

Improving Reading by . . . *Reading*: Ideas from Two Teachers

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Authors in this issue have offered ideas on helping students improve their comprehension and vocabulary. In this article, two teachers remind us that the best way to improve comprehension and vocabulary is tied to getting kids to read more, a task that often seems impossible. But Davis, a teacher in Alabama, and Lyons, a teacher in Texas, were undaunted by the seemingly impossible, and each found a method for connecting kids to books. Many thanks to both of these teachers for sharing their motivational strategies.]

Reading Exercises Your Mind by Mary Davis

"May I check out two bags since it is a holiday?" one student asks.

"Mrs. D., the librarian promised she would save bag 17 for me!" another interrupts.

"I'm sorry, we can't reserve bags," I say.

"Have you read bag 53? It is the best yet!" Heather suggests.

"I finished another bag over the weekend!" Kyle shouts.

Are these the comments of students who struggle with reading? You bet! Some simple gym bags filled with books have changed the reading attitudes, interests, and habits of some of the students at Berry Middle School in Alabama.

After several years of teaching middle school reading to students who were years behind their peers, it was evident to me that I needed to estab-

lish a more successful approach to reading instruction than I had been using. My goal: To help students who were reading three to four grade levels behind catch up to grade level. My problem: These students lacked motivation to read and were great at avoiding any reading situation. My solution: A program I call "Reading Exercises Your Mind."

If exercise makes a body stronger, then reading can make a mind stronger. But just as it takes a certain amount of cajoling to get some adults into a regular, consistent, and worthwhile exercise program, it takes just as much (more?) cajoling to get some of our middle schoolers into an independent reading program. "I'm too busy doing other stuff" and "It's boring" and "I don't like it" can be heard from the adults who don't want to exercise or from young teens who don't want to read. What generally gets adults exercising is the payoff they want—and that's generally the short-term payoff (getting back in that outfit that just doesn't fit anymore) rather than the long-term payoff (stronger hearts, lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure, more joint mobility). Likewise, with kids, what often gets them reading is a short-term payoff (getting something they want) rather than the long-term payoff (increased comprehension, improved vocabulary, more literate lives). With this thought in mind, a few colleagues and I initiated the school and home reading program at our school.

Just What Is It?

The school reading intervention program puts students with real reading difficulties (SAT scores in stanines 1–3) in an intervention class. This course supplements the regular language arts course and is taught at the sixth-, seventh-, and

eighth-grade levels as the need arises. Currently, we have 70 students in these intervention classes. We use the Qualitative Reading Intervention test (QRI-II) at pre-intervention, mid-year, and school-end to quantify progress. Class time is spent on phonemic awareness, guided reading, independent reading, and vocabulary development. Students are taught strategies such as think-aloud and retelling. This intervention program is showing us much success as students move back into their regular language arts classes ready and able to do the reading.

The home reading intervention, or what I call Reading Exercises Your Mind, puts books into students' hands for them to read at home. This is the part that has turned lots of our students on to reading. The exercise physiologist in me wanted an exercise theme for the program. I wanted it to come across as classy and fun and enviable to other reading students. Why not have books in gym bags? Why not encourage local sports figures to give students pep talks about reading? Why not have personal trainers (teachers and parents) get students through difficult workouts (books)? Why not have rewards for getting through the workouts? My colleagues and I couldn't think of any reason not to do this, so we wrote a grant to the Hoover City Foundation for books, received \$500.00, found a donor for the gym bags, and started the program.

Reading Exercises Your Mind centers on giving students book bags (gym bags until we ran out, then big sealable plastic bags took over) with three books in each bag (see Figure 1 for a list of book groupings). Each bag focuses on one theme or topic—everything from sports to survival to science to motorcycles. All three books in the bag are about that one topic. Each book in the bag is a different level of difficulty, starting at about a second-grade level and going up to around the fourth- or fifth-grade level. We follow the Goldilocks rule—we try to have a “too easy” (independent reading level) and a “too hard” (frustration reading level) and a “just right” (instructional reading level) book in each bag. Of course, readability is about the student's reading ability and interest, and

that changes from student to student, so what's “too hard” for some will be “just right” for others; however, since this program is for students who are scoring poorly on our assessment exams, we can make some assumptions about book levels as we assemble the bags.

Students check out bags and take books home to read. The “too easy” (independent level books) are read alone, with students telling parents about the book when they complete it. Parents use a “retell scoring guide” to help them determine how well students told them about the book (see Figure 2, p. 54). The “just right” (instructional level) book is read with parents; students ask for support whenever they need it. The “too hard” (frustration level) book is read to the student by the parent. This read-aloud component is critical as students' reading comprehension and vocabulary development are supported through the read-aloud experience. Again, students must retell the story, and parents complete the retell evaluation. When students have completed the entire book bag, they complete the “running man” form (see Figure 3, p. 55).

Obviously, to do this, we've got to have parent support. I've found that one problem in working with struggling readers is that there is often a lack of parental support. Many parents are working several jobs and don't have the time to help. Some parents want to help but don't read well themselves. My colleagues and I decided that we'd assume that the parents were our allies, and if we showed them how to help their children, they'd be willing to do so.

We encourage parent support by starting the program with a big parent night. Food and babysitters are provided so parents can't use the “I've-got-to-fix-dinner” or “There's-no-one-for-my-toddler-to-stay-with” excuses for not attending. During this event, parents not only hear about how the program works and get their evaluation forms (more are always available in the bags), but we also model what retells ought to sound like. This modeling is imperative if parents are going to feel comfortable evaluating their child's retell performance. We also explain how to fill out the

- Bag # 1 Ships and the Sea**
Eyewitness Series: Pirates, Raiders of the High Seas by Christopher Maynard
The Great Barrier Reef by Martin J. Gutnik
Ships: Sailors and the Sea by Richard Humble
- Bag # 2 Dogs, Man's Best Friend**
The Bravest Dog Ever: The True Story of Balto by Natalie Standiford
Choose one of the following two books:
Dog Tales Series #—One Golden Year: A Story of a Golden Retriever by Coleen Hubbard OR *Hank the Cow Dog: It's a Dog's Life* by John Erickson
"The Gift of Giving" (magazine article: *Goodness*, May/June 1999)
- Bag # 3 Girls Can Be Jocks, Too**
Full House Michelle Series: Major League Trouble by Cathy East Dubowski
On the Ice with Tara Lipinski by Matt Christopher
Athletes: Women in Profile by Leslie Strudwick
- Bag # 4 Take Me Out to the Ballpark**
Baseball Pals by Matt Christopher
Great Moments in Baseball History by Matt Christopher
Cal Ripken, Jr., Count Me In written with Greg Brown
- Bag # 5 Science: Fact and Fiction**
Aliens for Breakfast by Jonathan Etra and Stephanie Spinner
Science Fiction Series: The Space People by Eve Bunting
The Birth of the Universe by Isaac Asimov
- Bag # 6 A Horse Is a Horse, Of Course, Of Course**
Pony Pals Series: Keep Out, Pony! by Jeanne Betancourt
Classic Horse Stories: A Heartwarming Collection of Equine Tales by Karen L. Mitchell
Horses by Jackie Budd
- Bag # 7 Flying Machines**
First Flight: The Story of Tom Tate and the Wright Brothers by George Shea
The Secret of Doom Series: The Hidden Stairs and the Magic Carpet by Tony Abbott
The First Transcontinental Air Service by Richard L. Taylor
- Bag # 8 Middle School Relationships**
I'd Rather Be Eaten by Sharks by Elaine Moore
Cody's Secret Admirer by Betsy Duffey
Young Romance Series: Survival Camp by Eve Bunting
- Bag # 9 Say Ahhh! Medicine and the Human Body**
The Zack Files Series: Through the Medicine Cabinet by Dan Greenburg
Exploring the Human Body by Lisa Rojany
New Technology: Medicine and Health by Nigel Hawkes
- Bag #10 Dogs and More Dogs**
The Latchkey Dog by Mary Jane Auch
Shiloh Season by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
Eyewitness Juniors: Amazing Wolves, Dogs, and Foxes by Mary Ling
- Bag # 11 Jewish Culture**
A Picture Book of Anne Frank by David A. Adler
Tikvan Means Hope by Patricia Polacco
The Hanukkah Book by Marilyn Burns
- Bag # 12 More Sports**
Soccer Cats: Operation Babysitter by Matt Christopher
Michael Jordan: Beyond Air by Philip Brooks
The Fantastic Book of In-line Skating by Aldie Chalmers
- Bag # 13 Basketball, Football, and Baseball Fun**
Catcher with a Glass Arm by Matt Christopher
Bo Jackson by James Rothaus
Michael Jordan by Sean Dolan
- Bag # 14 Let's Go to the Mall!**
Nibble, Nibble, Jenny Archer by Ellen Conford
Shopping Savvy by Rita Milios
Sweet Valley Series: Robbery at the Mall by Francine Pascal
- Bag # 15 Castles and Knights**
Time Warp Trio Series: Knights of the Kitchen Table by Jon Scieszka
Eyewitness Readers: Days of the Knights by Christopher Maynard
Castle by David McCaulay
- Bag # 16 The Rain Forest**
How to Babysit an Orangutan by Tara and Kathy Darling
Mysteries of the Rain Forest: 20th Century Medicine by Elaine Pascoe
Rain Forest—Kids Discover Magazine (the issue is just called Rain Forest and it can be backordered).
- Bag # 17 I'm Scared!**
The Funniest Haunted House Book Ever! by Joseph Rosenbloom
Don't Open the Door after the Sun Goes Down: Tales of the Real and Unreal by Al Carusone
Bats: Amazing and Mysterious Creatures of the Night by Marianne Haffner
- Bag # 18 Are You Afraid of the Dark?**
Choose Your Own Adventure: Island of Doom by Richard Brightfield
Bunnica Strikes Again by James Howe
Nightwaves: Scary Tales for after Dark by Collin McDonald
- Bag # 19 Mysteries: Facts and Fiction**
The Case of the Dummy with Cold Eyes by Elizabeth Levy
Help! I'm a Prisoner in the Library by Eth Clifford
The Fire Curse and Other True Medical Mysteries by David Lee Drotar
- Bag # 20 Predator Attack!**
Amazing Animals: Eyes by Rebecca L. Grambo
Amazing Animals: Hunters by Rebecca L. Grambo
Predators by Bernard Stonehouse
- Bag # 21 Umm-mmm! Good!**
Better Homes and Garden New Junior Cookbook
The Pizza Puzzle by Susan Beth Pfeffer
It's Disgusting and We Ate It by James Solheim
- Bag # 22 Making Money**
If You Made a Million by David M. Schwartz
Boys at Work by Gary Soto
Kids' Wall Street News: The News and Financial Publication for Young Adults Magazine (Millennium Issue, Wall Street News 2000, Vol. 5, Issue 1)
- Bag # 23 Canine Fun**
The Backward Bird Dog Bill Wallace
Caring for Your Dog by Mark McPherson
My Dog Ate It by Saragail Katzman Benjamin
- Bag # 24 Horses and More Horses**
Horse Stories Series: Lady's Girl by Eve Bunting
Eyewitness Readers: Horse Heroes, True Stories of Amazing Horses by Kate Perry
Eyewitness Books Series: Horses by Juliet Clutton-Brock
- Bag # 25 Icky, Yucky, Amazing Bugs**
Mystery in Bugtown by William Boniface
Eyewitness #D Series: Insect by Theresa Greenaway
The Big Bug Book by Margary Facklam
- Bag # 26 A Taste of Sports and Poetry, Too!**
On Their Own, Adventure Athletes in Solo Sports by Steve Boga (High Noon)
The Last-Place Sports Poems of Jeremy Bloom by Gordon Korman and Bernice Korman
Quarterback Exchange: I Was John Elway by Gordon Korman
- Bag # 27 Use Your Imagination . . .**
White House Mystery by Penn Mullin (High Noon)
Runaway Magic by Elaine Pageler
At the Sound of the Beep by Marilyn Sachs
- Bag # 28 Classics Are Cool!**
Poetry for Young People, Emily Dickinson by Frances Schoonmaker Bolin
David Copperfield by Charles Dickens (Great Illustrated Classics)
Mark Twain (Great American Short Stories, Lake Classics) retold by Prescott Hill
- Bag # 29 Mysteries Galore!**
Trouble in the Black Hills by Penn Mullin (Postcards from America Series, High Noon Books)
A Place of Power by Marilyn Cunningham
Loch by Paul Zindel
- Bag # 30 Courageous Women**
Laura Ingalls Wilder: Author of the Little House Books by Carol Greene
"Heroes for Today," Reader's Digest, Dec. 1998, Vol. 153 Issue 920, p. 137.
Girls to the Rescue Series, Tales of Clever Courageous Girls from Around the World #5 by Bruce Lansky, editor

Figure 1. Bookbag themes and books (books listed from easiest to hardest within each bag)

retell form and discuss the “running man” form students must complete. Our principal is there to talk about the importance of this program, as are local sports stars (this can be the high school football coach, an Olympic hopeful, or a true Olympic champion; we once hosted Willie Smith, Olympic gold medal winner in the 4 x 100 relay). Parents receive lots of positive feedback for being active partners in their child’s education. Parents end the night by looking over the contract that teachers, students, and parents would be signing.

Once students begin checking out book bags, there are short-term incentives for finishing the books. Students who finish 3 bags get a bookmark or comic book. We wanted students to reach this point by November (after starting in September).

After their fifth bag, students got a book from the book fair (\$5.00 maximum). The book fair is in November, so all students selected a book, and it was held for them until they reached this goal. Incentive number three required eight bags to be read. When this happened, students went on a field trip to a bookstore where they could choose yet another book (again \$5.00 maximum) and then return to school for an ice cream sundae party. The grand finale was reserved for students who completed ten bags. These students went on an all-day field trip to the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, had lunch at a park, went on a tour of the Hoover Library, and stopped by McDonalds for a free dessert. This trip was scheduled in May and kept students reading all year long.

Take-Home Reading Program

Student Name _____

Your child’s daily homework assignment is to read for a minimum of 15 minutes each evening. Either the parent or another adult is to listen to the child read and RETELL the events or facts read. Please indicate the child’s level of success with the RETELL. An additional assignment is for the parent to read ALOUD to the student for at least 10 minutes. Please briefly discuss with your child what you read aloud each night and record what you and your child thought about the book.

Rate of Success	
1=Told all of the important events or facts	2=Told about many of the events or facts
Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____	Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____
Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____	Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____
Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____	Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____
Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____	Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____
Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____	Date _____ Name of material read to parent _____ Pages Read: ____ to ____ Evaluation *1. *2. *3. Parent Signature _____

Figure 2. Retell scoring guide

Challenges and Successes

Students in this program raised their reading scores 1 or 2 stanines on the SAT. They began to experience success in their regular language arts classes and, most important, continued reading. This shift in attitude toward reading also showed up in a shift in attitude toward learning. Not every student was successful, of course. Some parents—not many—wouldn't help. Some students had such severe problems that in spite of great gains, they were still not successful in their on-level classrooms. A second year working with those children has been very important.

This program has been successful because parents, students, and teachers worked together. At school, students had time to work on reading in a small-group setting. At home, parents had the use of accountability tools to help them keep their students on track. Extrinsic and intrinsic rewards were an important factor. Finally, great books that students really could read in cool-looking gym bags helped a lot. At one point, I actually had two students fighting over who would get to check out a certain bag. That fight was a high point of my career!

A school and home reading program can work if you've got the right tools. Look in your area for small grants or generous donors to help fund books and gym bags. Find local sports stars who are willing to talk with parents and students. Teach parents how to be our partners, and offer rewards to students for sticking with the workout. It's definitely worth the work!

Story Starters: A Means of Captivating and Motivating Adolescent Readers by Shirley Lyons

The words "if only" have crossed my mind in the past several years as I have entered my eighth-grade, inner-city classroom. If only I could stop the tardies. If only I could get the attention of the whole class from the very start of the period. If only I could motivate students to read a book—to pick up a book, for that matter! If only I could get

them to respond to characters and plots. If only I could improve their reading skills. It would be glorious!

Finally, after teaching reading to eighth graders for eight years in an urban setting, I have found a method that has given me some of those glorious moments. I've named this strategy "story starter." Story starter is a lesson that begins with my reading aloud a short (5–10 minutes) selection that will grab students' interests. It may be an excerpt from a book, a magazine, a newspaper, or an Internet article. After reading aloud, students then write in their story starter journal. These are student-made journals using 8 1/2" x 14" newsprint (but any size would work). Each student takes about four pages, puts them together, folds them

Reading Exercises Your Mind Bag # _____



Students: Please complete the following information and return it to your reading teacher.

Which book(s) did your parent read aloud to you?

Which book(s) did you read and discuss with your parent or read alone?

Student's signature: _____

Parent's signature: _____

Date: _____

Progress Report: So far, I have completed this many bags: _____

Figure 3. The "running man" form

in half, and then staples the pages together along the folded side to keep the booklet intact. This gives each booklet the outside page for the front cover, fourteen inside pages, and one outside page for the back cover. Since we'll use two pages for each story starter lesson, each journal is good for seven days.

Front covers are designed by students. The cover should include the student's name and class period, and then something about the topic we're reading: survival, family, friendship, discoveries. Often, students design covers last after they've had a chance to absorb the scope of what we've been reading. That means some students even design a cover around a specific novel.

The point of story starter is not just to read aloud to students (which certainly will help connect them to books), but also to improve their listening comprehension by requiring some active listening. I do this by asking students to jot down some notes—anything from single words to quick phrases to complete thoughts—while I'm reading to them. They write these notes in their journals

on one of the two pages they'll be using for that particular story. The point isn't to take lots of notes, but only to take some notes while listening. They also can sketch pictures instead of writing words. They know the notes are there to help them remember what the selection was about. If a picture is more effective than words, then they should draw. Later, students will answer questions—sometimes only one, other times as many as four or five—over what I read aloud to them. They'll answer these questions in their story starter journal.

Putting Story Starters into Action

At the sound of the tardy bell, I begin the reading. Within a few classes, students realize I'm reading aloud something that's interesting, so tardies diminish as the "What's she gonna read today?" takes hold. As I read aloud, students jot down notes in their story starter journals. At first, some students put too much; others put too little. Few, however, get it just right. We keep doing it, though, and sooner (for some) or later (for others) they find

Monday: *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis, pages 26–28

Questions:

1. Does the man in charge of the line treat Bud fairly? Use your notes to support your answer with a detail in the story.
2. What do you see as a bad thing about the way Bud's pretend family treats Bud?
3. What do you see as a good thing about the way Bud's pretend family treats Bud?
4. Draw a character or an event you recall from this story. Be prepared to explain why you chose to make this drawing. (Note: I always offer this as the final option.)

Tuesday: *Thank You, Ma'am* by Langston Hughes (short enough to use the entire story)

1. Compare this boy in the story to Bud in *Bud, Not Buddy*. What's interesting about both boys?
2. Compare Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones with Bud's pretend mother. Which mother do you like better?
3. What lesson(s) do each of the boys in each story learn?

Wednesday: *The Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt, pages 5–8

1. How does Georgie's mother treat him?
2. List all the characters who know how badly Georgie is being treated.
3. Why does Georgie keep Steve a secret?
4. Think of all the male characters you've heard about this week. Which one has the worst situation? Why?

Thursday: *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Kimberly Kirberger, pages 306–307 ("Teenager's Bill of Rights, Our Rights with Friends, with Parents and other Adults, with Everyone")

1. Which right did you think was most important? Why?
2. What right(s) would you add to the list of rights in this selection?
3. What rights were violated for each of the characters we've met this week?

Friday: Repeat any selection students request.

1. Which selection did you enjoy most and what was it about that selection that made it stand out for you?
2. Select one of the selections and write a letter of advice to a character in that selection.

Figure 4. A week's worth of story starters

the “just right” amount of information they need for what we’ll do next.

After the oral reading, students answer questions over the selection. This is a very quick process (10 minutes) that occurs while I take roll, distribute materials, sign any forms students have placed on my desk. I keep the time short because a) we have other things to cover, and b) students who don’t like to read generally don’t like to write. By limiting their time here (10 minutes) and space (one journal page—half a sheet of paper), students aren’t overwhelmed.

Later, we discuss comments students made in their journals as they answered questions. During this time, they have the opportunity to hear several thoughts on the same topic. For example, after reading aloud a portion of Christopher Paul Curtis’s book *Bud, Not Buddy* (pages 26–28), one of the questions students answered was, “Does the man in charge of the line treat Bud fairly?” One student answered, “Yes, because everyone else was hungry. There were a lot worse people in the line that needed food more than Buddy,” while another responded, “No, because he was about to hit Bud for nothing.” Then another student said, “I think the man treats Bud fairly because if he got there late, he doesn’t get a chance to eat. That would not be fair to other people that have been standing in line for a long time,” while still another disagreed with, “No, I do not think he is treating him right because all kids need to eat.”

Benefits

To help you get started with using story starters, see Figure 4 for “A Week’s Worth of Story Starters.” This gives you the selection and questions you might want to ask for each selection. Figure 5 gives you a list of popular selections. If you use this read-aloud method, then after a while you

A Family Apart by Joan Lowery Nixon, pages 46–50
Hit and Run by R.L. Stine, pages 32–38
Holes by Louis Sachar, pages 11–15
Homecoming by Cynthia Voigt, pages 13–17
I Am the Cheese by Robert Cormier, pages 23–27
Monster by Walter Dean Myers, pages 3–10
NightJohn by Gary Paulsen, pages 33–41
One Fat Summer by Robert Lipsyte, pages 74–81
Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse, pages 60–69
Remembering the Good Times by Richard Peck, pages 168–174
Rules of the Road by Joan Bauer, pages 25–30
Slake’s Limbo by Felice Holman, pages 8–15
The Giver by Lois Lowry, pages 59–64
The Monument by Gary Paulsen, pages 50–57
The Pigman by Paul Zindel, pages 11–18
The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963, Christopher Paul Curtis, pages 12–18
Whispers from the Dead by Joan Lowery Nixon, pages 1–8
Wolfriider by Avi, pages 1–8

Figure 5. List of selections and page numbers

might notice the same benefits I’ve seen in my classroom:

- As long as I keep choosing interesting story starters, students keep showing up on time to class.
- Listening comprehension has improved.
- Note taking skills have improved.
- Students constantly want to know “so what happens next” and that means they are checking out the books so they can find out what happened in the story.
- Students are learning to listen to each other as we briefly share answers to the open-ended questions.
- Students are learning that reading is not boring.

All in all, I found that story starter did exactly what I wanted—gave me some glorious moments as some of my *if-only*’s were answered.

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