



# 8 Proven Literacy Strategies

## Innovative ways principals are getting students to read more and better

**T**eaching is an art and a science. So when it comes to getting children to learn to read, instructional leaders need to have a grasp of evaluation data, a knowledge of educational trends, and most importantly, a real understanding of what piques kids' interest.

Here are several strategies principals and administrators have used to support reading instruction in their schools. Subtle or direct, all have proven effective in reaching one common—and crucial—educational goal: getting kids to read.

### **1. Text Annotation**

Since the adoption of Common Core State Standards, it has been imperative to implement instructional strategies that support students in mastering these new expectations. One of the most vital practices I have added to my students' toolbox was the use of annotations when reading a text.

Annotations are marks or symbols that readers can use to focus on specific details of the text and/or support overall comprehension. Symbols can include underlines, highlights, circled words and phrases, and notes or ideas about the text. Annotations give students the opportunity to interact with the text while reading.

When I served as ELA content lead teacher on the Instructional Leadership Team, Cordova Elementary School [took] this practice schoolwide. We started by supporting the use of annotation in all content areas.



Students were able to think through every text with the use of the same thought-provoking symbols.

Some Cordova annotations included: “\*” for key ideas, “?” for potentially confusing items, and circles around unknown words with notes on their inferred meanings. Annotation created a supportive atmosphere for reading complex texts in every subject area and gave teachers insights into their students’ understanding.

My use of annotations has evolved over the years. Now, as an instructional support adviser, I often create annotations and support their use based on the specific standards being addressed. For example, I might create a lesson that requires students to read a text independently and, while reading, circle the author’s claim and underline the parts of the text that support that claim.

Annotation is a proven strategy that supports reading comprehension for all students, and it’s a valuable formative assessment that can guide teacher instruction.

—*Rachelle Taylor,*  
*instructional support adviser,*  
*Shelby County Schools, Tennessee*



**Students should have the opportunity to self-select books that are interesting to them, regardless of reading level, content, or genre.**

## 2. People Over Programs

I feel that scripted reading programs tend to turn kids off, but the people in your school who connect with students have the ability to get kids fired up and excited about reading. My push has been to get everybody reading every day—adults *and* students. I want adults talking about books, modeling reading books, and making book recommendations.

I was able to get the school custodian to pose for his ID badge with his favorite read-aloud, and I turned the school nurse—who said she “didn’t read”—into someone who texts me book recommendations on a regular basis. They are two staff members who interact with students across every grade level, and the students now see them as readers—people who value reading.

—*Liz Garden,*  
*principal, Leroy E. Mayo School,*  
*Holden, Massachusetts*

## 3. Freedom of Choice

One proven literacy strategy is to allow students choice in what they read. Choice is the key term: Students should have the opportunity to self-select books that are interesting to them, regardless of reading level, content, or genre.

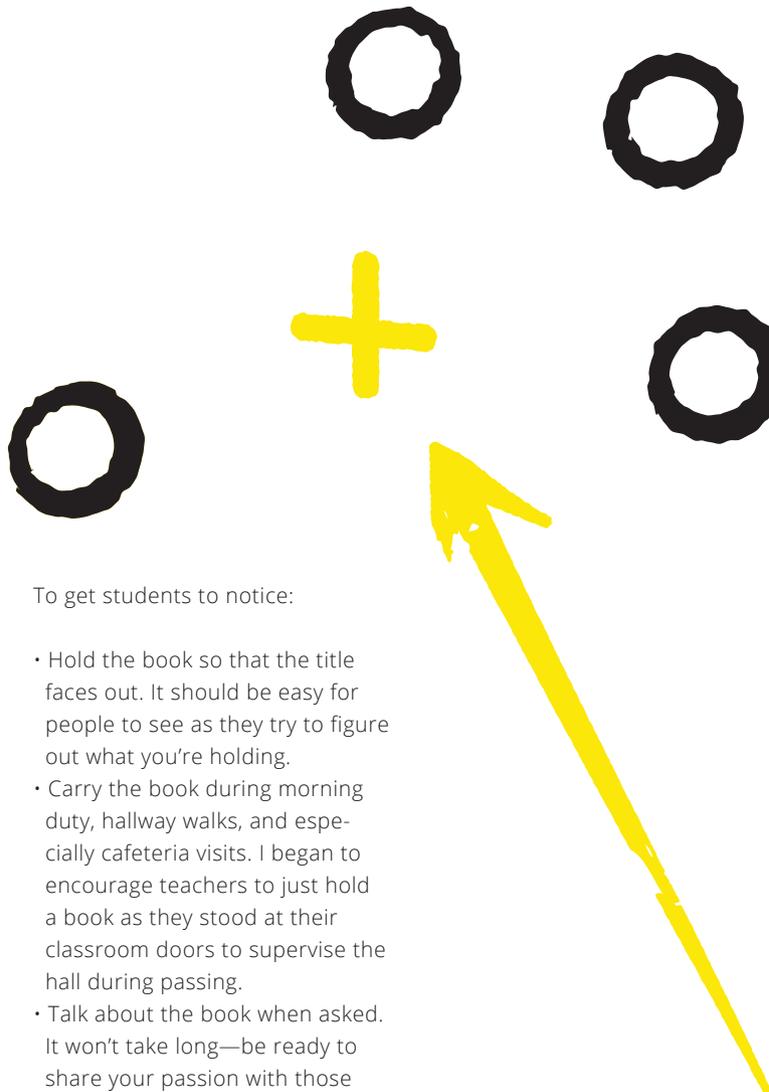
Think about it this way: If I ate a peanut butter sandwich for every meal for a year, I would be bored to tears, lose my appetite, and lose all motivation to eat at mealtime. If I were instead able to choose my own menu every day from a cruise ship buffet, my palate would be varied, my enthusiasm would be considerable, and my pants size ... well, that’s another story.

Don’t get caught in a debate over what should count as reading—reading is reading. Even graphic novels build skills. Make sure that students have books that reflect themselves, their interests, and our changing world.

—*Julie Bloss, principal,*  
*Grove Early Childhood Center,*  
*Grove, Oklahoma*

## 4. Chat About Data

The administrative team meets monthly with principals to discuss student data, [but] we also discuss data frequently with students. Formal data chats are conducted a minimum of three times per year. Teachers meet informally with students more often [and have] one-on-one minichats that center around performance on diagnostic assessments, fluency goals, time on task, performance in digital instruction programs, and more.



Teachers discuss areas of strength and areas needing improvement collaboratively with students. After reviewing his data, one second-grade student began a supplemental reading intervention and supplemental at-home reading tasks. The student and his teacher conducted frequent check-ins to monitor and discuss his progress. The student's second i-Ready diagnostic in January showed he had already exceeded his typical growth goal for the year—a 29-point gain—and was just one point away from meeting his “stretch” goal.

—Belinda L. Dammen,  
assistant superintendent of elementary education,  
Pascagoula-Gautier School District, Pascagoula, Mississippi, and  
Jessica Coleman, principal, Gautier Elementary School

## 5. Reward Reading

Each week, students in Gautier Elementary's 100 Club are recognized during morning announcements [for passing] 100 percent of their digital instructional lessons for the week. The student with the highest score in each grade level is named a Gator Super Hero, receives a prize, and wears the superhero cape for the day. Students who have the highest growth and highest performance in each second- to fourth-grade class are treated to a special field trip. And all students who meet growth goals receive a ticket to attend a special celebration assembly each term.

This year, plans are for select students to have the opportunity to dunk [us and other school leaders] in the dunking booth at Field Day. Each student will be entered for this opportunity every time they pass a reading lesson with a perfect score.

—Belinda L. Dammen,  
assistant superintendent of elementary education,  
Pascagoula-Gautier School District, Pascagoula, Mississippi, and  
Jessica Coleman, principal, Gautier Elementary School

## 6. Be Seen With a Book

Talking about books is easy when you love what you read. When a child says he or she doesn't like reading, it is because [they haven't found the] right book. I've found a way to hook the most reluctant reader, and it only requires me to carry a book everywhere I go.

It's a strategy I adapted from *Game Changer!* by Donalyn Miller and Colby Sharp: Grab one of your favorite books—one you enjoyed and can talk about with enthusiasm. The first time I tried this strategy, I chose *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, a book that was a whole-school read in one of the buildings that fed into my middle school. It has tug-at-the-heart themes I knew children would be willing to talk about.

To get students to notice:

- Hold the book so that the title faces out. It should be easy for people to see as they try to figure out what you're holding.
- Carry the book during morning duty, hallway walks, and especially cafeteria visits. I began to encourage teachers to just hold a book as they stood at their classroom doors to supervise the hall during passing.
- Talk about the book when asked. It won't take long—be ready to share your passion with those who read the book and those who didn't. Natural conversations will commence.
- Recommend other books you've read and add to your own reading list. I keep copies of favorites in my office so I can always lend a book to an interested student. Some of my favorite “hook” books are *Orbiting Jupiter* by Gary D. Schmidt, *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, *New Kid* by Jerry Craft, and *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier.

This low-risk practice has given me big returns in terms of building a literacy culture. I have been able to engage with staff and students in a way that I wouldn't have in the past.

—LaQuita Outlaw,  
principal,  
Bay Shore Middle School, New York

## 7. Use Data to Make Decisions

Using data is an essential part of quality literacy instruction, face-to-face and virtual. As we pivot to work in different contexts of teaching and learning, data becomes even more critical to students' literacy growth and progress. There are two fundamental questions you can use to guide a reading teacher's decision-making and instruction:

- **What does this data tell me about where to move a student or students?**

Teaching reading will look and feel different from 2020 on, so we will need to think beyond traditional and recent assessments of children's literacy and language development. Children have been engaging in all types of learning during the pandemic; we need to know our students and what they have been doing while learning. Interest surveys can provide teachers with valuable data that supports each student and classroom.

- **What does the data tell me about where to shift my practice?**

When teaching is evolving in format and practice from minute to minute, this question must accompany how reading teachers process student data. What does the data tell us about our teaching and how students are responding to instruction? Reflecting on the data for our practice allows teachers to understand that *all* data is important.

Reflective reading teachers can support students through literacy and language development regardless of the school environment. Learn how to collect, analyze, and use the information children show us they know—or don't know—about literacy to reflect and give students what they need to grow as readers and writers.

—Molly Funk,  
educational consultant,  
Core School Solutions

## 8. Let Instruction Drive Implementation

One of the Lead for Literacy Center's proven literacy strategies is to view your system through the lens of instruction. The implementation of multitiered systems of support can be complex and daunting. By using instruction and intervention to anchor your system, however, you can create a centralized vision for the implementation and coordination of evidence-based literacy practices, identifying an aspect of literacy instruction that requires improvement.

Let's say your school's core reading instruction requires additional cohesion and consistency to improve student outcomes. Improving core reading instruction will become your primary goal, and you'll consider how other elements support this goal: How can assessment and data use improve core reading instruction? How can PD and coaching be used to support implementation? How can distributed leadership, organization, and communication be leveraged more effectively?

Use literacy instruction as a central implementation driver, and you can coordinate other primary elements required for high-quality implementation strategically.

—Lana Edwards Santoro,  
co-principal investigator,  
Lead for Literacy Center ●