One of the greatest luxuries of small-group guided reading is the opportunity it affords to engage every child in meaningful reading experiences. It also enables you to observe all children and take note of how they read. These observations are invaluable because they reveal information that can be used to plan succeeding lessons. What’s more, the small-group setting gives you the opportunity to help individual children as needed. Indeed, small-group guided reading is advantageous to both students and teachers.

All of this, of course, assumes that the rest of the children in the class are independently engaged with meaningful activities, know how to solve many of their own problems, and do not have to interrupt you and the group with whom you are working. Our teaching experiences and interactions with numerous teachers have helped us to see that, regardless of grade level, this independence does not happen by chance or magic but instead through explicit teaching. Regardless of grade level, children have to be taught how to work independently and what to do when they run into difficulties.

Clearly, the power of the instruction that takes place when students are learning independently must rival the power of the instruction that takes place with the teacher if all children are to maximize their full potential as readers. In fact, results of research studies designed to look at the factors that contribute to maximum reading growth among students have revealed that the best primary teachers achieve a 90/90 level of engagement in their classrooms—90 percent of the students focus on literacy tasks 90 percent of the time (Pressley, 1998).

In this chapter, we offer some suggestions to use to maximize the literacy learning that can and needs to occur during the time away from the teacher. These suggestions are aimed at addressing the teachers’ question we hear most often: “What do I do with the other children when I’m working with a small group?”
How Do Learning Centers Help Me Organize and Manage Guided Reading Instruction?

Probably the most popular classroom structure that is used to engage learners when they are not working with the teacher in small-group guided reading lessons is learning centers—small areas within the classroom where students work alone or together to explore literacy activities. Students work in these centers independently. There are many ways to implement such centers.

Sometimes an entire reading/language arts block revolves around their use. One center is called “guided reading” and this is where the teacher is stationed. Children rotate through this and other independent centers according to a specified schedule during a certain block of time. This ensures that every child is provided with guided reading instruction each day and that every child also experiences the other centers as well.

In other classrooms, the structure is less comprehensive and less formal; children may or may not be grouped. They may be assigned to centers by the teacher or self-select to use them. The teacher forms a guided reading group by selecting children according to the purpose of the planned instruction. Instead of a set rotation, the remaining students are asked to stay at a center until a task is completed. Then, they are expected to select additional centers until the teacher is finished working with the guided reading group.

What Needs to Be Considered for the Effective Use of Learning Centers?

Regardless of the way learning centers are used, you need to consider their audience and motivation, how to foster independence, decisions about activities, the school system’s expectations, and their overall structure. To ensure success for students and teacher alike, these must be thought through ahead of time.

Audience and Motivation

As with any good teaching, decisions about learning centers need to be grounded in what you know about the children as readers, writers, and learners. Looking at what children are able to do on their own and how they perform on assessments and during guided reading can provide a wealth of information. Next, you’ll want to consider motivation. According to Brophy (1987), there are two keys to motivate learning: perception of the possibility of success and perception that the outcome will be valued. The instructional activities must be within the reach of learners. In other
words, the learner needs to be able to perceive the possibility of success. Most of us quickly withdraw from an activity when we perceive that success is not possible, especially when that perception is based on the real experience of repeated failure. So it is with children. One way to set them up for success is to make sure that they fully understand the activity as the result of discussing, modeling, and practicing it in large- and small-group instructional settings. By the time the activity is placed in a center for independent use, students can’t help but be successful.

**Fostering Independence**

In considering the learners, one often overlooked question focuses on independence. Just how well can the children function independently? What do they need to learn to function better as independent learners? Most often, children need to be taught how to be independent and taking the time to teach them is well worth the effort. For example, children may need to learn how to work with others in a group, use a tape recorder, care for materials, and/or locate help. To address needs such as these, lessons that focus on the procedural aspects of independent work can be designed, taught, and learned. Figure 5.1 shows a four-part lesson that we suggest you use. Figure 5.2 contains a scenario that shows the lesson’s elements in action.

- A focus—purpose for the lesson
- An explanation—children are provided with information that relates to the stated purpose
- Role-playing—students have an opportunity for guided practice
- Direct application—children have time to use the information as they complete their centers’ activities for the day

**FIGURE 5.1 Four-part minilesson**

**Activities**

Children need activities that will advance their knowledge about literacy in one or more ways. When determining which activities to use, the answers to questions such as these will lead to specific learning center activities to address them:

- Do students need repeated practice with a given story?
- Do they need to read with a partner to better understand a story?
- Do they need to write a response to something they have read?
- Do students need to listen to a given story on tape to better understand how to read with fluency?

You’ll want to distinguish between independent activities that *generate* excitement about reading and writing and those that *engage* students in
Focus: Learning how to discuss

Explanation: “There’s a lot to know about learning how to talk about a text with others. Today we’ll begin to understand how to do this. What do you suppose a good discussion would look like?” As students state their ideas, the teacher writes them on a Discussion Etiquette chart. Their ideas include the following:

■ Look at the person who is talking.
■ Ask a question if you don’t understand.
■ Take turns so that everyone can say something.

“You have a good start. Now let’s give this a try.”

Role-Play: The teacher invites four volunteers to join him in a discussion about a story that was previously read. What is important about this role-play is helping students to see how the ideas they generate come to life so that they will be able to do the same when they discuss. The teacher notes, “I now have my discussion group and we are going to start discussing. What the rest of you need to do is watch and listen to us and see if we are using the ideas listed on our Discussion Etiquette chart.” A brief discussion then ensues, along with a debriefing in which students talk about which behaviors they saw.

Direct Application: To finish out the lesson, the teacher says, “So now that you know some ways to discuss with others and you have actually seen me do it with some of you, you need to do the same when you are discussing today. We’ll keep our chart posted for all to see.”

FIGURE 5.2 Sample lesson

reading and writing. While any number of cut, color, and paste activities done in response to or in support of reading and writing experiences can help to create some excitement about reading and writing instruction, these activities do little to engage students with actual reading and writing. Engagement with print is essential for learning about print and is what intensifies the power of center-based instruction.

State and/or District Curricular Expectations
Now more than ever, it seems that teachers are expected to follow curriculum guides and provide evidence that students have been exposed to, if not mastered, the curriculum. Designing centers with the literacy curriculum in mind is an excellent way to ensure that children are exposed to it. Of course, to make curriculum guides and documents user-friendly, you may want to transform them into manageable lists to keep at hand for easy
reference. Such lists might be housed in a lesson plan book or affixed to a file folder. In some cases, activities can be coded to the lists.

**Overall Structure**

When thinking through the elements that can make or break using independent learning centers, the overall structure (i.e., *infrastructure*) requires some consideration. A learning center’s structure needs to do the following.

- **Facilitate independent use by students**—Any activity that has the potential to interrupt small-group instruction because of the complexity of sustaining its operation may be more of a deterrent than a learning tool.

- **Operate with minimal transition time and management concerns**—If implementing centers consumes more time, energy, and effort than the instruction and activities that take place at the centers, using them needs to be rethought.

- **Encourage equitable use between activities and among learners**—If all center-based activities have value, it stands to reason that they will be important for all students. Although some students may like some activities more than others, they need to be encouraged to participate in all activities. If the organization precludes some students from having access to the same centers as other students, arrangements need to be made to equalize access.

- **Include a simple built-in accountability system**—Engagement in the center-based activities is critical if students are going to learn what we would like them to learn as a result of completing them. We know that some students stay productively engaged in the learning activities in the teacher’s absence; but sometimes, we may well wonder whether all students stay productively engaged. Building a simple accountability measure will serve as a motivator for students to stay productively engaged and also serve as a “window” to each student’s level of engagement. One accountability example is the center card which is issued to each student (see Figure 5.3). On it, a teacher can identify the independent activity options for students. As activities are completed during independent time, students write the date, and maybe the time, on the card.

- **Allow for efficient use of teacher preparation time**—Elaborate centers, which consume large amounts of teachers’ limited preparation time without similar payoffs in the duration of student engagement time, will lead to a quick abandonment. What busy teachers need are structured activities that can be changed or altered easily once they’ve been established as part of center-based instruction.

- **Blend in with class routines**—Routines provide a predictable way for children to engage in learning and for teachers to plan instruction to
minimize concerns, confusion, and chaos. After they have been established and practiced, routines can be followed without teacher guidance. The gradual release of responsibility gives the teacher greater assurance that the activities students are expected to complete independently are within their reach. Posting schedules, such as the one shown in Figure 5.4, is one way to help children get a sense of routines. They also afford students with yet another opportunity to learn how to read different types of text—schedules.

**What Are Some Good Examples of Literacy Centers?**

What follows are descriptions of ten centers that meet the criteria just discussed. Next to each center name is the icon used to present the center in the remainder of this chapter. Each builds on classroom routines to encourage independent use by students and efficient use of teacher preparation time. While the structure of the center can stay the same, the activities within them can change with relative ease. Each is designed to be accessible for all students while providing for individual differences because of the level of sophistication each learner brings to the task. Each can be linked to what the teacher knows about students as readers, writers, and learners as well as to standards, curricula, and assessments as established by any given agency and/or staff. With simple structures, transition time can be kept to a minimum, equitable use can be encouraged, and accountability can be built in.
Listening Post

The listening post is a perfect activity for an engaging independent center that provides learners additional practice with print. By placing a story on tape and multiple copies of the text at the center, the teacher can easily create a changeable center that provides learners an opportunity to warm up before, review after, or extend beyond a guided reading session. Sally, a second-grade teacher, takes it a step further. She intensifies the practice at the listening post by engaging students for a longer period of time that includes repeated practice of the text in a variety of ways (see Figure 5.5). She holds students accountable by expecting each one to orally perform a selection, which was practiced at the listening post, during sharing time at the end of the language arts block.

Listening Post

1. Listen to the story on tape and follow along.
2. Listen to the story on tape and read along.
3. Turn off the tape and read together.
4. Turn of the tape and read with a partner.
5. Turn off the tape and read on your own.
6. Listen to the story on tape and read along again.
7. Talk about your improvement.
8. Be ready to share the story with the class.

FIGURE 5.5 Listening post activities
Readers’ Theater
Like the listening post, a readers’ theater center is easily created by designating a practice space, providing multiple texts, and identifying guidelines for practicing. As with the listening post, it can be used as a warm-up, review, or extension from guided reading instruction. A readers’ theater center can also be designed to encourage students of all levels to work together, because appropriate parts can be assigned to students of differing abilities. By providing a sequenced routine (see Figure 5.6), students are engaged for longer periods of time as they practice for a performance, which serves as an accountability check. This type of activity center provides a purposeful opportunity for building fluency, oral performance skills, and confidence.

The addition of simple props, masks, and/or puppets can make the production of plays from practiced texts another way to engage students. We have discovered lots of ways to create a readers’ theater drama corner without investing a lot of time or energy in the creation of puppets or costumes. One teacher we know gathered old metal spatulas and character kitchen magnets and found that her students could easily make the puppets they needed by putting the appropriate character’s magnet on a spatula.

Another teacher collected grabbers—character and animal heads on the end of a long stick with a handle that, when squeezed, causes the mouths to move up and down. Her children easily transformed these grabbers into the puppets they needed to perform a story. We even know of one teacher who ordered and used umbrellas that were shaped like the heads of animals—ducks, frogs, bears, bugs—the students used them as their “costumes” for dramatic performances. Again, because the students did not need to create complicated puppets, costumes, props, or scenery, they could spend more time staying engaged with reading the print and practicing for the plays.

Readers’ Theater

1. Leader reads the story aloud.
2. Everyone reads the story together.
3. Partners read the story together.
4. Everyone is assigned a part.
5. Students practice their parts on their own.
6. Students practice their parts together.
7. Everyone gets ready to share the story with the class.

FIGURE 5.6 Readers’ theater routine

Reading and Writing the Room
Reading and writing the room is a popular way to become familiar with a print-rich classroom environment. Students are encouraged to partner up and shown how to use special pointers and glasses as they read the room—
one student points to words in the environment as his or her partner reads them. Clipboards and scrap paper might be available for students to use in writing the room—copying down words about the environment.

Creating a scavenger hunt (see Figure 5.7) invites students to look for specific examples to explore concepts of print, letter names, word identification, and vocabulary elements. This is more closely grounded in curricular needs and is another way to engage students in a challenging activity. Hunts can be easily changed and/or designed with varying degrees of difficulty to accommodate for the needs of diverse learners. Usually, the students’ efforts leave a “paper trail” that can be collected and quickly reviewed.

One of the easiest scavenger hunts for students is having them reexamine texts created or used in the class. The morning news, which is created collectively by a class, can be placed in a center and looked at for concepts of print (number of words, number of letters, number of sentences, longest words, shortest words, most frequent words, most frequent letters, and so on) or for word identification strategies (visual features of words, sound–symbol patterns, inflected endings, and so on). Clearly, hunts engage students in independent, meaningful print activities.

### Scavenger Hunt

Find three words in our room that . . .

___ have more than six letters.
___ end in –ing where the final letter was doubled.
___ mean the same as “said.”
___ have the same sound patterns as “boat.”
___ are words from math.
___ start with “sh.”
___ have the same spelling pattern as “nice.”
___ are contractions.
___ rhyme with “she.”

**FIGURE 5.7 Sample scavenger hunt**

### Pocket Chart

Any instructional tool and space used in large-group instruction can easily become a center for more independent activity during guided reading instruction. In one classroom, the pocket chart is used to introduce common poems to be used as the basis of whole-to-part reading instruction. The print is started at the line, phrase, word, and word part levels. Figure 5.8 lists the procedures to show how it works.
Because students have seen these activities modeled in a whole-group setting and have had some practice, they are more apt to be successful with them at the center. Students can also be shown how to work with partners and how word card games can be played by providing a number of opportunities for students to conduct independent skill practice with one another. Activities students choose can vary in difficulty according to their needs. The introduction of a new poem provides new material and another opportunity to repeat the activities.

Poems and Story Packs
Poems and stories can be used in several ways. One teacher we know retires a poem or story from large-group practice situations by placing the words, phrases, and/or sentences created for word study in a large see-through envelope. These packs of story and poem parts are placed in a basket and made available to students during center time. Because they contain materials created from texts of varying difficulty, students can select ones that are appropriate for their level.¹

Students are directed to find a quiet place, to shake out the parts, and to engage in a variety of activities, including reconstructing the familiar text. Working with partners or independently, students engage in a variety of classifying and sorting activities that call attention to the words and their features. Words can be sorted according to visual or sound features, meaningful parts, and/or overall meaning. Students are also expected to record the words in their categories to show accountability.

¹ Note: Color-coding each text’s parts makes it easy to get the right pieces back into the right pack!
**Working with Words**

Almost any working-with-words activity that is done in a large group can be transferred to a center once students have become familiar enough with it to be able to complete the activity with peer help or independently. When showing students how to make words by adding and deleting letters, for example, you can use an overhead projector and magnetic letters. While you model this in front of the class, students can have a “making words” sheet on their desks (see Figure 5.9). As words are generated on the screen, students copy the words into boxes on their sheets and then later add illustrations to show the meanings of those words.

Once this activity has been guided in the large-group setting a number of times so that students become familiar with it, it can be placed in the center. You need to identify an anchor word and place it in the center along with letter manipulatives. First, students manipulate the letters to create new words; then they record the words they create on the making word sheet and, if appropriate, add illustrations to show meaning. This recording sheet serves as an accountability measure.

**Big Books**

Revisiting big books used in shared reading experiences provides a natural opportunity for students to explore print more independently. Big books placed in an easily accessible center can be made more inviting by allowing students to also have access to teaching tools—pointers, word frames, stick-on notes, and correcting tape—so that they can conduct activities modeled by the teacher in the large-group setting. As anyone who has worked with young children knows, they thoroughly enjoy taking on the role of teacher.

---

**FIGURE 5.9 Sample of a making words record sheet**
Like texts created during routines, such as morning news, big books used during shared reading experiences can also be set up for scavenger hunts. A big book used in class can be identified as the center’s book for a scavenger hunt (see p. 90). Students then examine the text for concepts of print or word identification strategies as they did with the morning news text.

**Responding Through Art**

Some students can best show their understanding of a selection through art. In one classroom, Shel Silverstein’s poem *Spaghetti* had been featured. The response center contained a variety of bags of pasta and large sheets of colored construction paper. Students designed their own rooms and covered them in spaghetti in ways that were at least as creative as any teacher-prepared art project might have been. After adding print to their pages by labeling pictures, creating talking bubbles, or writing descriptive sentences, the student responses are used to first create a print-rich bulletin board and later bound into a book for the class reading center. The key with art response projects like these is to minimize the teacher’s preparation time, maximize the students’ creative abilities, and consider how adding print can provide more practice with reading and writing.

**Writing**

There is no question that one of the best ways to engage children with text is to have them generate their own. Writing demands much critical thinking because the writers must organize ideas and use specific words to express thoughts to create text that is meaningful to themselves and others. Other times, writing is a form of response enabling writers to show what was of personal value in the text or to show what was remembered. Certainly, it is a way for writers to apply all known print conventions. The centers can be easily created by supplying students with access to a variety of writing tools, formats, and resources. Students can engage in writing activities that differ in their demands. The writing projects can serve as an accountability measure.

**Reading**

We cannot emphasize enough that the best activity for students to become involved in away from the teacher is the activity they engage in with the teacher—reading. Students should always be encouraged to read when they are waiting for instruction. Reading practice can be done individually, with a classmate, or with a more competent coach. It is easy to create inviting reading centers that provide easy access and adequate opportunities to independently explore texts, which is another way to warm up, review, or extend guided reading instruction.

Students should be encouraged to grab a text, a buddy, and a carpet square from the stack in the classroom; find a quiet corner; and read to each other. Having other people in the classroom can provide the students with the possibility of additional contact with a competent reader—an
older student or adult classroom volunteer. These individuals may not be capable of conducting a separate guided reading group, but they can certainly listen to individuals read. For accountability purposes, students can keep a record of the books they have read.

Additional Centers
In addition to the ten specific centers described here, the ones listed in Figure 5.10 are suited to a variety of grade levels.

- Computer workstations
- Retelling center for storytelling, reports, and radio announcements
- Content area centers for related math, science, and social studies
- Commercial and teacher-made print and language games
- Print-enriched dramatic play centers with literacy props
- Whiteboard, blackboard, and chalkboard activities
- Block areas enriched with materials for planning and labeling
- Music center with materials to read and create books based on songs
- Newspaper and magazine center with related activities
- Overhead projects set on the ground

FIGURE 5.10 Ideas for additional centers

Can Any Other Organizational Structures Be Used During Guided Reading?
Guided reading and learning centers are not inseparable components—we can have one without the other. Independent activity can be structured for students without relying exclusively on learning centers, but we want to avoid returning to the stacks and packs of worksheets and workbook pages that were used in the past as a way of keeping students busy when not with the teacher. Two ways to envision independent activities for students—alternative independent project formats and a new vision for “work folders”—are described next.

Alternative Independent Project Formats
Instead of setting up a variety of learning center activities, it may be more appropriate to consider the development of an independent project format that can guide students in self-directed, meaningful inquiry projects away from the teacher. Early childhood educators Harris-Helm and Katz (2001) have made this the foundation of their curricular approach—“The Project Approach.” Even when such activity is not used as an entire curricula’s approach, it can be planned as an alternative to center-based activities.

For example, one district we know of provided teachers with staff development time to pull together a consistent set of guidelines, rules,
forms, and assessment tools that could be used to introduce an independent project format to all students within and across grade levels (see Figures 5.11a, 5.11b, and 5.11c). As a result, throughout the school, self-directed, independent inquiry projects became a familiar option for students when they were not working directly with their teachers.

**GUIDELINES FOR INDEPENDENT INQUIRY PROJECTS**

You are expected to follow these rules as you work on independent inquiry projects:

1. When working on your project, stay on task. Conference with the teacher before starting a new project or setting aside a planned project.
2. Wait to talk to the teacher until the teacher is not working with a group or another classmate.
3. Consult with other students to help you with your project if you are waiting for the teacher, but try not to interrupt their work.
4. Use inside voices when talking to each other about your independent inquiry projects during class time.
5. Use the pass system when you need to leave the classroom to work on your projects.
6. If you work outside the classroom, follow the rules of that area and the adult in charge.
7. Since independent projects are a special opportunity for learning for individuals, avoid calling attention to yourself by boasting about your work and/or privileges.

When working on an independent inquiry project, I agree to follow the rules above. The consequence for not following the rules will be the suspension of independent study privileges.

Teacher’s signature

Student’s signature

---

**SPECIAL PROJECT PLANNING SHEET**

(Primary Grades K–2)

Student’s name: __________________________

Date: __________________________

Special topic: __________________________

What I want to learn: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

How I will share what I have learned: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

Deadline: __________________________

**INDEPENDENT INQUIRY PROJECT PLANNING SHEET**

(Intermediate Grades 3–5)

Student’s name: __________________________

Date: __________________________

The topic I have decided to learn more about is __________________________

My reason for learning more about this topic: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

Material resources I expect to use in my inquiry: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

Human resources I expect to use in my inquiry: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

What I expect to learn from my inquiry: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

How I expect to share what I have learned: __________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

Deadline: __________________________

---


**FIGURE 5.11 Sample district project formats**
Although a district or schoolwide effort is admirable because it provides the advantage of a network of teachers working together to create a cohesive alternative to using learning centers, individual teachers can do the same. This is exactly what Brenda did in her first-grade classroom. She developed a simple planning sheet, introduced it to her students, and allowed them the option of designing their own independent projects to work on when they were not with her (see Figure 5.12).

Kim designed something similar for her third-grade students (see Figure 5.13). She also created an assessment sheet that asked students first to self-evaluate the project and then to share completed projects with their peers and family before turning them in to her. This allowed projects to pass through multiple levels of review before being evaluated by the teacher.

Harvey (1998) provides teachers with yet another vision of how such independent inquiry projects can provide older students with an engaging alternative to center-based activity during independent worktime.

**A New Vision for "Work Folders"**

Students can be provided with a “work folder” to guide independent work but rather than containing several worksheets or workbook pages to accomplish, this folder can contain a variety of reading and writing tasks. In one classroom, for example, students were exposed to a variety of poems as shared reading experiences. A copy of each poem was then placed in the students’ folders for additional oral reading practice to further develop reading skills, such as fluency and oral interpretation.

Students also created a set of word cards based on the words in each poem. After working at the pocket chart to create the word cards, students
placed the cards in a zip-up bag inside their work folders to use to practice word card games and activities. The students were also given a list of each poem’s words, which could be practiced and used in word games as well. The directions for additional projects linked to each poem, such as self-illustrated books based on the poems, were also placed in the work folders.

At any given time, the work folders always contained something that the students could work on while they were not working with the teacher. They could reread their poems, work with the word cards, practice with the word list, or complete a special project. In this classroom, a simple account-
ability system was developed by providing each student with a grid containing boxes for each poem, set of cards, word list, and special project. As students demonstrated competence in each activity, they were checked by the teacher and students were told to color in the box for the poem’s activity that they worked on, signaling completion of that task (see Figure 5.14).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miss Hocket Poem</th>
<th>Sea Serpent Poem</th>
<th>Spaghetti Poem</th>
<th>Bug on the Teacher Poem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Hocket Cards</td>
<td>Sea Serpent Cards</td>
<td>Spaghetti Cards</td>
<td>Bug on the Teacher Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Hocket Words</td>
<td>Sea Serpent Words</td>
<td>Spaghetti Words</td>
<td>Bug on the Teacher Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Hocket Project</td>
<td>Sea Serpent Project</td>
<td>Spaghetti Project</td>
<td>Bug on the Teacher Project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 5.14 Student poem recordkeeping grid

**Additional Organization Structure Ideas**

As seen in the scenarios presented in Chapter 4, many teachers integrate guided reading experiences with other classroom organizational structures. Whole-group instruction of common core texts can follow a “grouping without tracking model” (Paratore, 1990). With this model, the actual reading of the text can be done by some students with the support of the teacher in guided reading groups, while others read the text without the direct support of the teacher. Activities can be structured so that while some students receive teacher supervision in a guided reading group, others can operate independent of the teacher.

Some schools have chosen to integrate guided reading into more process-oriented reading–writing program blocks such as with readers’ or writers’ workshop. Some children may be working with the teacher in small guided reading or writing conference groups, while others are working more independently with peers or partners doing their own reading and writing.

Some teachers have found that organizing and managing guided reading instruction is much easier if they can work with the other professionals in their classroom. They can assist students with special needs, language differences, or other reading difficulties. In inclusive classrooms
with “pull-in” support models, a second pair of eyes, ears, and hands provides a more efficient way to manage all the demands of guided reading.

**What Will Help Me Manage Accountability, Recordkeeping, and Assessment When Students Are Working Independently?**

In Chapter 2, we briefly addressed the issue of assessment, discussing issues to consider in making decisions about the use of groups during guided reading. In addition to those ideas, the following are a few more techniques to consider to manage students and activities during guided reading time.

**Punch Cards**

Punch cards are a simple management system that can be developed and introduced to students to help manage and keep track of their activities while away from the teacher. To create a punch card, the teacher identifies four to eight independent activities—some may be at centers, others may not—that the students can work on when they are not being supervised. These activities are identified by icons in boxes on the punch card. You can also place numbers in the boxes (1, 2, 3) with each icon to indicate the number of times a student may complete that activity. The card is then duplicated and distributed to each student.

When students have choice time away from the teacher, the punch card serves as a concrete reminder of what activities can be done. As the students complete an activity, they can mark off the box in a number of ways to keep a record of having done it. The use of the punch card helps regulate the independent behavior of the students and facilitates the teacher’s recordkeeping (see Figures 5.15a and 5.15b).

**Folder System**

A folder system is another way to keep track of individual students and their work. Expanding folders with multiple slots are available from any office supply store; they offer an easy-to-use place to collect and store student work until it can be reviewed. Each slot can be labeled over and over with students’ names. As students complete work samples, they can file them in their own slot in a centrally located expanding folder. When the teacher is ready to examine the students’ work, it is already collected and filed in one place.

**Live Performances**

Accountability for some independent work might be best handled through live performances. Building in a little bit of sharing time at the end of each language arts period is a good idea. This will provide students with the opportunity to share performances rehearsed at the listening post, readers’ and/or puppet theaters, or for interpretive pieces worked out independently by individuals and partners.
FIGURES 5.15a and b Sample student punch cards

Adapted from Wisconsin State Reading Association
Recorded Readings
When it is impossible to listen to all students, some may be asked to read into a tape recorder thereby recording the readings on audiotapes. These tapes can be analyzed at the teacher’s convenience or by trained support personnel. The tapes can also be saved throughout the year to provide evidence of a student’s progress.

Guided reading experiences can actually be built around listening to taped readings as students are invited to follow along in a text and uncover and analyze miscues they hear on the tapes. This may be particularly helpful for older readers as seen in Retrospective Miscue Analysis, a technique described by Goodman and Marek (1996).

Learning Logs and/or Response Journals
Integrating the use of learning logs and/or response journals as a tool for students to record independent work activities creates a space that is easy to collect and monitor. Students get into the regular habit of bringing their journals with them as they move through centers or complete individual activities. If students’ journals are color-coded, separating them into five groups, you can be very systematic about collecting and reviewing journals without overwhelming yourself. A different color for each day identifies which ones to review on that day.

Again, making sure activities are structured so that they require some recorded evidence is critical. For example, instead of having students simply sort word cards at a working-with-words center, expect students to record the sorted words into categories in their journals. This work can also be collected in color-coded folders or prepared for more extensive presentations in color-coded portfolios.

Observation
To determine whether all students are actively engaged when not working under the teacher’s direct supervision, frequent observation is a must. During the brief transition time, as one group moves out and another moves in, you can scan the “rest of the field.” One helpful tool is to keep a class-list-type of observation form that has been created with the students’ names on the left and blank space on the right. In a systematic scan of the class, starting at the top of the list and noting with a plus (+) or a minus (−) whether the student is engaged, you will begin to identify a profile for all the students. Even if you can’t observe each student during each brief break, by systematically moving down the list you will eventually get a “snapshot” of each student’s level of engagement.

Teacher–Student Interaction
Students whose profiles indicate difficulty with self-engagement and regulation may require more formal interaction during brief transitional periods or throughout longer blocks of independent worktime. Again a separate sheet with space to record interactions with these students will
help the teacher more systematically monitor and regulate students’ behaviors.

**Recordkeeping Devices**

To manage the collection of anecdotal information during conferences and other interactions and observations, we described two systems in our discussion of assessment in Chapter 2. Teachers have created flip chart folders by taping down overlapping index cards (one for each student) on the inside of a file folder. Each card contains the name of one student and the folder is a convenient place to record anecdotes while working with students. Another technique involves the use of blank mailing labels placed on a clipboard. Again each can contain a student’s name and become a place to temporarily record information about a student. The labels can then be peeled off and stuck on the appropriate individual’s folder.

**Sharing with Others**

Remember that you can relieve some of the concerns about management and accountability by sharing the responsibility with others. By introducing, developing, and implementing the use of well-defined rubrics to use for evaluating work, you can add a layer of peer evaluation and self-evaluation that will help to hold students accountable for the quality of their work. Just as having other professionals in the classroom is helpful sometimes, sharing concerns about students and asking for feedback about your evaluations of them may be very useful.

**How Can I Reduce Student Interruptions When Teaching Groups or Individuals?**

Many students take comfort in knowing that they can depend on their teacher when they encounter difficulties. As teachers, we like to help students. Put these two together and we are bound to get several interruptions.

Even though we want students to know that we are there to help them, we also need to show them how to solve their own problems whenever possible. Doing so will not only minimize interruptions but will also foster independent learners and learning. The following are some suggestions.

1. *Make it clear that you are not to be interrupted during a guided reading group.* There is nothing wrong with setting down some important parameters and then making sure that they are followed by everyone. You must get good at ignoring students who may approach you while you are working with a small group or individual. Investing some
time in role-playing so that students can see and hear what interruptions look like and sound like may provide them with better insights into why they need to be avoided.

2. **Encourage students to ask peers in their group their questions.** Certain students might even be identified as resource people during the guided reading instruction. A button, pin, or hat might clearly identify a student as the “question answerer of the day.”

3. **If you have access to parents or other adult helpers during this time, identify them as the person to go to with questions.** You might also consider establishing a cross-age arrangement with a class of older students who could be used to field questions. It is important, however, to make sure that any additional resource people fully understand your processes and procedures so that they can address questions without interrupting you.

4. **If your students are asking a lot of questions about particular centers and activities, it may indicate that students are not ready to handle the activity either because of inadequate preparation or limited abilities.** You may need to stop using that center and practice it in a large group before turning it back to the students.

5. **Stay aware of typical interruptions and try to circumvent them before they happen.** With young children, for example, problems with materials and supplies can lead to many interruptions. Pencils break and disappear at a rate that can exhaust us. Having a supply of already-sharpended pencils available to replace those that somehow get lost is one way to anticipate and avoid a common interruption.

6. **Respond to legitimate questions during brief transitional times.** Students with questions might sign up on the board and when you are freed up, you can follow-up with those students whose names are on the board. Students might also have an indicator, like a folded card with a question mark on it, to set out on their desks. Then, when you quickly pass around the room during a brief transitional break, you can help those students.

"**Yeah . . . But . . . What About These Questions?**"

In this chapter, we have addressed questions commonly asked about organizing and managing instruction away from the teacher during guided reading. Our interactions with educators in a variety of staff development situations have helped us to identify a few more questions that typically surface. Usually those questions come from teachers who agree with what we have shared here (“yeah . . .”) but always have at least one constraint, hurdle, or obstacle that prevents them from taking that first or next step ( . . . but . . .”). Let’s take a look at a few of those “yeah . . . but” questions.
I see the value in using learning centers during guided reading, but my classroom space is too limited to accommodate centers. How do I manage space concerns in a small classroom?

As stated earlier, keep in mind that one does not have to view guided reading experiences as inseparable from center-based instruction. There are alternative ways to engage students away from the teacher that do not rely on centers. But if you see center-based instruction as the best complement to guided reading experiences in your classroom and space is a real constraint, try one or more of the following suggestions.

1. Create centers that require a minimal amount of set-up space. Focus on what is needed for the learner. Worry less about display for the sake of appearance.

2. Create portable centers that can be moved to any open space. Placing center materials in tubs can help both to keep the centers organized and to make them transportable. There is nothing wrong with students taking the materials to their desks and working in that available space by themselves or with a partner.

3. Think about using spaces you might not first consider. Accessible lower cupboards when opened up provide surfaces that can be transformed into centers. The sides of steel file cabinets are perfect for using magnetic manipulatives. Velcro® strips and self-stick posterboards can turn wall, door, and room divider surfaces into centers.

4. Use existing instructional tools and spaces as centers when they are not being used for group instruction. The pocket chart, big-book stand, overhead projector, flannel board, and puppet theater can all become centers where students can replicate and innovate on the teacher’s practices in the same spaces.

5. Students can work on the floor. Old tablecloths can quickly define and enhance a space for students on a cold tile floor. In-progress projects can easily be transported off the floor as needed by lifting the tablecloth. Puzzle mats, which avid puzzle builders use to roll up their in-progress efforts, might work similarly for ongoing student projects.

6. Grouping individual desks together can provide a tablelike surface that’s more conducive to partner and team projects. Consider factors like that as you work around space constraints when arranging your classroom environment.

7. Allow more independent groups to be in the hall or with an adult helper. Students who have become good at reading and writing the room (see description earlier in this chapter) might be given a chance to read and write the hall. Scavenger hunts designed for the room could also be allowed to spill over into the hall. As we described before, a stack of discarded carpet squares can define quiet spaces for students to work individually or with their partners, even in a hall.
8. Remember, some of the best “centers” may actually be outside of your classroom. School policies that allow responsible students to visit and work independently in the library, media center, or computer lab create such opportunities. Preestablished pass systems and access to easily set timers can assist with transitions to and from the classroom to other school facilities.

- How can I keep track of which students need to go to which centers? Is there an easy way to set up a rotation schedule for centers?

As mentioned, simple systems, such as the punch card, may be the easiest way to ensure that students rotate through all centers. Once a box has been colored in or punched, the student needs to select another center or activity. By using numbers that are punched out or crossed off, the student knows how many times they can visit the same center before having to try a new activity (see Figure 5.15).

In another classroom, the teacher uses a center wheel. Her independent activity options are identified on segments of an inner wheel; her small groups are identified by names placed on the outside of the wheel. By simply rotating the internal circle of activities, she automatically and systematically reassigns her students to new centers (see Figure 5.16).
Another teacher uses a pocket chart that is devoted to center assignment. Icon cards are created for each independent activity option and placed on the left side of the pocket chart. Name cards for each of the students in class are placed to the right of each icon, thus assigning them to their center activity for the day. By simply moving the activity icon cards up in the pocket chart, students are systematically reassigned to new centers. When certain groups need their membership readjusted, the teacher only has to move the name cards to get the new assignments in place (see Figure 5.17).

![Pocket chart center assignment](image)

**FIGURE 5.17 Pocket chart center assignment**

Calendars can be used to automatically assign students to centers and independent activities. Icons placed on a large group class calendar reminds students about what options are available on any given day. Leaving the icons on the calendars serves as a reminder of which activities have been receiving the most attention in class. Individual weekly or monthly calendars might be designed so that group assignments are built into each one. These can be attached to desks, folders, or learning logs to remind students of their work activities and places for the day (see Figure 5.18).
Finally, remember that there is nothing wrong with letting students self-select their activities and center assignments. This is one way to discover which centers fall short of students’ interests and expectations and may need to be rethought for future use.

I see the value in guided reading experiences for most of my students, but what about special needs students who tend to challenge me the most in effectively implementing programs like this? What are some options for the special needs students in inclusive classrooms?

In our work with teachers of special needs students whose reading and writing instruction is taking place in inclusive classrooms, they were unified in their opinion that their students should be held to the same expectations as the other students. The teachers weren’t suggesting that these students might not need more support, more training, or more practice; however, they wanted regular classroom teachers to have high expectations for the students and to help them make progress toward goals established for other students. They were especially emphatic about making sure that the special needs students were working on reading and writing during reading and writing time. The following list contains some suggestions for accommodating students with identified exceptional needs.

1. For students with identified exceptional educational needs, it is important that individual education plans (IEP) clearly identify the goals and activities for the students during inclusive class instructional periods. All educators involved in supporting the students need to agree on what should be happening in a block like guided reading time.
2. Develop more detailed behavior plans and/or checklists that can be used to guide and monitor the students during these instructional periods. For example, if the students were to be integrated into small
discussion groups, they might be given four behavior cards (comment, opinion, question, and compliment) to take with them to the group activity. These cards can be concrete reminders for the students who struggle somewhat with social interactions. As they make an appropriate contribution to the group (a behavior indicated on one of the cards), they can turn the cards over and try another behavior.

3. Assignment of appropriate buddies to support the students may be one way to enable students to participate in activities without demanding supervision from the teacher. Again, a cross-age grouping arrangement with a classroom of older students can provide a teacher with responsible helpers during guided reading time. Older students may benefit from keeping a journal to record their plans for working with the students and their reflections on how well their work sessions went. It actually might be helpful for the classroom teacher to review the notes taken during times when he or she can’t directly supervise a student with special needs.

4. It is critical to establish a smooth working arrangement with other educators in order to provide support services for the student with identified exceptional needs. The ability and willingness to work with these colleagues can lead to important support in the regular classroom during guided reading times when supervised activity is needed but cannot be provided by the teacher.

5. For students whose needs have not been formally identified as exceptional—other conditions like ADD and ADHD—center-based activity actually can be helpful because it allows them to move around and/or work with more physical/tactile activities. For easily distracted students, some teachers have discovered that the use of earphones helps to minimize distractions and keeps them more focused when they have to work independently in an environment buzzing with activity. It is important to create spaces where a student can go to avoid interfering distractions without isolating him or her from teacher supervision.

6. One advantage that can be built into center-based instruction is that students with identified exceptional needs can be given more choices, either a wider range of activities or a lot of individual inquiry projects. Therefore there is a greater likelihood of finding an activity that will engage a student than if all students are asked to complete the same activity. Building in choice allows all students to find at least one activity at which they can experience success, thus minimizing potential frustrations with whole-class assignments. Choice also removes limits on those students who have the interest and abilities to go way beyond basic expectations.
7. As we noted in Chapter 2, we need to make strategic decisions when grouping all students, and this is especially true for those with special needs. A mixed-achievement group can work well if an effort is made to be sure the cooperative task has the potential of involving all students; otherwise, stronger students may take over and those that need the practice the most may not get it (Matthews and Kesner, 2000). On the other hand, a similar-level achievement group may not provide enough positive models of academic and/or social behaviors for those students who need them the most. Some teachers have discovered that partnering students who have a wide gap in achievement level (proficient with novice) might not be as effective as partnering students with a narrower gap (proficient with partially proficient, or developing with novice). Pairing children who appear similar can be advantageous because each brings different strengths to the task at hand. Using their strengths, the students can help each other out with their areas of need.

Final Reminders

No matter what decisions are made about using guided reading, we need to state again that any instruction away from the teacher needs to be as powerful as instruction with the teacher. Like instruction with the teacher, it needs to be grounded in knowledge of the children—their reading and writing know-how and their degree of independence. Like instruction with the teacher, it needs to be sensitive to the external demands of standards, curricula, and assessments. Like instruction with the teacher, it needs to involve children in an unceasing cycle of self-improvement by continued engagement with print-rich activities. Like instruction with the teacher, children and adults need to see it as both accessible and purposeful. And, like instruction with the teacher, it needs to set children up for success so that they will see themselves as independent readers—the ultimate goal of guided reading. Just remember to . . .

- Avoid busy work.
- Keep activities focused on literacy.
- Make sure to provide actual practice with the real thing rather than projects that lead students away from reading and writing.
- Keep it simple.
- Keep it manageable!
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