

# Facilitating Engagement by Differentiating Independent Reading

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“I don’t care if you read, just make sure you are quiet!” This oft-spoken edict teaches some students that independent reading or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is more about allowing the teacher to get work done than about digging into great text. Students who love to read will sink into a text while those who try to please the teacher, but lack a passion for reading, will grab any text and abide. Others may not get this far. They learn a litany of avoidance tactics—going to the bookshelf, using the restroom, staring at the pages—that help meet the teacher’s criteria of silence, but take the place of engaged reading.

One outcome of these issues has been that many educators view independent reading as a waste of time and therefore have dropped it from many classrooms. Instead of ditching it, doesn’t it make more sense to address the problems with independent reading? Although this can seem daunting, it is doable. We provide here a rationale for facilitating reading engagement, describe types of readers found in many classrooms, and offer tools and tips to differentiate and enhance independent reading based on our action research project that resulted in a restyled and effective independent reading block (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006).

## Engagement Matters

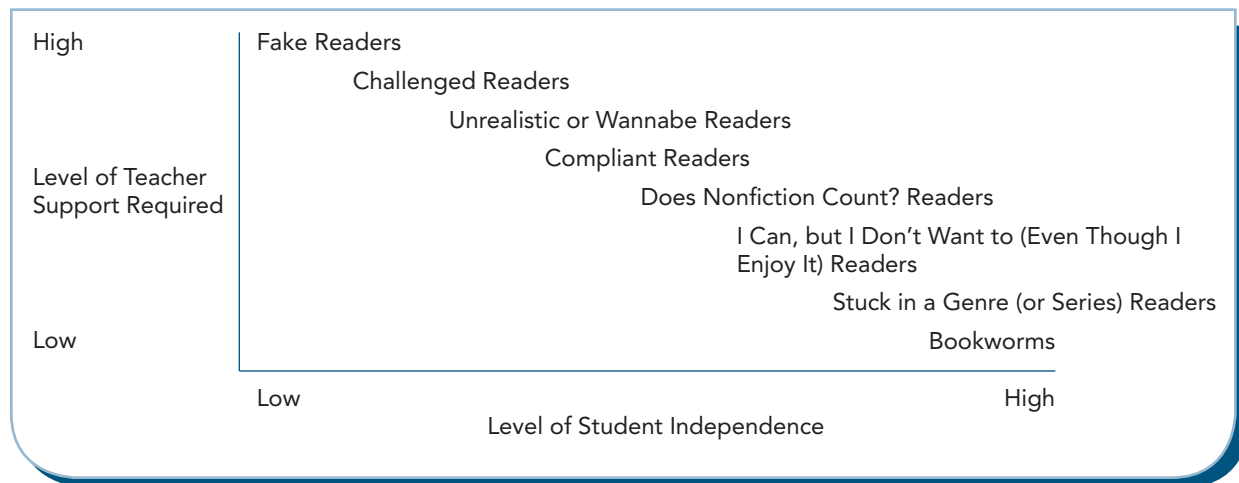
Engagement is the level of cognitive involvement that a person invests in a process (Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). At the highest levels, the learner submerges in the task—mentally, emotionally, and even physically. At the lowest levels, the learner is barely aware of the task. Without engagement, learning is difficult. Engaged readers actively interact with text, seeking to understand what they have read. They avoid distractions and socially interact with others regarding text (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Morrow, 1996). Engaged readers

choose to read because they are interested in a text and they enjoy reading (Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Campbell, Voelkl, and Donahue (1997) found that highly engaged readers demonstrated higher levels of reading achievement than students who were less engaged. Furthermore, engagement in reading has helped students overcome obstacles, such as low family income and a less varied educational background (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Engaged reading is a critical goal for educators to set for their students.

## Continuum of Readers: From Disengaged to Engaged

Just as each student is unique, so is each reader. In any given classroom, students’ level of reading engagement can range from completely disengaged to obsessive, and we recognize that a student’s engagement may waver according to the content, task, and text. But if we want to support readers during independent reading and help them with engagement, it is critical for the teacher to identify the various types of readers in the classroom. To assist in this process, we have identified a continuum of reader profiles for independent reading from the least engaged to the most engaged (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008; see Figure 1). Our purpose in describing these readers is not to label them, but to recognize that in any given classroom, at any given time, there will be disengaged readers and engaged readers. Knowing more about students’ habits allows the teacher to differentiate independent reading to meet everyone’s needs. We have included descriptions of these readers and offered suggestions to improve their engagement. We believe that with the right classroom environment and teacher guidance all children can become engaged readers.

**Figure 1**  
**Continuum of Engaged Readers and Level of Support**



## Disengaged Readers

### Fake Readers

These readers exhibit an array of behaviors. Some appear to be reading—books are open, pages are turning, and eyes pass print, but really, they're pretending. Others are "avoiders who do the everything-but-reading shuffle between the bookcase, desk, bathroom, and pencil sharpener" (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007, p. 58). Fake Readers are apathetic toward reading, have rarely enjoyed a book, and believe they never will. Their universal characteristic is that they rarely ever read.

**Teaching Implications.** Fake Readers need a lot of support and close monitoring through teacher checks and conferring. By keeping a close eye on these readers the teacher sends the message that she cares and is not going to let them settle for anything less than engaged reading. It is easy to spot these readers through observation. We use the Silent Reading Behaviors Observation Checklist (Figure 2) to quickly identify disengaged readers (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007). Although typically this checklist is employed during the first few weeks of school, it can be used at any time. The teacher instructs students to read silently. As students are reading (or not), the teacher writes down the name of anyone not engaged and tallies each incidence (without correcting students). Two or three different observations will unearth habitual offenders and patterns of disengagement. Once

discovered, the teacher can work with these students to help them engage.

An attitude survey can help the teacher pinpoint reasons for a student's lack of enthusiasm. A key ingredient to getting these students to engage is getting to know their interests and identifying text they want to read, which can be accomplished through an interest inventory. Fake Readers also benefit from a structured independent reading block that holds them accountable for engaging with texts. This block might include response activities, peer discussion, and teacher conferences. Many Fake Readers need a task to do while reading. This could include having them write a one-sentence summary at the end of each page or having them make a prediction before reading a chapter. Some Fake Readers turn around quickly once they get into the right text and understand that the purpose of reading is engagement. Others will be intractable, requiring patience and tenacity from the teacher.

### Challenged Readers

These students may want to be engaged readers, or they may have struggled so long they have given up on that objective altogether (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008). They often have cognitive limitations, socioeconomic challenges, physical difficulties, or are English-language learners. Their common trait is that reading is difficult for them and they read below grade level.



## Unrealistic or Wannabe Readers

These readers continually choose inappropriate books. They tend to be book switchers, seldom completing a text. They have mastered decoding but because they select texts that are too difficult, they have comprehension issues. Therefore, they often abandon the book out of frustration. These students frequently notify the teacher each time they have completed a chapter because they view reading as finishing the book, and they rarely enjoy a book, although they want to.

**Teaching Implications.** The “Status of the Class” helps the teacher identify Unrealistic or Wannabe Readers easily (Atwell, 1998). The status is used to monitor book selection and progress during independent reading. During a brief walk through the classroom, the teacher inventories what the students are reading, including the page numbers. Although this takes only a few minutes, it serves several purposes. A quick skim assists the teacher in identifying most disengaged readers we have described and helps the teacher determine which readers need a conference. It is also an opportunity to celebrate engagement, for example by saying, “Wow, great reading, I noticed that yesterday you were on page 42 but today you are on 75, you must be really enjoying this book. Tell me why?”

Unrealistic or Wannabe Readers also need advice on book selection and support for sticking with a text. Teachers can use an interest inventory to determine topics and genres the student will enjoy and then find great books based on this information and the student’s reading level. Highlighting these books during whole-class book talks, book commercials, or in a book pass will entice them to read these books. A book pass is a great way to acquaint students with your classroom library collection (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008). If you select the books that students will use in the book pass based on student interest and level you can really steer these readers to more appropriate text. In the book pass students can work in small groups or in one large circle (Allen, 2000). Each student takes a book and does a brief skim and scan of the text. After about one minute, and on the teacher’s signal, each student writes a few remarks to remember something about the book. In addition, we hope some of the books become part of a “To Read List.” Next, the books are rotated and the process is

repeated in order to expose students to several book titles.

Brief student–teacher conferences during independent reading will help students find and stick with a good book. These Readers can be the most challenging group to work with because they typically exhibit the full spectrum of disengagement behaviors. Patience, conferring, and the status check-ins (Atwell, 1998) will help them get on track.

## Compliant Readers

These readers read because they were told to. Because they rarely read for pleasure, they tend to choose books randomly. They usually do not read outside of class and frankly do not think much about reading.

**Teaching Implications.** These readers need to be part of a culture that values books (and reading). They need an atmosphere where new book titles are enthusiastically shared and where spontaneous book talks occur during lunch, on the playground, or after the weekend. Knowing book titles they will enjoy reading and having access to them is vital. An Interest Inventory and Attitude Survey can help the teacher make targeted text suggestions. In addition, a calculated approach to read aloud by the teacher can get Compliant Readers into genres and authors they never knew existed.

## Engaged Readers

### Does Nonfiction Count? Readers

These readers crave information. They may appear disengaged if their classroom library doesn’t include nonfiction or if they feel the teacher only values fiction. Because they may not see themselves as readers, they often have difficulty focusing on narrative story lines (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008). When watching television, they prefer the Discovery and History channels. Often boys and video game aficionados (Booth, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), these readers thirst for knowledge and are curious about the world.

**Teaching Implications.** These readers need to know nonfiction reading is reading. The teacher can accomplish this by including nonfiction texts in book talks and read-alouds and by having an abundance of



high-quality, appropriately leveled nonfiction in the classroom library that complements students' interests. A teacher who wants to move a nonfiction reader into a narrative genre might suggest a biography. Giving these readers the opportunity to choose what they will read and encouraging them to read it facilitates their engagement.



### ***I Can, but I Don't Want to (Even Though I Enjoy It) Readers***

These students are able to select a book they enjoy reading, but they lack a true zeal for reading. Like Compliant Readers, they often take a long time to complete a book and usually read only when told. When given the opportunity to read or do something else, they do something else. They are primed, but although the factors for engagement are there, they haven't moved up the engagement continuum.

**Teaching Implications.** The teacher identifies and monitors these readers through the "Status of the Class" (Atwell, 1998). If you notice students' volume of reading has increased (an indicator they have found books they like) then probe and compliment them. Because finding the right book is crucial to getting students to read more, give them a chance to discover that they are more engaged when they read the right text. Thrilling plots, a good series, or a specific author usually can draw these readers in. Others will need a classroom culture that promotes reading by providing time for reading, reading aloud, conferring, and peer discussion.

### ***Stuck in a Genre (or Series) Readers***

These students read willingly, but usually within a specific genre or series. They know what they like and that is it. Is this a bad thing? No. Most engaged readers have a favorite author or genre, and for adults this is a hallmark of engagement. However, because we want to move all students forward in their desire and ability to read a wide variety of texts, it is important to help them add to their reading choices.

**Teaching Implications.** The goal for these students is to get them to read more widely. Peer discussion,

status check-ins (Atwell, 1998), teacher conferences, and book talks will help them find new books.

If these readers get into a genre or series rut (of more than a couple of months) it might be time to nudge them into something new. Teachers should encourage these readers to continue reading their favorites at home but ask them to try something new in school.

Using their current reading and interest inventory data you can suggest a new genre. For example, a student who has read every Goosebumps book might enjoy a quick-paced mystery by Peg Kehret. These readers need to know that the teacher will support their book selection and if the first suggestion does not grab their attention, there will be another.

### ***Bookworms***

These readers are book fanatics. They typically have reading preferences but tend to read from more than one author or genre. These students opt to read, even when they are not supposed to. Having them in the classroom is an added benefit because they are role models for engaged reading. Their fervor can be contagious.

**Teaching Implications.** Because Bookworms read for pleasure, opportunities to reflect, respond, and engage in peer discussions help them pause and think about their reading. By feeding them a steady diet of good reads the teacher (and readers) will be satisfied and the other students will see the teacher as a source for good book selections.

## **Tips for Successful Independent Reading**

We offer the following tips to help teachers effectively employ independent reading in the classroom:

1. Reflect on your goals and expectations for independent reading, then clearly articulate these to your students. A T-chart describing what you will be doing and what they will be doing during independent reading can be a great visual reference.

2. Support students in their reading and convey the message, through your actions, that independent reading time is highly valued. Examples of how to do this include assisting students with book selection, taking a “Status of the Class” (Atwell, 1998), or conferring. Nonexamples include answering your e-mail, grading papers, or writing lesson plans.
3. Observe students during independent reading to identify those who have engagement issues (such as pretending to read, frequently getting up, talking instead of reading, or staring into space).
4. Make sure you have reading materials they want to read. Knowledge of their interests and reading levels and a familiarity with children’s books will guide you in assisting students with text selection. Do not limit text selection based on Accelerated Reader or Lexile levels.
5. Have a predictable structure to independent reading. We use R<sup>5</sup> (Read, Relax, Reflect, Respond, and Rap; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008). Students know the expectations during each phase of R<sup>5</sup> and it is employed consistently (several times a week).
6. Build written or oral response into your independent reading structure. We use prompts that guide the students as they write about their reading and then they share with a partner.
7. Use independent reading time as an opportunity to reinforce comprehension strategies taught during conferring or during response-related activities.
8. Model your love for reading by enthusiastically sharing what you are currently reading, giving booktalks, and reading aloud.

## Remember, Engagement Is the Goal!

What the teacher does and does not do in the classroom makes a huge difference in whether a student chooses to engage in reading. Consigning independent reading to an at-home task may perpetuate the less engaged readers described in this article, and could unintentionally move some engaged readers down the continuum of engagement. We have offered the teacher practical tools and suggestions for facilitating the engagement of all readers. By

noticing each reader’s level of engagement, determining needs, and differentiating the support provided to each student, independent reading will improve and meaningful engagement in books will increase.

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- ▶ [Is This the Right Book for Me? Strategies for Beginning Readers](#)
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