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Common Core State Standards & Independent Reading

The teaching of reading differs from state to state, county to county, and also teacher to teacher, but in order for students to grow as readers, independent reading must be part of the literacy program. In the past, as teachers embraced fiction—including historical fiction and fantasy—informational texts were often overlooked: unappealing covers, outdated information, and inaccessible formats formerly branded nonfiction texts as too hard and boring, leaving both teachers and students unenthused. When standardized tests began to show a weakness in students' comprehension of nonfiction, states began to update their standards to address this discrepancy. Today, most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which are brimming with nonfiction reading and writing requirements.

The CCSS require students to be more analytical, metacognitive, and inferential. Students need to know what happens in a text and why authors make certain choices. These standards challenge readers to dig deeply into a text and to support their thinking and writing about reading. Students are expected to tackle complex text independently.

Central to the mission of developing thoughtful readers is independent reading. Carving out at least 15–20 minutes a day devoted to independent reading is essential. Allowing and encouraging middle schoolers to self-select texts that interest them will invest them in reading. They'll be in greater control of their choices—giving them the independence they crave and need. Though it may seem obvious, it is also true: when reading books of their own choosing, readers read more. And all readers improve when they read more.

Establishing Independent Reading Time

Balanced literacy allows teachers to meet learners at their own level. The range of readers in a classroom can be wide: a class of 28 might be reading at 14 different levels. In our classroom, shifting from a traditional—at the front of the room teaching—to a balanced-literacy model required a shift in our roles. We were no longer in charge of students' thinking; we needed to let go, release responsibility, and allow and encourage independence.

In the paradigm of the balanced-literacy model, the teaching of literacy (our focus is on reading) incorporates whole-group, small-group, and independent instruction. Within each mode, teachers have choices about the intensity of their teaching. Balanced literacy, and the thinking behind it, encourages a move away from teacher-directed lessons to student-focused instruction through a workshop model.

In a traditional balanced-literacy classroom, the only sound you'd expect to hear are pages turning and/or whispered conversations, but we realized we needed to hear another sound: the sound of writing. The scratch of pencils on paper is the sound of thinking, and that's why we created SmartNotes, an approach in which students record their thinking as they read independently.

The Workshop Model

Workshop classrooms are successful because each student is moved forward as an individual learner. Workshop classrooms are alive. No day is the same as the day before. Your lesson plan book may look similar to last year's, but your teaching is now dependent on whom you have in front of you. This changes from year to year and class to class.

The following three modes of instruction form the frame for the reading block.

- **Whole-class work:** This work is intended to meet the needs of the bulk of your class. In this component, a mini-lesson should target a specific goal. Goals are determined by your curriculum and the needs of your students. After you model reading strategies, students practice them independently, using their independent reading book.
- **Small-group work:** For some students, the mini-lesson hits home and is internalized. For others, a quick reminder/check-in is sufficient. Still for others, small-group instruction is required.
- **One-to-one conference:** Sitting beside a student and listening to him or her read and learning about his or her thinking is valuable. Having individual conferences allows a teacher to know the reader and teach the specific skill that each student needs. Additionally, it allows you to push a student to think differently—more deeply.

Learning how to understand and talk and write about texts in a deep and thoughtful way is essential for our students. The hybridization of the workshop model and traditional literature study is an effective way to instruct middle school learners. Traditional middle school curriculum is based on literature study, which is similar to the high school approach, so middle schools have to prepare kids for this future. Many teachers at this level, therefore, consider themselves to be teachers of literature rather than teachers of reading. In many middle schools, there is one core text that all students read. The teacher models text analysis through this reading experience, but reading strategies are often not considered. Also not considered are student reading levels or interests. As a result, many students do not fully understand this core text. But text analysis is important. It's necessary for students to grow, so reading-strategy instruction should not be ignored. Students at the middle school level still need direct instruction in how to be strong readers.

SETTING UP A STRUCTURE AND ROUTINES

Workshop classrooms at the middle school level require student independence. Creating and managing this environment can be daunting, but establishing a structure and routines will really help you.

ROOM ARRANGEMENT Keep in mind how you and your students will move about the room. Watch out for tight spaces that could inhibit easy movement. You will also want to set aside space to sit alongside students for conferences. We prefer our students to sit at their desks or tables when they read independently. Finding a special reading nook and getting comfortable is nice, but it isn't necessarily conducive to good thinking and writing. It doesn't matter whether students sit at desks or tables, but they should be able to turn and listen to you and to one another. Also, designate a location where you will meet with small groups of students; groups of three or four students are the most efficient. If possible, get a small table for carrying out small-group work.

Place it in a spot that allows you easy visual and physical access to the room and the rest of your students. Small-group instruction is valuable teaching time, and other students should not come over to interrupt this learning. Establish this rule early in the year. By the time they're in middle school, your students must be able to work independently, solve problems, and stay productive as you meet with small groups or individual students. While the focus of your teaching will be on the small group in front of you, it remains important to keep an eye on other students.

Despite the goal of independence, students will need help with supplies. To save time, have pens, pencils, erasers, and sharpeners in a location that students can easily access.

Many classrooms today have access to technology, but creating your own handwritten charts, posters, and other materials will make your classroom vibrant and personal.

CLASSROOM LIBRARY To entice your kids to read, your classroom library should be accessible, varied, and inviting. Stock it with a variety of texts: fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, and poetry. Reading material should be arranged for easy access, and you should display a wide range of levels, topics, and genres to match the diverse learners in the room. Kids need to read a lot; they will only do that if they are interested in the texts they have access to. Raid your bookshelves at home and visit used-book sales and garage sales.

Keep in mind, as you enhance your library, that the CCSS requires 50 percent of student reading to be in the area of informational text. The good news is that nonfiction texts have been updated—they are cool now. Gone are the encyclopedic texts that were both overwhelming and boring. Today's best nonfiction texts are presented in dynamic ways that entice readers. For example, some informational texts are printed in a picture-book format, but they contain complex ideas, vibrant graphics, and challenging vocabulary. The graphic-novel format is also popular, enabling weaker readers to understand difficult informational and narrative content.

Kids need to be able to find reading material easily, so set out books and other texts in bins or baskets according to author, genre, and/or series. Bins and baskets can be inexpensively purchased at dollar stores or tag sales. Provide a book sign-out sheet like the one shown on page 109 with each bin or basket so students are accountable for returning the material they've checked out.

Planning Instruction

Plan reading instruction over the course of a week. This broad framework will help you organize the goals you want to accomplish. Thinking by the week is less stressful than day-to-day planning/worrying. Thinking ahead to where you want your students to be at the end of the week will make things easier. It's helpful to chunk lessons/skills into manageable pieces throughout the week.

We follow a format that allows for daily independent reading and individual conferences, a mini-lesson on a targeted skill, follow-up independent practice, and small-group instruction as needed. This structure not only supports our planning routine, but it also offers consistency for our students.

We begin each class period with the same routine. After students come into the classroom, they take out their independent reading books, reading logs, and notebooks. We check their logs

USING LEVELED BOOKS

Leveled classroom libraries are not essential for independent reading to be successful. In fact, at the middle-school level, obvious labels on texts are a detriment to positive student self-esteem. Another reason that we don't advocate for a leveled library is that the levels are blurred at the middle-school level. Interest in and background knowledge of topics supersede strict reading level.

while students begin reading and taking SmartNotes. After the logs have been checked, we sit alongside students for one-to-one conferences or pull a guided-reading group. After 20 minutes of this independent reading time, we move to whole-class work. Many times, this means that we read aloud from our shared text and take communal SmartNotes. The basic structure is always the same. There is a fluid movement between independent reading and whole-class conversations.

The chart below shows our plan for November 14–18. We were ready to work on a paragraph related to the character traits of Max in *Freak the Mighty*, so our whole-class work was focused there.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
TEACHER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log Check • SmartNote Conferences • Mini-Lesson: Using SmartNotes to review thinking around previous chapter of <i>Freak the Mighty</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log Check • Guided Group: Review character traits; make inferences; use Max quotes from <i>Freak the Mighty</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log Check • SmartNote Conferences • Mini-Lesson: Structure for writing about reading: paragraph organizer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log Check • Guided Group: Complete paragraph organizers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log Check • SmartNote Conferences • Mini-Lesson: Start writing paragraph about Max's character trait from <i>Freak the Mighty</i>
STUDENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent reading with SmartNotes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent reading with SmartNotes • Meet with teacher to work on character traits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent reading with SmartNotes • Work on organizer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent reading with SmartNotes • Meet with teacher to work on organizer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent reading with SmartNotes • Write paragraph

Independent Reading: At the beginning of class, students read their independent reading book and take SmartNotes. The amount of time you can slot for this will depend on your schedule. Our reading classes are 45 minutes long: 20 minutes is devoted to independent reading in grades 5 and 6, while 15 minutes are allocated in grades 7 and 8. On the very first day of class, we establish the habit of students bringing an independent reading book to class each day, so they automatically come in and start reading.

Log Check: As students read, we walk around the classroom and collect information about what students are reading and how much they have read on a Quick Page Inventory Sheet (see page 110). This quick inventory is a pulse check to see if students are really reading at home and maintaining their reading life. Logging page numbers each day both reinforces the importance of maintaining a reading life and helps keep track of how quickly students are moving through books.

Think back to one of Sue's essential questions: *How can I hold students accountable for learning during independent reading?* This question is always in the back of our minds. Maintaining a reading log is a small requirement, yet it is the first step to helping students meet high expectations. They have to read every day, and they have to be able to talk and write about what they have read. This validates independent reading. Their job is to read and think; our job is to check their thinking and support it.

Conferences: Conferences are integral to the independent reading routine. Direct instruction happens at this time. Students can expect a one-on-one conference on a regular basis during

independent reading time. These conferences can be a quick check-in of three minutes or a more in-depth conversation of ten minutes. We have the luxury of co-teaching, so we are each able to see three students per day and meet with all our students in a class each week. When we are solo, on the other hand, each of us holds about two conferences per day, so it takes two weeks to meet with all the students. We discuss conferences in Chapter 4.

Mini-Lessons: Mini-lessons are whole-class instruction. They focus on the skills and strategies students need to navigate texts. Mini-lessons come from three different areas.

- Sometimes, after conferring with the whole class, a common need becomes clear. When this happens, we teach a mini-lesson to address this whole-class need.
- Other times, the whole-class-focused mini-lesson comes from what we know our students need at this age/grade level; for example, how to handle complex text structures or character traits.
- Finally, our mini-lesson teaching points come from the work we are doing around a class read-aloud. Students need to transfer these skills to the thinking they do in their independent reading books.

SmartNotes are used in two ways within the mini-lesson. First, we refer to SmartNotes taken as a class when we read a mentor text during shared reading. SmartNotes are also used by students to show us that they are using the strategy we have taught when they read their independent book.

Selecting Just-Right Books for Independent Reading

The essence of independent reading is having each student reading a just-right book—a book that is not too hard and not too easy—and being able to self-select such books. Students learn how to read a book that is a good fit. “Just right” means that the text is of interest to the student and that comprehension requires work but is still accessible independently. This just-right, independent reading book is unquestionably the most important resource for both student and teacher. The chart below is one we create as a class. We discuss the differences between being interested in a book and being able to read it.

A just-right book is that perfect ride: an interesting book that is not too easy nor too hard. So think about interest and readability when you choose a book.	
INTEREST	READABILITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the back cover. • Look at the front cover. • Look at the table of contents. • Read the first page. • Get a recommendation. • Follow a series. • Follow an author. • Follow a genre. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read two pages in the middle of the book: Look for words that are too hard. Ask yourself: <i>Can I think as I read?</i> • Read the back cover of the book. • Try it!

A problem we often encounter is the desire of middle school students to read long, complex books. These texts are often inappropriate for their age, not to mention above their reading comfort level. Although it is important to challenge students, the just-right book is one that isn't a challenge; it allows readers to both read and think. As a result, reading a just-right book fosters reading growth.

Richard Allington has researched best practices around reading instruction, and a tenet of his work is that readers must read a lot to grow: "First of all, success breeds success. When readers are successful, that success builds all sorts of motivational aspects about reading activity. More reading produces better reading" (2009, p. 50). Growth in reading and time spent reading have a causal relationship; better readers enjoy reading, and therefore, read more. As a result, they grow and become still stronger readers. Weak readers, on the other hand, find reading a struggle and therefore read less—inhibiting their growth. The bottom line is that to grow as a reader, students must read. Students need to be exposed to literature. The right text matters because it supports growth. To refer to these types of texts, Allington has coined the term "high-success reading." This means, "accurate reading, fluent reading, and reading with understanding" (2009, p. 51). Students must be immersed in hearing words, writing words, and reading words.

READING THE SAME BOOK AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

Consistency is key. Therefore, we ask students to read the same book at home and at school. Following the thread of a longer text is expected of this age group; switching between multiple texts creates confusion. Reading for an extended period of time is practice. It increases students' reading stamina and instills the positive feeling of completing a text and looking forward to the next one. Reading at home and continuing the good work from class is vital to students becoming better readers. To this end, we require students to read for a minimum of 20 minutes a night and to maintain an Independent Reading Log like the one shown on page 111. As mentioned earlier, we check this log daily. A reading log is another record-keeping tool that provides data for the teacher and accountability for the student.

Conclusion

Time spent reading is time well spent. Independent reading is a valuable tool, but it is not an end unto itself. Students shouldn't be "just" sitting and reading—they should be thinking their way through the text—and SmartNotes will help them do that. In the following chapters, you'll read about how to introduce and model SmartNotes to the whole class by working with a core text and how to use it to do on-the-spot assessment and instruction. Reading is active, and SmartNotes prove this.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Fifth-Grade Paragraph Rubric

Things you did well	What to keep working on
IDEAS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Your topic sentence answers the question/prompt. <input type="checkbox"/> You included title and author. <input type="checkbox"/> Your example provides background information for the reader. <input type="checkbox"/> Your quote lends itself to deeper analysis. <input type="checkbox"/> Your explanation sentences show a full and deep understanding of the text and the question/prompt. <input type="checkbox"/> Your writing is mostly clear and smooth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Your topic sentence does not answer the question/prompt. <input type="checkbox"/> You did not include title and author. <input type="checkbox"/> Your "Why" sentence doesn't explain your topic sentence. <input type="checkbox"/> Your example doesn't provide background information for the reader. <input type="checkbox"/> Your quote doesn't lead to deeper analysis. <input type="checkbox"/> Your explanation sentences show a literal understanding of the text and the question/prompt. They are vague and/or disconnected. <input type="checkbox"/> Your writing is not clear and focused.
ORGANIZATION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Each element enhances reader's understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Elements do not enhance reader's understanding.
SENTENCE FLUENCY	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> You mostly avoid run-on, choppy, rambling, and/or fragmented sentences. <input type="checkbox"/> You have included a quote weave. <input type="checkbox"/> Writing is smooth, natural, and easy to read. <input type="checkbox"/> Sentences begin differently and are noticeably varied in structure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Run-on, choppy, rambling, and/or fragmented sentences impair reader's fluency. <input type="checkbox"/> You have not woven in your quote. <input type="checkbox"/> Writing is not smooth, natural, and easy to read. <input type="checkbox"/> Few sentences begin differently and are not noticeably varied in structure.
WORD CHOICE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Word choice is powerful, original, and precise. <input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary is mature. <input type="checkbox"/> Repetition is avoided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Word choice is misused, repetitive, and/or vague. <input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary is simplistic.
VOICE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Voice is acceptable for audience and purpose. <input type="checkbox"/> Voice is distinctive and unique. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Voice is not acceptable for audience and purpose. <input type="checkbox"/> Personal pronouns are used. <input type="checkbox"/> Voice is functional.
CONVENTIONS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> You carefully proofread (few errors in punctuation, grammar, and spelling). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> You have many errors in punctuation, grammar, and spelling. Proofreading is not evident.

CORRELATION OF SAMPLE MINI-LESSONS TO THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Mini-Lesson	CCSS
<p>Summary SmartNotes Mini-Lesson for Fiction, <i>pages 22–25</i></p>	<p>RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.</p> <p>RL.6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.</p> <p>RL.7.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.</p> <p>RL.8.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.</p>
<p>Determining Importance SmartNotes Mini- Lesson for Fiction, <i>pages 25–27</i></p>	<p>RL.5.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</p> <p>RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.</p> <p>RL.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</p> <p>RL.6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.</p> <p>RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</p> <p>RL.7.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.</p> <p>RL.8.1 Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</p> <p>RL.8.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.</p>