvas. Our own enthusiasm while demonstrating is contagious and promotes a love of reading and writing. Also, since these components are usually whole class activities, management is easier than for the small group work and conferencing required for guided reading (Chapter 3) and guided writing (Chapters 6 and 10).

Perhaps, most important, when we teachers intentionally demonstrate and teach concepts and conventions about all types of texts, we are modeling reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and listening strategies and responses that will be supported and practiced in guided reading and writing as well as applied later in independent reading and writing. In all of these contexts, we are demonstrating not only the strategies students are ready for; we are also showing them what they will be ready for soon. By exposing students to strategies that may be just outside their reach, we are demonstrating, suggesting, challenging, and practicing possibilities for future use on their own.

For each of these components, we value and model our own literacy, incorporate and integrate multiple teaching approaches, negotiate the parameters with our students, teach for understanding, and constantly monitor and assess as we teach.
Effective teachers integrate approaches and strategies as they intentionally build on what learners already know, extend their students’ skills and knowledge, and encourage inquiry, problem solving, self-monitoring, and independent thinking. Literacy contexts are functional, social, contextualized, and purposeful to the learner. Let’s look at how this works in a specific classroom.

It is a Monday morning in late spring, and kindergarten teacher Karen Sher has written the following “morning message” on the chalkboard in her classroom: Hooray! Our chicks hatched. We might be able to see the last one come out of the egg. Her students, who have been reading, writing, and talking about chicks and chickens for weeks, gather around the board before school begins, pointing to letters and words, talking with one another, questioning, approximating, trying to read the words. The bell rings, students take their seats, and Karen guides her class in deciphering the message (she credits “What Can You Show Us” [in Richgels et al. 1996] for this adaptation):

KAREN: What do you see that you know?
SARA: Morning message.
KAREN: Show us where that is. (Sara comes up and points to the words. Karen writes over the words in colored chalk as she says them aloud) Morning message. Tell me something else you know.
ADAM: To. (Karen traces over the word with colored chalk as Adam reads it.)
SARA: Hatched.
KAREN: How did you know that?
SARA: I know c-h says ch, and then I put the hat on ch. I put hat and ch together with ed, and it says hatched.
KAREN: That’s terrific! (Going over the word with pink chalk) Who sees something else they know?
CURTIS: Might.
KAREN: How did you know that?
CURTIS: If you put an l in front, you’d have light.
KAREN: You used rhyming words to help you. Good for you.
MOLLY: Hooray.
KAREN: How did you figure out hooray? Come up and show us where that word is.
MOLLY (pointing to parts of the word as she talks): I knew o-o makes the oo sound, like in too. I know ay in day, and I kept looking at it and thinking in my mind, and I put it together to say hooray.
KAREN: Wow, good for you. Everyone, let’s clap the word. (Students clap twice.) How many parts does it have?
CLASS: Two.
KAREN: Yes, that’s right. Who sees something else?
KYLA: Chicks.
KAREN: Come up and show us where chicks is. (Kyla comes up and points to the
word and reads it) Where does the word start? (Kyla points to the beginning of the word) Where does it end? (Kyla points) Yes, that’s right. (Reading the message that’s been deciphered so far) Hooray, chicks, hatched, might, to. It doesn’t make sense yet.

SHERRELL (raising her hand): We.
KAREN: Come show me. (Sherrell does) Good. Who else sees something they know?
ASHA: R (says letter name).
KAREN: Very good. (Highlights r in our) I wonder what word that could be.
DAVID: Our.
KAREN (reading the message so far while pointing to each word): Hooray! Our chicks hatched, might, to.
BRIDGET: See.
KAREN: Hooray! Our chicks hatched, might, to, see. Who knows something else?
TIARA: The.
KAREN: I see a couple of them. Come show me.
TIARA: Here’s two. (She points and says the, the, as Karen highlights the words)
TYLER: Egg.
KAREN: How did you figure it out?
TYLER: I know how to spell it. (He stands up) E-g-g.
KAREN: Let’s all spell it.
CLASS: E-g-g.
TORIANO: Be. (Karen highlights the word with colored chalk)
JAMAICA: Able.
KAREN: How did you know that?
JAMAICA: When I see the message, I look at the letters and sound stuff out. If it doesn’t make sense, I say it faster, all together. I try it again. Like with able, I’d never seen it before. I said a-b-l, and I didn’t get it. So I pushed the sounds together fast, abl, and then I got it.
BRANDON (spontaneously chiming in): If you put t in front of able, it’s table. (He goes on to make the words sable, cable, and stable)
KAREN: Good for you, Brandon. Now, let’s see if this all makes sense. Hooray! Our chicks hatched. We might be able to see the, the egg.
CHARLES (raising his hand): F (says letter name).
KAREN: Good. Does anyone know what o-f says? (She draws a circle around of)
TANGELA: If.
KAREN: If is close. Let’s see what if looks like. (She writes if on the chalkboard)
CHASE: Of.
KAREN: F says V (says letter sound) in this word because English is a crazy language.
CLASS (chanting): English is a crazy language!
EAMONN: One. (Karen highlights it)
KAREN (reading the message so far): Hooray! Our chicks hatched. We might be able to see the, one, of the egg. (Three words are left unhighlighted: last, come, and out)
RHYS: I see a c. (Karen highlights the c in come)
KAREN: Rhys, what sound does c make? (Rhys makes the correct sound)
NICOLE: Come.
KAREN: What’s the sound at the end of come?
ASHA: Me.
KAREN: It looks like me, but sometimes e at the end of a word doesn’t say anything.
CHARLES: L (says letter sound).
KAREN: Try the word.
CHARLES: Last.
KAREN: How did you figure it out?
CHARLES: It has l and st.
KAREN: What does a say? (Charles makes the correct sound) We’re missing one word.
What could it be? (Highlighting out) What’s this word?
ADAM: Out makes sense.
KAREN: Good for you. Let’s see if we can read the whole sentence now. (The class joins in) Hooray! Our chicks hatched. We might be able to see the last one come out of the egg. Does it make sense?
CLASS (loudly): YES!

Morning message, as it has been conducted in this classroom, involves inquiry, confirmation, and affirmation of new, applied learning. The children’s attention never lags as they try to figure out the words and read the message. These young students know that words in a text must go together to make sense. Everyone has been engrossed and involved, and the whole lesson has taken just over five minutes. Each student has been successful at his or her own level, from the new student who recognizes one lowercase letter, to the student who can read most of the message’s words. I am amazed at how much these children know and how much Karen has been teaching them.

Karen notes that since she has made a bigger effort to capitalize on teaching skills in context—morning message, shared reading, shared writing—she has gotten the best literacy results ever. “My kids are so aware of sounds and letters and language.” Karen’s findings are supported by important research that examined the practices of the most effective primary teachers. Such teachers teach and practice skills—both explicitly and opportunistically—as part of real reading and writing, and one great benefit is that lower achievers demonstrate dramatically improved performance (Pressley, Allington, Morrow, et al. 1999).

READING ALOUD

Having been read aloud to by teachers, parents, and other experts has long been viewed as a critical factor in a child’s becoming a successful reader. Being read to helps a child:

- Enjoy reading
- Develop a sense of how stories work
- Build a rich vocabulary
- Predict
• Comprehend and know
• Understand literary language
• Acquire grammar
• Notice how authors write
• Listen better
• Read more

These benefits are true for students of any age, for second-language learners, and for reluctant readers. Yet, in general, reading aloud at school and at home decreases as children get older.

It is wonderful—even enthralling—to be read aloud to by an enthusiastic reader. The joy of literature and the fun of being hooked by a good book know no age limits. (My grandmother still read aloud to me when I was a teenager.) In addition to exposing us to the pleasure of reading, being read aloud to brings us in contact with books and genres we might otherwise miss as well as with rich, complex lives outside our own experience. Children, too, can listen to and understand books, concepts, and vocabulary they are not yet able to read on their own.

We must continue to be role models with regard to this crucial activity. At the very least, devote fifteen minutes a day to reading aloud. (In secondary classrooms, where only a few minutes at the beginning of a period may be available, poems and excerpts are a good compromise.) Don’t miss a day. The payoff is huge for you and your students. The time spent is pleasurable, little preparation is necessary, discipline is rarely a problem, and students are cementing positive attitudes toward reading.

**Communicating the Ongoing Value of Reading Aloud**

Research confirms that reading aloud positively impacts overall academic achievement as well as reading skills and interest in reading. Fifth-grade teacher Fred Bolden agrees: “My highest-achieving students are still read to by their parents.” Yet we cannot assume that parents are reading aloud to their children or that they understand the continuing value of reading aloud.

A parent called second-grade teacher Ed Kmitt to say, “Reading aloud in class is a waste of time.” In response, Ed shared the thoughts one of his students beautifully captured in his journal early in the school year (see Figure 2-2). Now Ed makes it a point to let the parents of his students know that their children love to be read to and that it increases their passion for reading on their own.

When second-grade teacher Loretta Martin and I asked her students how often their parents read to them, we were surprised how rarely they did, even though the students said they still loved being read to. Many parents stop reading to their kids once the children can read on their own. Sobered by this information, Loretta encouraged parents to read aloud to their children one night a week. Several weeks later, student after student mentioned how wonderful it was to be read to again “just like when I was little”: “It felt good and cozy.” “It felt like I was four years old again when my dad used to read me a story every night.” “It was an interesting story that I would like to read to my children.”

Appendix A-1, “Why I Read Aloud to My Children,” can be sent home as a gentle re-
minder of the importance and joy of reading aloud. Daniel Pennac, in his eloquent book *Better Than Life* (1999), demonstrates how reading great literature aloud can motivate even our most reluctant readers. It’s a great book to share with the parents of “turned off” older readers.

**Reading Aloud as an Opportunity to Demonstrate and Value Reading**

Best of all, reading aloud is a perfect way to demonstrate the joy of a good book. I also use reading aloud to demonstrate thinking aloud—predicting, summarizing as you go, working through tough spots. When reading aloud, I may also point out pacing, rereading for clarification, connecting to known information, and confirming or disproving predictions. (See pages 452–454 for a “think aloud” demonstration with a news magazine.)

There is no best way to read aloud. Be sure that you love the book, have read the material in advance, and read with expression. Often, I will set the stage by talking about the
author, the genre, the topic or theme, and the audience. Sometimes I will read a story all the way through. Other times I will stop at logical junctures and ask for predictions. With picture books, I am careful to show and value the illustrations.

Our students cherish the books we read aloud. Therefore, our daily read-alouds need to include various genres, not just fiction. (It’s a good time to make connections with other areas of the curriculum: see “Reading Nonfiction Aloud,” pages 445–448, for specific guidelines, most of which also apply to fiction.) Reading series books aloud (see pages 75b–78b) can turn kids—especially developing readers—on to reading. Repeated readings of favorite books and poems encourage students to seek these materials out to read on their own. Also, consider offering students a choice: briefly describe several titles, and let the class vote on which one they want to hear. Some teachers also have students keep track of books read aloud as part of their total reading record (see pages 54–55).

Students are never too old to be read aloud to. Many of Holly Burgess’s high school students tell her literature “makes more sense” when she reads it aloud—especially when the literature is challenging and she is dramatic and interpretive.

**Interactive Reading Aloud**

Sometimes, the book is so good that just reading aloud and savoring the moment is enough. Our silence is our appreciation. Many times, however, the conversation and interaction around the book are what make reading aloud powerful. And it is important for some of this talk to occur while the book is being read aloud, not just afterward:

> By allowing children to talk during read-alouds, teachers can assist children in their making of meaning as that meaning is in the process of being constructed. They can also observe how the children assist each other in making meaning. If children invariably understand read-alouds as a time to sit quietly and listen to the story, discussion afterward may be less rich. (Sipe 1998, 60)

Before, during, and after the reading, students may explore patterns, themes, illustrations, predictions, what they noticed; compare what’s been read with other books and authors; talk about the reading with a friend; or write or do a drawing about it in their journal.

**Opening Up the Possibilities for Who Reads Aloud**

While books are most often read aloud by teachers, other adults and students can also do the job well. Mike Oliver is a principal in Mesa, Arizona. The first week of school he spends the entire week reading aloud to every class. His purpose is to set the tone for the school, to model for teachers, and to get to know the kids. In other schools, school board members, superintendents, administrators, special teachers, retired teachers, secretaries, and custodians are invited to come into the classroom to read aloud. Not only do students see these people in a new light, savvy teachers use this opportunity to showcase what’s going on in their classrooms.

Some teachers let parents know how much they value reading aloud by inviting parents to come in and read a favorite book to the class. When second-grade teacher Loretta
Martin issued a read-aloud invitation to her students’ families, every family was represented by a parent, grandparent, or other relative (see Appendix A-4). What a great way to make parents feel welcome in the school and classroom! Other schools establish a formal read-aloud program for parents and train them to read aloud interactively.

In many schools, community volunteers also read aloud to kids, especially students in kindergarten and first grade who don’t have a rich literature background and don’t know how stories work. Reach Out and Read is a national program in which volunteers read to children in clinic waiting rooms. Children are given free books, and the pediatricians urge parents to read to their children. (See “Home-School Connections,” pages 61b–62b, for complete information.)

Often, older students can read to younger students effectively. Many of the fourth graders in my district are paired for the year with a kindergarten buddy. Once a week, at a set time, the older students read aloud to the kindergartners and interactively engage them in the story. (Upper-grade teachers first model the process, coach the fourth graders, and conduct rehearsals.) In some schools, upper-grade students volunteer to read—usually first thing in the morning, just before school starts—to first and second graders who struggle with reading. Or, as part of their weekly community service, secondary students may read to younger students. The reading-buddy relationship is a nurturing one, and reading attitudes and the library’s circulation rates improve to boot.

**WRITING ALOUD**

When writing aloud the teacher makes her thinking visible while composing and scribing in front of students. Students see a demonstration of how writing works—planning, thinking, drafting, organizing, selecting words, forming letters, spelling, punctuating, revising, editing, and formatting.

Every time we write in front of students is an opportunity to display the thinking that lies behind the process. Writing aloud doesn’t require much teacher preparation. In fact, overplanning is counterproductive: we want to model what writers do as they write.

The “morning message” is a quick and excellent way to demonstrate writing (Invitations, pages 51–52). The teacher thinks aloud while correctly writing a short message in front of her students. Students follow along visually and may also read aloud with the teacher. After the message is written, the teacher asks questions that focus on one or several conventions of writing or features of text, whatever the students need and are ready to learn or need to have reinforced. As we saw earlier in this chapter (pages 27–29), a “morning message” can also be a wonderful way to focus on figuring out letters, sounds, and words in the early grades.

**SHARED READING**

In shared reading, a learner—or group of learners—sees the text, observes an expert (usually the teacher) reading it with fluency and expression, and is invited to read along (see Invitations, pages 33–38 for specifics). Renowned New Zealand educator Don Holdaway “invented” the big book (with its oversized dimensions and enlarged type and illustrations), taking his cue from how stories are read at home at bedtime—in a relaxed
setting, favorites being read again and again, the child able to see the text clearly and in-
vited to join in. His goal was to make the sharing of stories, poems, and songs central to
literacy instruction. His book *The Foundations of Literacy* (1979) is timeless; read it if
you are new to shared reading or want a refresher course in specific goals, procedures,
teaching strategies, and follow-up activities.

Shared reading is terrific way for students of all ages to enjoy reading and improve
their reading skills. In addition to the teacher, the expert reader may be a peer, an older
student, an adult volunteer, a taped voice (often the teacher's or a volunteer's), or a CD-
ROM. Most often, students chime in orally, but as long as they are following along visu-
ally, I do not insist they speak the words. While shared reading is usually done with the
whole class, it may also be used with a smaller group or even a single child. Shared read-
ing is an excellent opportunity to hear text read aloud. While shared reading is often rel-
egated to the primary grades, it is an excellent technique for all grades.

For students to reap the benefits of shared reading, they must be engaged with the
text. Therefore, we need to be sure everyone is really following along. Make sure stu-
dents whose attention wanders easily are sitting up front where you can quickly signal
them back to attention.

**Benefits of Shared Reading**

I love shared reading because it is easy to do, makes reading pleasurable, and takes the
pressure off having to read alone. Students who are not yet able to read the text on their
own can understand it. Investigative studies show that students learning to read in a sec-
ond language do better with “book floods” and an emphasis on shared reading (Elley
1998, 14). Shared reading:

- Provides an enjoyable and supportive context for reading
- Provides access to interesting, lively, and attractive texts
- Models reading in a natural, expressive voice with appropriate pacing
- Exposes children to the language and structure of stories and books
- Teaches multiple reading strategies
- Shows children how to preview a book
- Helps all children participate as readers
- Encourages close examination of the concepts of print (spaces between words,
punctuation, dedication, title page, table of contents, index)
- Demonstrates one-to-one matching between spoken and written words
- Provides a meaningful context for learning and applying phonics and spelling—
  using what children already know about letters, sounds, letter patterns, and words
to figure out new words
- Encourages and persuades students to try the book (or parts of it) on their own
  later
- Increases reading fluency
- Models reader response (prediction, discussion)
- Builds and supports children's confidence and positive attitudes about reading
Helps develop a joyful community of readers
Promotes guided reading

Much of what we teach and reinforce in guided reading (pages 140–161) can first be demonstrated in shared reading. Then, in small-group guided reading, students can practice and apply what they have already attempted with teacher support. Shared reading is particularly beneficial to struggling readers and students for whom English is their second language.

Some Shared Reading Basics

Choosing Texts

The primary purpose of shared reading is to delight and engage the reader. Therefore, choose books your students will be interested in, both old favorites and new titles. In kindergarten and first grade, I make it a point to use one or two “predictable” books, ones that include natural language, rhyme, repetition, and illustrations that support the text. Whenever students can chant or sing texts, enjoyment and learning are heightened. Students also love to read texts they have authored: class stories, news items, poems, and chants they have written during shared writing (see pages 37–43).

Be sure all your readers can see the print easily. Enlarged print—big books, poems, and stories recopied onto chart paper—is recommended in the early grades, but individual copies or projected transparencies also work well.

Organizing for Shared Reading

In the upper grades, shared reading need take only five or ten minutes. With younger students, especially in kindergarten and first grade, shared reading is often the primary context for teaching reading. Daily whole-class shared reading may thus last thirty minutes or more and include several poems and big books, some of which are read more than once.

Combining shared and silent reading lets students decode the sections of the story that are too difficult for them to read on their own while encouraging them to read the easy parts by themselves. Shared reading can also be combined with reading aloud and oral cloze (page 130). I sometimes begin a guided reading group by reading a chapter aloud while the students follow along visually. Occasionally I’ll pause and let the students fill in the next word or phrase, monitoring their ability to “track” the print and read or anticipate specific words. Some teachers have students read out loud along with them but lower their own voice in the easier parts the students can handle on their own. Another option is to read a very familiar text as Readers Theatre (pages 74–75).

Teaching Skills and Strategies

The point of shared reading is for students to enjoy reading in a nonpressured, social setting. However, it is also a great way to teach children how texts work and to help them develop reading strategies. To that end, during the first reading, concentrate on being
sure students enjoy and understand the story. Then, in subsequent rereadings, make one or two teaching points—you can introduce and reinforce any of the strategies students practice in small-group guided reading (see pages 143–144):

- Noticing textual elements
- Learning the role of punctuation
- Noticing and using letters, phonemes, onsets, and rimes
- Using illustrations along with print to determine words
- Using meaning to figure out text
- Combining meaning, structure, and visual cues to figure out words
- Recognizing frequently encountered words
- Predicting
- Summarizing

Reading big books for enjoyment is a perfect and very natural opportunity to focus on features of print. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers need to be sure to point out words and aspects of print as they go along. Many teachers fail to focus on features of print when they read big books for enjoyment and a natural teaching time is lost.

**Shared Poetry Reading**

Shared reading of poetry, particularly when it includes rhythm and rhyme, is one of the best ways I know for promoting confidence and competency in developing readers of any age. Poems are fun to read again and again and provide the repetition struggling readers require. Language play, oral cloze, and words with common rimes can be highlighted. I often use a sliding mask (Invitations, page 190b) to highlight particular words and text features.

It is easy to find poems for shared reading. Poetry anthologies include many old and new favorites. Students often have favorite poems they are eager to share, some of which they may have written themselves. (Pages 364–382 discuss teaching poetry writing.)

**Poetry Notebooks**

Some of the teachers in my school district copy favorite poems onto transparencies, insert the transparencies into three-ring plastic envelopes, and file them, along with cover sheets bearing the poems’ titles, alphabetically in a large binder. This poetry book becomes a resource for the “poet of the day” (page 37) and for literacy centers containing an overhead projector (page 165), and is a source of material to read during sustained silent reading. Adding, removing, and returning a poem to the notebook are natural ways to teach alphabetizing.

Poems can also be placed into individual notebooks that students use during shared reading in school and when they practice reading at home. Several years ago I ran into a former first-grade student. I was delighted when this sixteen-year-old proudly told me that he still had his poetry notebook!
Second graders in Ed Knitt's class each maintain a three-ring binder filled with rhythmic poems that have cadence and rhyme and lend themselves to chanting. At least two new poems, chosen jointly by Ed and the students, are added each week. He photocopies the poems on paper of various colors so students are able to distinguish the poems easily. For fifteen minutes two or three times a week, Ed uses these poems during whole-class shared reading. His kids love these sessions: “I can’t get them to stop,” Ed says. The kids love to perform their poems for visitors, and they recite some of them spontaneously on the playground or on the bus during a field trip. Ed has also noticed that words from the poems are more easily decoded in other contexts and turn up in the students’ writing.

**Poet of the Day**

I came up with “poet of the day” when I was working as a second-grade reading specialist (see *Invitations*, page 35). I was working with one group of struggling readers in particular, but I used daily shared reading of poetry as an icebreaker and community builder for the whole class. Here’s how it works.

Each day one or more students, who have signed up a day or two in advance, lead the class in a shared reading of a favorite poem. (While you’ll find that almost all students sign up voluntarily, you can assign a day to the few who don’t.) The designated poet or poets of the day choose a transparency from the classroom poetry binder and lead the whole class in a shared reading of the poem. All readers are expected first to practice reading their chosen poem until they can read it fluently.

The reader stands next to the overhead projector (on a securely positioned stool or chair if necessary) and leads the shared reading by moving a line marker down the transparency, one line at a time. (You’ll need to demonstrate this process initially, but within a few weeks you’ll be able to stand back and observe, coaching those readers who need additional support.)

One good thing about this activity is that all students can do it successfully. Independent readers are free to choose more difficult poems, and developing readers are able to choose short, familiar poems that they can already read or that require very little practice. It also doesn’t require a lot of time, just a minute or two for each student.

**SHARED WRITING**

In shared writing, the teacher and students compose collaboratively, the teacher acting as expert and scribe for her apprentices as she demonstrates, guides, and negotiates the creation of meaningful text, focusing on the craft of writing as well as the conventions. (See *Invitations*, pages 59–66, for procedures and sample lessons.)

Shared writing builds on what the teacher has already been modeling through writing aloud. It is an excellent way to model quality writing and a very effective way to teach concepts of print. It’s also a great way to get developing readers and writers and second-language learners to concentrate on words. Shared writing can be done in pairs, in groups, or as a whole class. Texts can be short and completed in one session or long and written over several weeks.
Composing and revising in this shared context make the interrelationship among reading, writing, speaking, and listening very clear. Students hear sounds in words, recognize common words, and constantly reread text. Because the language is familiar and the students have helped create it, shared writing is great for practicing and improving reading; shared writing often becomes the text for shared reading.

I regularly use shared writing to demonstrate techniques I then expect students to use on their own. For example, before I encourage students to write poetry, we’ll first write a poem together (see page 374). Or when students are learning to write fiction, we may develop a realistic character together (pages 358–359). Or when I’m teaching students how to write a summary, we’ll compose one together first. In any shared writing I do, I start with a topic or story I know will be interesting. I brainstorm possible directions the writing could take, I sculpt the piece so it is well written, I teach conventions and spelling as I go along.

This guided writing is the scaffold writers need in order to attempt a new genre or project. After repeated exposure to this kind of modeling, students write longer and more interesting sentences, pick better topics, and improve their grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

**Shared Writing Contexts**

I use whole-class shared writing for a variety of purposes and audiences:

- Writing a class thank-you letter, invitation, or request (see pages 332 and 480) instead of having each student write a separate but similar one
- Composing a class newsletter to parents (see Appendix A-8)
- Retelling a familiar story and/or creating a new version
- Formalizing classroom procedures, jobs, behavior (see pages 540–541)
- Reviewing a field trip or other class experience (this often becomes a booklet)
- Keeping a class record of important learning experiences (see pages 267–268)
- Entering observations of a class pet, plant, or experiment in a class journal
- Preparing a visitor’s guide—for parents, teachers, administrators, congressmen—explaining what to look for in the reading/writing classroom (see page 389)
- Creating rubrics (evaluation standards) for classroom projects and assignments (see pages 202–203)
- Making signs and charts that list school rules related to safety and decorum
- Writing continuing nonfiction or fiction (see pages 39 and 41)
- Writing poetry (see page 381)
- Writing book reviews (see pages 340–341 and 344)
- Establishing editing expectations (see pages 179b–180b)
- Determining guidelines for literacy tasks—selecting books, giving book talks, etc. (see pages 51, 56, 58–59, and 122)
- Preparing a story map (characters, setting, problem, main events, resolution)
- Writing a keepsake memory book of the school year (see Figure 2-3)
The resulting texts are often used for shared reading, and students often keep individual copies to read silently and share with their family.

Some questions/prompts I use to guide (not dominate) shared writing are:

- Who has a good beginning sentence?
- How else can we say that? How about if we say it this way?
- How can we combine those two thoughts?
- Who has another idea?
- What do you think about . . . ?
- Is there anything else you think we should include here?
- Where do you think we should add that?
Until such prompts come naturally to you, you may want to have them close by for reference.

Examples of Shared Writing Lessons

An Example of Shared Fiction Writing with First Graders

Teachers Margaret Villari and Kathy Sharkoff, who jointly teach first grade in a job-sharing arrangement, often use shared writing. Margaret says the payoff has been “enormous,” and she now writes in front of the children every day. When Margaret and Kathy noticed the children were writing primarily about real happenings, they started writing a shared piece of fiction on a large, lined tablet displayed on the easel.

First, they brainstormed ideas and charted the characters and the plot (that is, an overall problem and its resolution). Then, each day they added to the story. At least part of the time, the children were expected to help with the spelling. (“How do I spell er at the end of a word?” “Ladder is in our story over and over. We know how to spell it.” “If the word is on our word wall, I expect you to spell it correctly.”)

Because they were in the classroom on alternate days, each teacher left a Post-it note on the tablet telling where the story was headed. (This is great modeling for what writers do: I constantly write myself notes about what I want to add, what I want to say next.) They continued writing the story for weeks, and the children’s enthusiasm never lagged. When the story was finally finished, the class reread it, revised it slightly, and made it into a big book. Margaret wrote the story out by hand, and the students illustrated it. A copy was made for each student and for the classroom library.

An Example of Shared Nonfiction Writing with First Graders

Christine Cachat’s first graders are enchanted with their daily recounting of the class hamster’s adventures. Each day, they reread the story from the beginning, often making some revisions before continuing. After several weeks the story is finished, and the class publishes it both as a big book and as booklet-size individual copies that each student illustrates for him- or herself. Parts of the piece are copied onto transparencies and used for shared and cloze reading and to exemplify textual features. This is the writing/reading connection at its best. (Figure 2-4 is one page of a student booklet; Figure 2-5 on page 42 shows one of the transparencies.)

Christine comments, “I was surprised by how much they loved it and how long they stayed interested in the story. They’re so proud of it because they can read it themselves. I never thought they could be so interested in a topic.”

An Example of Shared Poetry Writing with First Graders

Students love sharing interesting information. Writing a poem together on a common research topic is a powerful motivation for reading and research, and it’s a fun way to
record, remember, and enjoy the new information. Every year Nancy Johnston’s class creates a poem to go along with their research on animals, each student contributing a unique fact about the animal they investigated. Titles of past poems have included: “What Do the Animals Do All Day?” “Can You Believe . . . ?” “Did You Know That. . . .” (See page 381 for a complete poem that Nancy and one of her classes created through shared writing.)

Shared Writing in a Second-Grade Classroom

Lisa, a first-year teacher of second graders, is eager to help her students improve their writing. I suggest she try shared writing. We decide to write a story about Jason Thele (J. T., as he was affectionately called), the class’ pet guinea pig, who recently died. The story
goes on for days and days. (Before each day’s addition, the class rereads the story and occasionally makes small changes. Shared writing and shared reading go hand in hand. See Photo 2-1.)

Modeling shared writing for Lisa, I stretch out the sounds as I write the words the class and I have agreed on. I am strict about not allowing students to call out spellings when I want to assess what a particular child knows or solicit contributions from children who are reluctant to volunteer. However, for a word I expect everyone to know how to spell, I’ll say, Okay, everyone, spell but [or was, whatever] for me.

When I ask Kevin how to spell when, he gives me w and e. I write these letters down, leaving room for the missing ones. Because it is the second semester and this is a word he should know, I take a moment to focus with him. “What do you hear at the end of when?” I say the word slowly. He says t. “Listen again.” He says n. Then I concentrate on the h. “There’s a letter after w that also sometimes comes after w in words like what and where.” When he doesn’t know, I call on a volunteer and write in the h. After we finish
our shared writing for the day, I ask Kevin, “What was the tricky part for you?” He says h. Before I leave, I ask him to spell when, which he does easily.

Lisa continues shared writing for about ten minutes each morning (though later in the year, she switches to every other day), noting that kids who have difficulty writing by themselves are able to contribute. Shared writing gives them a voice. Lisa also mentions a significant improvement in the content, spelling, and punctuation of the students’ own writing. Crossover to student work is evident; they have seen her thinking about how to word a sentence, sounding out words, pausing and putting in punctuation, rereading.

A WORD ABOUT INTERACTIVE WRITING

Interactive writing is shared writing with the addition that students also serve as scribes: they take turns holding the pen and writing the letters and words of the message. Young students love to write letters and words on large chart paper, and the advantage to having them do so is that the writing is more child centered. Developing readers and writers are jointly able to focus on and explore sounds, letters, and words. Students have the opportunity (with
teacher guidance) to say the words slowly; stretch out the sounds; analyze what they hear in terms of the appropriate letters to use; and write with directionality, spacing, capitalization, and punctuation. Sometimes, the teacher holds the pen with the student, the student writing the letters she knows and the teacher filling in the remaining letters.

I find that interactive writing works very well in small groups or one-on-one. Its main disadvantage is the amount of time it takes. When children are gathered in a large group, their switching places at the easel and their often slow, laborious letter formations can disrupt the group’s attention and engagement. Also, children who know their letters and sounds can be easily bored.

Another drawback for me is the stress placed on conventional spelling and overall correctness, which many students may not be ready for. I do not use the white correction tape prescribed for keeping the writing perfectly correct (Button, Johnson, and Furgeson 1996, 450, building on the work of Pinnell and McCarrier 1994). When a student misspells, the teacher is supposed to tear off a piece of tape and cover up the error. Either the child or teacher then writes the correct letter(s). I worry that the wrong message may be sent to developing writers, that is, that their approximations are not good enough. Therefore, whenever I use interactive writing, I ask students to tell me what letters they are about to write. If the letters are incorrect, we talk about the problem before they write them down. Alternately, I may write down the letters for the student. Also, while I remind students to use lowercase letters, when a young writer uses the correct letter in the middle of the word but forms it as a capital letter, I say, Good for you. You knew that letter was t, and let it go for the moment.

INDEPENDENT READING

Having time to read books and materials of your own choosing is absolutely necessary to becoming a reader. Recreational reading promotes comprehension, vocabulary, conventional spelling, a sense of grammar, writing competency, and a positive attitude toward the written word. Yet reading like this continues to be undervalued by some parents, teachers, and administrators. In addition, the higher the grade level, the less time seems to be devoted to independent reading.

Teachers who do devote lots of time to reading are sometimes forced to defend their position. A second-grade teacher I know tells me he is being questioned by parents about why he reads aloud every day and allows so much time for students to read independently. A fourth-grade teacher worries because her principal questions her repeatedly about beginning each day with WEB (the acronym for Wonderfully Exciting Books, which is what many teachers call our independent reading program). We need to clearly communicate to families and administrators why this activity is a daily necessity, not a frill. Then we must set up our classrooms to include lots of time and opportunity for independent reading.

The research is firmly behind us. A landmark study, often quoted, has shown that time spent reading books is the best predictor of reading achievement and growth in students in second through fifth grade (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988). In addition, students in grades 4, 8, and 12 who reported doing more daily reading at school and at home had higher average scores than their peers who reported doing less daily reading (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). Finally, “saturation reading programs,” in which older students reading below grade level read in class for extended periods, dra-
matically improve reading scores. Still, “few administrators, or teachers, have the
courage to open up their curriculums and make developing avid readers the priority”
(Leonhardt 1997). We need to find that courage.

Basic Principles for Independent Reading

• A sustained period of time is set aside each day for independent reading. Some teachers begin the morning or afternoon with independent reading and love the settling effect it has on the students. Time set aside varies from ten or fifteen minutes at the beginning of the year to as much as forty-five minutes at the end.

• Everyone reads, including the teacher. The only model for reading enjoyment some students will ever see is their teacher.

• Students choose their own reading materials. They must therefore have access to materials they can read and that interest them.

• The reading environment is quiet, relaxed, and comfortable. Depending on your and your students’ preferences, it need not be silent, but it does need to be peaceful.

• The focus is on enjoyment. Although this is a time for students to practice reading strategies and learn new information, the main purpose is reading for pleasure.

• Students keep a record of books and genres read as soon as they are able to do so. I base what I ask students to do on my own reading record. Asking them to include genres as well as titles and authors helps keep me, the students, and their families aware of reading preferences and lets me know when I may need to encourage students to “balance” their reading diets. Students can also rate the books, based on their own or some other agreed-on rating scale. (Figures 2-8 and 2-10, pages 53 and 55, are examples of student reading records.)

• Written responses are rarely required. Knowing you will have to write a report on what you’ve read makes reading far less enjoyable.

• There is time for sharing and recommending books. Hearing about books others love makes us want to read them too. (See “Book Talks,” page 58.)

• Students must have books with them at all times. Students in our WEB program are expected to carry books back and forth between school and home. I problem solve with the perpetual forgetters. We negotiate strategies to help them remember: writing a reminder note, putting the book in their backpack before bedtime, placing the book next to their lunch box (lunch is harder to forget!).

Of these, reading for pleasure is the most important. Unless they enjoy what they’re reading, students will be disengaged and uncommitted.

Reading for Pleasure

In classroom after classroom I ask students why they think their teachers want them to read every night. Without exception, they respond: To do well in school. To learn stuff. To
learn new words. To find out information. To get smarter. To get ready for the next grade. I probe a little: Yes, all this is true, but Sunday I spent all afternoon reading a book. Why do you think I did that? Then, finally, it dawns on them: reading is enjoyable! Students never mention the pleasure factor first, and this worries me. We have to be careful that in our zeal to turn kids on to reading, it doesn’t become an assignment they dread.

Some years ago the parent of a third grader told me her son felt he had to read for at least thirty minutes each night: one day his teacher had told him he hadn’t read enough pages the night before. So Tommy, who used to like reading on his own, was now watching the clock and counting pages. Worried that we might be mandating reading rather than encouraging it, I wrote a piece on WEB reading (Routman 1996, 188).

Ask this question of your students: Why are we devoting sustained time in school and at home to independent reading? Use their responses to gauge the messages they are receiving about reading. Perhaps reading for pleasure does not come to mind immediately because they are not finding enough materials they can read that interest them, they see too few role models (see page 555), or too much emphasis is being placed on “checking” their reading.

**Making a Commitment to Independent Reading**

When educators value and model free reading and take the time to ensure that all students are engaged with interesting books, the dividends are rewarding for everyone involved.

On the first day of school this past year, Mike Oliver, the principal of an elementary school in Mesa, Arizona, gave each of his teachers $400. In place of the usual first-day faculty meeting, he sent the teachers to the local bookstore, where they were able to purchase books at a 40 percent discount. Then they displayed the books they bought by lining them up in rain gutters (Jim Trelease’s idea) so the front covers were in full view. These book displays overpowered anyone who entered any classroom in the school.

Second-grade teacher Bev Sullivan and I are talking in the hall. She tells me she thinks all her students will reach our district reading benchmark (see Appendixes I-5 and I-8), that all her students are successful readers. When I ask how she accounts for that success, she says she makes sure her students read and read some more. She prompts reluctant readers to take part in WEB by having them sit with her and handpicking their books. She says her students also spend a lot of time partner reading. We both agree that it’s the amount of reading students do that’s made the difference. And in mid May, Bev confirms her students’ success. “They all met the benchmark! I know it’s the amount of daily reading they did.”

**Providing Access to Interesting Reading Materials**

There is a strong relationship between the amount of reading students do and reading achievement: the students who read most are the best readers (National Center for Education Statistics 1999, 134). If students are to read a lot, interesting reading materials must be readily available. It is well documented that access to books and libraries influences how much children read (Krashen 1993; McQuillan 1998).

We can improve the reading achievement of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may not have access to lots of reading materials “by improving their access
to print” (Krashen 1998, 85). We need to provide these students—and all students—with lots of materials they can read and want to read. (See pages 80 and 87–88 for advice on how to establish classroom and school libraries that meet your students’ interests and needs.)

In elementary school, the rate of progress for children from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds “is virtually identical”; it is during nonschool time that low-SES children fall behind (Snow et al. 1998, 31, citing a research study by Alexander and Entwisle 1996). While the cited research does not state or imply why these students fall behind in the time they are not in school, it seems fairly obvious; they are not reading. These are the students who do not frequent the library as often as their middle-class counterparts, who do not have the same access to books and preferred reading materials.

After I became aware of this research finding, I made a bigger effort to make sure that all students had lots of books to read over the summer and during other vacations. Teachers have long known that those students who do not read over the summer lose ground. I handpicked books, put them into the hands of readers I was concerned about, and sent home a letter to parents explaining the importance of independent reading for maintaining and promoting gains in reading ability. Principals may want to think about allocating funds just for giving books to students to read during vacations, especially over the summer. One teacher I know got books for students by facilitating a schoolwide book drive to which families donated books their children had outgrown.

Students of all ages will choose to read if they have materials that interest them. Reluctant middle school students will read “lighter” fare like the popular series books, scary books, magazines, comic books, and sports books. Let them. Light reading like this will help them make the transition to more complex reading (Worthy et al. 1999). I know this from experience. While my mother was signing out “classics” from the library to coax her reluctant daughters to read, my sister and I were reading teen romance comic books under the covers. This nightly reading-by-flashlight continued, quite happily, for several years.

**Being a Role Model for Reading and Talking About Books**

On the first day of school, Cindy, Marlene, and I are talking in the hallway, catching up. “Have you read *She’s Come Undone*?” Cindy asks, and we are off and running on an enthusiastic discussion of newly discovered authors, favorite books, writing styles. It turns out we’ve all read Wally Lamb’s book and agree it was a great summer read but not great literature. As we talk, I make notes of books I want to read: *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, by John Berendt, and *What We Keep*, by Elizabeth Berg. I tell my friends about the most extraordinary book I’ve read in years, *The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy, and about another incredible book, Jean-Dominique Bauby’s *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, which deeply touched me. It hits me that this beginning-of-the-school-year talk about books is exactly what we should be doing in our classrooms the first week of school.

If our goal is for students to become lifelong readers, we must model that way of living. Even if we don’t like to read ourselves, we must find a book that engages us. “To teach reading without the fervor of your last novel, journal, story at the top of your heart is to false lead your children to literacy” (Nia 1998).

An intermediate-grade teacher I have been working with reluctantly admits she doesn’t like to read. She tells me, “Teaching was easy. I followed the manuals. I did what I was told.
I never thought about my own literacy or being a literacy role model.” I loan her *Durable Goods*, by Elizabeth Berg, a favorite book of mine and one I think she may enjoy. She winds up liking the short chapters and feeling successful, but at first she is put off because it is an easy read: “In first grade, I was reading hard books, fifth-grade level. I was always pushed to move ahead and do hard books. I read everything phonetically. I didn’t enjoy reading. Reading was for answering the questions the teacher asked.” Much later she confesses to me, “You told me to read during sustained silent reading. This is the first book I’ve read. I was embarrassed to tell you.” She also tells me that now that she is reading and enjoying it (“I couldn’t put the book down”), she allot more time to independent reading. Her own excitement about reading has made her a more effective teacher of reading.

The best time to start your daily independent reading program is the first day of school. (Some teachers even write to students over the summer and tell them to bring favorite books to share during their first week back.) Talk about yourself as a reader and share the things you like to read. Build community by encouraging and valuing conversations about favorite books and reading materials. Use the time set aside for independent reading for your own recreational as well as professional reading.

Many teachers of first and second grade find they cannot read silently themselves until procedures and appropriate behavior are firmly established. These teachers let students know they read by talking about and showing favorite books but initially spend their own time during independent reading ensuring that students are properly matched with books they can and want to read.

**What About Reading Incentives and Rewards?**

Some teachers offer pizzas or similar rewards for reading, but I’m not in favor of it. “None of the studies on incentives show any clearly positive effect on reading that can be attributed solely to the use of rewards” (Krashen and McQuillan 1998, 418). I vividly remember several first graders who were still heartbroken in second grade because they hadn’t read enough books to earn a private lunch with their teacher. With rewards, the focus shifts from the joy of reading to the number of books read; reading becomes competitive. Independent readers of long chapter books are at a disadvantage, and motivation often decreases. One parent told me, “My son was so disappointed at not getting the reward that he stopped reading for a while.”

Recent brain research tells us that children do not need immediate rewards. Students are intrinsically motivated when goals and tasks are clear and relevant, when they feel positive about themselves and their learning, when feedback is positive and helpful, and when stress and threat are eliminated (Jensen 1998).

**Organizing for Independent Reading**

Clever names for designating independent reading abound: WEB (Wonderfully Exciting Books), SSR (Sustained Silent Reading or Student Selected Reading), SQUIRT (Sustained Quiet Uninterrupted Independent Reading Time), DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time), or DEAR (Drop Everything and Read). (Some kindergarten teachers, among themselves, refer to the time as SNR—Sustained Noisy Reading.)
The WEB program in our district goes beyond daily sustained silent reading in class and also includes:

- **Nightly reading** (between twenty and forty minutes)
- **Keeping a reading record** (WEB log)
- **Interviews on completed books** (conducted by classmates and teacher)
- **Book talks and sharing**
- **One-on-one student-teacher conferences** (at least once a month for independent readers and as often as daily for developing readers) to discuss book selection, authors, and genres read; check reading record; monitor comprehension; set goals
- **Communicating with parents**

See also *Invitations*, pages 42–49, for a description of WEB reading and Servis 1999 for an excellent description of a daily WEB program and sustained silent reading.

Whatever you call your daily independent reading and however you organize it, I recommend including the following practices:

- **Find out your students’ reading preferences** (through oral or written interviews), and make their preferred materials readily available.
- **Organize the classroom library, with your students’ help, so reading materials are interesting, varied, attractively displayed, and easily accessible.** Organized baskets or crates of related books, leveled books, or magazines let students make choices more easily (see pages 85–88). Be sure to include students’ published materials.
- **Make sure students are matched with books they can read.**
- **Provide time each day for students to select books on their own.**
- **Establish a procedure for carrying books between home and school.**
- **Negotiate record keeping, and carefully model this process.**
- **Monitor students’ understanding of what they are reading.** (See pages 114–121 for one-on-one formal and informal reading conferences.)
- **Help students set goals** (trying a new genre or author, increasing amount of nightly reading, self-monitoring for comprehension).
- **Let students of any age read or browse through anything**—magazines, picture books, catalogues, even comics. Remember that light reading often helps turn reluctant readers on to reading.

**Matching Kids with Books**

Students need to be able to enjoy and understand reading material in a number of genres. For students to make steady progress in reading, the things they read,
whether instructionally or independently, must match their interests, experiences, and reading ability. If students have a steady diet of books that are too hard for them and/or in which they have no interest, their reading actually regresses.

One of the easiest and most useful ways to ensure that a student is reading appropriate material is to conduct an individual, informal assessment (see pages 114–118 for procedures). And it’s not just the struggling readers we need to monitor. Many strong readers continue to read only very easy books and need to be nudged to challenge themselves a bit.

We also need to be sure the books we choose for instructional reading offer just enough challenge that students can problem solve the trouble spots without too much guidance. A careful introduction and some explicit teaching may be necessary. (See guided reading, pages 140–161.)

Sharon Taberski (2000) spends the first month of school conferring with her first and second graders one-on-one and suggesting books to them. She also makes sure each child has a book bag of between five and ten books he or she can read independently. Second-grade teacher Loretta Martin teaches her kids how to select books from her well-stocked and organized classroom library and monitors their selections carefully. Each student selects five books and keeps them in a freezer bag. After all the books have been read, the student goes “book shopping” for five new books.

Primary-grade teachers often find that housing books in baskets or tubs rather than on shelves makes the books more appealing and accessible. Teachers make sure there are baskets of books—often grouped by topic, author, difficulty, series—on students’ tables. It’s amazing how well kids can focus on independent reading once they have lots of easy, interesting books readily available. For struggling readers, who typically have difficulty selecting books they can read independently, it’s perhaps best to preselect and organize a basket (or group) of books at the appropriate interest and reading level and then allow the students to choose among those books. Rereading familiar books plays an important role here. Repetition helps developing readers focus on meaning and become more confident as they gain increasing control of reading strategies. Often, a reader will return to the comfort of an easy favorite after he has taken a risk with a more challenging book.

**Choosing “Just Right” Books**

A book is at a student’s independent reading level if he can problem solve the trouble spots mostly on his own using familiar, well established strategies. That means the student should be able to read and understand almost all the words and concepts on a page and be able to discuss and explain what he has read. This holds true for independent reading at home as well as in school. Books students take home should be ones they can read mostly on their own. We can’t assume parents will read these books to or with their children.

In helping a child select a book, ask yourself:

- Will she be interested in the book?
- Does she have the background knowledge to understand the ideas and the vocabulary?
- Are the amount, size, and placement of text appropriate?
- Are there illustrations that support the text?
While you may want to use book-level guidelines for developing readers (see pages 83–84) be sure you take the individual student into account, not just the book’s difficulty. Sometimes a book we think is easy may actually be hard for a student if he lacks the background or interest. Likewise, a book we decide is too hard for a student may turn out to be readable because of the student’s keen interest in and familiarity with the topic. Remember, too, that readers sometimes need to read several pages before they get the gist of what’s going on: once meaning kicks in, word recognition improves dramatically.

Students may choose to read familiar favorites, easy books, “just right” books, and challenging books. My own reading, while it includes all of these categories, falls mostly at the “just right” level, so I encourage students to read books they can handle without much difficulty. Figure 2-6 shows a second-grade class’ guidelines for selecting a “just right” book, prepared through shared writing. The “Goldilocks” strategy for selecting books (Ohlhausen and Jepsen 1992) is explained in Invitations on page 189b. You can also teach developing readers and their families to use the “five-finger test”: The student reads from one page in a new book she has selected. Every time she comes to a word she can’t read or doesn’t understand, she puts one finger up. If all five fingers go up, the book is too difficult for her.

Many teachers feel uncomfortable telling a student, This book is too hard for you. There is no one best solution here, and you have to trust your instincts and what you know about the child. Some students will want to read a book so badly that they will persist and triumph, often asking a “buddy” to help them. My position is that most struggling readers know they are experiencing difficulty, so why not be honest with them. They will not become readers without massive amounts of practice: in other words, the books they read independently need to be easy enough so they can actually read them. I usually say something like this: I can tell you really want to read this book. It’s a bit hard for you right now, but I’ll bet you’ll be able to read it on your own in several months. Why don’t you have your mom or dad read this book to you? For now, please choose another book you can read on your own so you can practice your reading. Then I jot a quick note to the parents telling them their child really wants to read the book but is as yet unable to do so independently and asking them to read it aloud.

It’s important that parents understand how necessary it is for children to read “just right” books to become readers. Many parents—and some teachers, too—have the mistaken notion that the way to become a good reader is to read hard books. Our communication to parents needs to be clear on this point (see Appendix A-3). In some cases, we

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**Figure 2–6  A second grade class’ guidelines for selecting a “just right” book; from a shared writing**

1. It’s on your reading level. When you read a page you can read most of the words. You understand the book and can tell what it’s about.
2. You can use your strategies to figure out words and to understand the book.
3. You know a little bit about the subject or what the book is about.
4. It’s not always the same kind of book—you choose among fiction, nonfiction, biographies, poetry, historical fiction, autobiographies.
5. It’s not too long for you.
6. It’s part of a favorite series.
also need to readjust our own attitude. As one intermediate-grade teacher told me recently, “This year I learned how important it is to match kids with books for them to grow as readers. I was always pushed into books that were too hard for me, so I never felt successful as a reader. It’s still hard for me to read easy books. I feel that if the book’s not a challenge I shouldn’t be reading it.”

Keeping a Reading Record

When I go into classrooms, I share my ongoing reading record and tell why and how I keep one. I’ve been keeping a monthly reading record since 1993, and it’s become a cherished ritual. Each month, I start a new page, on which I record the title, author, and genre of every book I read, placing an asterisk next to the ones I find “outstanding.” Seeing what I have actually read (or not read) pushes me to read more, vary genres (I used to talk about wanting to read more fiction, but I didn’t realize that goal until I started keeping track of my reading), and set goals. Seeing that the page is still blank in the middle of the month nudges me to begin reading a book. (Figure 2-7 is my reading record for June, 1999.)

Figure 2–7 My reading record for June 1999

June 1999

* Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by Coosje van Bruggen nonfiction

* Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoirs of a Dublin Woman by Nuala O’Faolain memoir

* Amy and Elizabelle by Elizabeth Strout fiction

* Welcome to My Country by Lauren Slater memoir

New and Selected Poems by Mary Oliver poetry

* Dance of the Happy Shades and Other Stories by Alice Munro short stories
I used to require students to record the number of pages they read each day. Then it hit me: I don’t do that as a reader, why should they? But without a page count, how will we know they’ve read the book? We trust them. There will always be several students who try to beat the system no matter what, but we don’t need to penalize the whole class for those few. Fourth-grade teacher Joan Servis and I found no difference in students’ honesty in recording when we simplified the system. In fact, because they could decide what they recorded and when, they took the task more seriously. Fourth-grade teacher Julie Beers agrees: “I can check daily, and kids can still lie about their reading. Teachers need to teach kids how important reading is, model the pleasure of reading by sharing what they read, and read with them. We’re not police.”

A fourth-grade class I worked with came up with these recording criteria:

- Read at least thirty minutes at home each day.
- Write down the title and author of all books you start, and if you finish the book, make some kind of sign.
- Keep a separate monthly listing of completed books. (See Figure 2–8 for a fourth grader’s and Appendix B-5 for an alternative form.)
- Have WEB log pages for the whole school year bound together.

*Figure 2–8  A fourth grader’s monthly reading record*
• List the genre of each book you finish. (See Figure 2-9.)
• Rate books. An asterisk (*) means you recommend this book to others. Or design your own rating system: 1 (excellent), 2 (okay), 3 (not very good).

Students should keep some kind of reading record as soon as they are able. Beginning the second half of the school year, kindergarten teacher Karen Sher has her students write down (on an index card, as best they can) the titles of the books they read during independent reading. When the front and back of the card are filled up, the student takes it home to show his parents and gets a new card.

The time you take to demonstrate format and neatness will pay dividends later. Even a seemingly simple task like recording titles and authors may need to be demonstrated repeatedly before students understand and take seriously what is required—capitalizing important words in the book title and underlining it, including the author’s first and last name, spelling all words correctly (referring to book to be sure), writing legibly, skipping lines, and doing whatever else you and the students determine. I am amazed at the sloppiness teachers accept. Students will do an excellent job when we refuse to accept messy work. A bonus is that students always take more pride in work that is well done.

I demonstrate on a projected transparency, verbalizing as I go along. I note that I am forming my letters carefully so my handwriting is good, that I am checking my spelling of the title and author by referring to the book’s cover. Then I ask students to record their book, and as they do, I walk around and provide necessary assistance. Sometimes I appoint student monitors.

Loretta Martin, a second-grade teacher, also has students record all her daily read-alouds. Before school each morning, she places the previous day’s read-alouds—the ac-

**Figure 2-9** A fourth grader’s genre key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Picture - PB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Information - info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Science Fiction - Sci, fic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Horror - Hor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Fantasy - Fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Mystery - Mus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Nonfiction - Non, fic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Fairy tail - Fairy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tual books—on the overhead projector. As students get settled, the first thing they do is record yesterday’s reading, both in and out of school. A student scribe carefully copies down the titles and authors of the read-alouds onto an overhead transparency. Students add these titles to their reading record (denoting RA for read-aloud), along with their personal reading and books read in guided reading groups, indicating whether the book was easy (E), medium (M), “just-right” (JR), or hard (H). Figure 2-10 is a page from one student’s record.

**Monitoring Reading Through Brief Interviews**

In *Invitations*, on pages 43–50, I describe what I call a WEB check, a quick comprehension check once students have finished reading a book. While I still use these procedures, I have made some refinements as I’ve continued to work with teachers and students.

Students, generally first thing in the morning, sign their names on a designated space on the chalkboard once they have completed a book and are ready for an interview.

*Figure 2–10  A page from a second grader’s reading record*

April 21, 1999
RA *The Great Kapok Tree*
   by Lynne Cherry
JR *The Dragons of Blueland*
   by Ruth S. Gannett
   April 22, 1999
JR *The Dragons of Blueland*
   by Ruth S. Gannett
   April 23, 1999
RA *Rain Forest Secrets*
   by Arthur Dorros
JR *The Dragons of Blueland*
   by Stiles Gannett
   April 26, 1999
H *Animorphs*
   by K. A. Applegate
Then, just as WEB is about to begin, the teacher asks which students are willing to interview someone who has finished a book. Usually the student interviewer has also read the book, but this is not a requirement. (When I model an interview I look through the book and read the blurb on the back cover, demonstrating how to get the gist of the story.) The students choose their interview questions from a list generated by the whole class during shared writing. (See Figure 2-11 for sample questions.)

Students are paired for interviews, which follow these agreed-on procedures:

• The interviewer and interviewee go to a quiet corner of the room and speak in soft voices.
• The interviewer has her questions in front of her.
• No interview takes place without the book, which the interviewer holds.
• If there is a problem or a question about whether or not the interviewee has read and understood the book, the teacher reinterviews. (This is rarely necessary.)
• After a successful interview, the interviewee enters the book on his monthly record.

When I am teaching students how to interview, I place two chairs facing each other at the front of the classroom and ask for a student volunteer. Then I conduct the interview. Students see how manageable and rapid the process is (it usually takes about three minutes) and how easy it is to assess from the student’s comments whether she has read and understood the book. After the demonstration, I ask, How many of you

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Figure 2–11  A fourth grade class’ sample questions for a WEB interview

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WEB Interview Questions

Ask these required questions:
Title of book and author of book (Illustrator of book)
Genre
Why did you choose this book?
What was one main problem, but don’t say how it was solved?
Describe the setting.
Choose one or two main characters and describe them.
Did you learn anything new while reading this book?
Would you read another book by this author? Why or why not?

Choose several optional questions:
Why do you think the author wrote this story?
What was the most exciting part?
What do you think the message is that the author was trying to get across?
Was the book fun to read? Why or why not?
Is this book like any other you have read? Why or why not?
Are you like any of the characters in the book? How or how not?
If you could change one part of this book, what would it be? Why would you change this part?
Think of your own question.
think [student’s name] read and understood the book? Almost always, this is an easy call in the affirmative. Next, I coach a pair of volunteers, an interviewer and interviewee, as the class observes. We repeat this process several times over the next few days. Students from late second grade on can easily manage this process once it has been well modeled and practiced.

Joan Servis notes that after many years of WEB, her interviews have evolved into conversational “book chats.” That is, the focus is no longer on checking comprehension but on recommending a book to a peer—just as we adults do. “I no longer do reinterviews, as students just don’t talk about books they have not read.”

Additionally, self-evaluation of independent reading is part of our district’s “common tools” (see page 576) for reading. See Figure 2-12 and Appendix I-7 for a blank form. (See Appendix B-6 for an alternative blank form.)

Figure 2–12 A fourth grader’s self-evaluation: “Thinking About Your Reading”

Thinking About Your Reading

Date Feb. 23, 1999

Name Blair

1. How often did you read?
   - [ ] everyday
   - [ ] most days
   - [ ] not often
   I take a break and read easier books once a while

2. Check the different kinds (genres) of books that you read.

   - [ ] Fiction
   - [ ] Biography
   - [ ] Non-fiction
   - [ ] Historical fiction
   - [ ] Poetry
   - [ ] Mystery
   - [ ] Science-fiction
   - [ ] Picture books

3. When you look at your log/record, what do you notice about the kinds (levels) of books you are reading? Are most of them:
   - [ ] easy (familiar or you knew all the words)
   - [ ] medium (just right)
   - [ ] hard (needed some help or difficult to understand)

4. What was your favorite book to read? Tell why.
   Homecoming by Cynthia Voigt. I love the book because in the 1st ch., there is a big problem, which leads you into the story.

5. What would you like to read next? Provide in the whole book story.
   Cool Women by Dwan Chipman & Naomi Wax

Adapted from S. Valencia 5/97

Shaker Heights City School District
Most of the books I read have been recommended by friends. It makes sense, then, to give students that same opportunity. A friend’s enthusiasm about a book often “sells” it. It is not unusual for a whole class of students to read books by an author one of their classmates has recommended.

Weekly student book talks are an excellent forum for recommending particular titles (see Invitations, “Critic’s Corner,” page 50). Organized book talks (see Figure 2-13 for some guidelines for students) provide important opportunities for students to speak in front of their peers and to talk up favorite books. Children are never too young to begin giving these talks.

Many kindergarten teachers have regularly scheduled times for students to give a book talk on a favorite book. To be sure students are prepared for these book talks, teachers first send home guidelines to families. The guidelines include:

- Selecting an appropriate book
- Reading and talking about the book
- Stating the title, author, and illustrator
- Briefly retelling the story
- Sharing a favorite part

When students have heard and read a book over and over again and practiced retelling the story at home, they are always successful. When necessary, teachers offer support by asking questions like:

- What else happens?
- What happened when . . . ?
- How does the story end?
- What’s your favorite part?
- Why do you like this page the best?

Figure 2–13  A book talk guide sheet for students

- Choose a book you have enjoyed a lot.
- Practice your book talk ahead of time. Use markers such as Post-its for particular pages you will be referring to so you can find them easily. Plan to complete your talk in about three minutes.
- Have the book with you.
- Give the title, author, and genre.
- Tell why you chose to read this book.
- Tell what the book is about without giving away the ending.
- You may want to talk about the characters, the problem, the setting.
- Share a favorite part—show illustrations, read aloud a paragraph or two, tell about an exciting event.
- Tell why you recommend this book and what kind of readers might enjoy it.
Tara Strachan leads her second graders in a shared writing on things to include in a book talk and posts the results. Here’s her class’ most recent list of suggestions (the first five are required, the others are optional):

1. State the title and author.
2. Tell what kind of book it is.
3. Point out the first sentence “grabber.”
4. Tell what the book is about.
5. Describe a main character.
7. Say what you can learn from the book.
8. Compare the book to something your audience already knows.
9. Rate the book’s difficulty.
10. Tell where to find the book.
11. Read a favorite sentence or paragraph.
12. Show a favorite illustration.

Working Through Problems

After I’ve demonstrated how to work independent reading into a daily classroom schedule, teachers sometimes tell me, *But you made it look so easy. I tried it, and it didn’t work.* Because independent reading is so critical to reading success, let’s take a look at two classrooms that are having difficulty and notice what the problems are and how we worked them through.

Carrie Jordan faithfully schedules WEB for her fourth graders the first half hour of every day but is not happy with how it’s going. She asks for my help, and I observe a session. I am impressed with the book sign-out procedures, which Carrie has modeled on another teacher’s approach (see pages 89–90). However, too much is going on. Anyone who wants to give a book talk comes up to the front of the room, sits on a stool, and talks about the book. The other students can listen or not listen. Meanwhile, Carrie is monitoring everyone, not reading herself. Her eyes dart around the room. She is clearly not enjoying herself, and many of the kids aren’t having a good time either. When I ask them, they mention particularly disliking the required daily comments and recording of pages read (at home and school).

I agree to oversee a few sessions. I begin by modeling the WEB-check interviews so the kids can do them by themselves. Carrie is surprised by how quickly and well it goes. After I interview two students in succession, two students model in front of the class. The next time I am back in the classroom, seven students have their name on the board for an interview (a week’s accumulation). Three interview pairs stay in the room, one pair goes into the coat area, one pair goes into the hall. I interview one of the remaining students, and Carrie interviews the other. All the interviews are completed within five minutes.

I begin another session by passing around my own WEB log. I tell the students how keeping a reading record pushes me to read more and more-varied kinds of books. I am
surprised by how interested these fourth graders are in my reading and record keeping. I show them the books I’ve read most recently—*Brothers and Sisters*, by Bebe Moore Campbell, and *Who Owns Learning? Questions of Autonomy, Choice, and Control*, by Curt Dudley-Marling and Dennis Searle. I tell them why I chose these books: *Brothers and Sisters* was given to me by Loretta Martin, a colleague and close friend, and *Who Owns Learning?* had a fascinating title and table of contents. I tell the kids I’ve been thinking a lot about control in schools and that I’d like them to come up with their own WEB interview questions. We talk about the questions I’ve been using, and then they brainstorm their own.

When I walk into Carrie’s room first thing in the morning a week later, I smile. The room is silent (book talks have been dropped for the time being, at my suggestion), and the kids are reading in cozy areas all over the classroom. Carrie, who used to sit at the head of her kidney shaped table at the front of the room, is sitting on the floor, reading. I feel guilty interrupting this magical time, but we need to negotiate the questions we’ll be using for WEB and decide on the format for the WEB log.

The kids decide to do monthly entries like mine—title, author, and genre—and that things like listing favorite authors and rating the books will be optional. We break into groups of four, and each student is given a copy of the list of WEB questions we brainstormed the week before as well as a copy of my list of questions. They negotiate what to add, delete, and change. Carrie meets later with the class and through shared writing they come up with their final list of questions (see Figure 2-11, page 56).

Another time Tara Strachan asks whether I will talk with her second graders. She is concerned that too many of them are not excited about independent reading. When I come to class, Tara and I tell her students that she and I belong to the same book club and are about to read *Paradise*, by Toni Morrison. I mention that most of the books I read have been recommended by my friends or are ones I’ve read reviews of in *The New York Times Book Review* (I’ve brought the Times review of *Paradise* with me and hold it up.) I show them my reading record and talk about how important it is to me and how it helps me balance what I read.

I ask students to tell me about their reading habits. Several mention how they stay up late to read—sometimes with a flashlight—when their parents think they’re asleep. A few mention going to the library or the bookstore with their parents. Many are in the Junior Great Books reading club for the first time and say how much fun it is.

“So, what *don’t* you like about reading?” I ask. Max says he doesn’t know what to read next, that it’s hard to find a book that interests him. Tara and I talk about how we always pretty much know what we’re going to read next, even though we may not have decided definitely. I always have several professional books and at least one or two novels in mind, often piled up and waiting. I realize that this planning, which I haven’t thought about before, is something we need to teach kids how to do.

Jason says it disturbs him when kids move about the room during independent reading. Others agree. Rachel says talking and pencil sharpening are a distraction. Several others mention being disturbed when a student interrupts with a question. I make the following recommendations:

- Once independent reading begins, stay in the reading space you have selected.
- Have with you as many books as you might need. (If you’re about to finish one book, have another ready to begin.)
- Remember, absolutely no talking.
• Fill in your reading log when you come in the morning, instead of after independent reading.

• Instead of reading different books at home and in school, carry the same books back and forth.

• If you don’t know what to read next, either choose from the bin of preselected books or have your teacher accompany you to the library.

Several weeks later, Tara’s students are transformed. “What’s changed?” I ask. The teacher-researcher in me can hardly wait to hear what they have to say. They can hardly wait to tell me:

SCOTT: I feel like the only thing that concerns me in life is reading. Everything is silent, and all I hear are the characters in my book talking.

ASHLEY: The computer people aren’t on the computer making noise anymore.

BRANDON: There’s not too much moving around. It’s so quiet I can just enjoy my books. And I’m choosing “just right” books from the teaching basket.

NATALIE: I feel like when I’m reading, the quietness pushes me into my books.

JOSHUA: I feel like I’m at home lying in my bed reading a book.

BISHOP: Even if someone has to leave the room, they leave quietly now, so no one is disturbed.

MAX: I feel like I can find more books that I like. I went to the library and got about five books. The quiet is helping me enjoy books more.

GERALD: I’m so into my book because my neighbors are so into their books, and that helps me.

PATRICK: I feel like I’m into my book. It’s made me able to read harder books because now it’s quiet, and I can concentrate on chapter books.

SAMANTHA: It’s more quiet, and I can really hear myself think.

GLENN: It feels like all the characters in the book are crowding around me, and I’m with them.

BISHOP: I like seeing my teacher reading because I like to do what my teacher does.

BRANDON: I look up and see [my teacher] reading, and it helps me to keep reading.

PATRICK: I know everyone is reading, even the teacher.

After lunch, I come back to observe and participate. There is absolute silence. I don’t hear so much as a cough. The only sound is pages turning. Students are comfortably situated all over the room, spread out on the floor, on pillows and cushions, and at their desks. When the half hour is up, nobody, including me, wants this peaceful time to end.

**FINAL REFLECTIONS ON INDEPENDENT READING**

There are so many competing influences for kids’ time today. Indeed, just because our students can read, doesn’t mean they will read—deeply, thoughtfully, and extensively. We can no longer assume they will become readers; that is, citizens who choose to read for pleasure and information. The growth of the Internet, cable television, entertaining computer programs, and increasingly adultlike movies for children all contribute to the
acceleration of childhood and the demand for ultra-sophisticated stories. If books are to continue as the lifeline for future generations, we teachers must provide the uninterrupted time and quality resources that foster the motivation to read. Imagination begins with the ability to picture stories in the mind’s eye. Reading sparks the imagination of the mind and spirit. As school may well be the last place where books are valued and promoted, we teachers must do everything we can to keep the magic and beauty of books alive for our students.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

• Articulate your own theory of learning. Think about putting your beliefs in writing so you can reflect on them. What do you believe about how children learn? How do your beliefs translate into practice? Are your theory and practice compatible, and are they based on research and experience? How can you minimize the discrepancies between your beliefs and practices so they go hand in hand?

• Take stock of your own reading and writing. How do you use what you do in your life to inform your teaching? How do you model and share your own literacy with your students? What else do you need and want to do to increase your own literacy?

• Become familiar with how the brain learns and apply that knowledge to how you teach and organize your classroom. See resources on brain-based learning, page 10b.

• Take note of your teaching approaches. Be sure you are not overrelying on any one of them. Are you teaching, supporting, and guiding students to make their own discoveries and confirmations? Are your approaches a combination of directed, shared, guided, and independent, that is, doing to and for students, with students, and by students? Are you gradually and appropriately releasing support and encouraging students to become independent?

• Revisit the classroom scenarios presented on pages 27–29, 40–43, and 59–61. What can you take away for setting up your own successful program?

• Examine how and how often you demonstrate reading and writing processes. Do you demonstrate before you assign? Do students understand the purposes of what they are being asked to do?