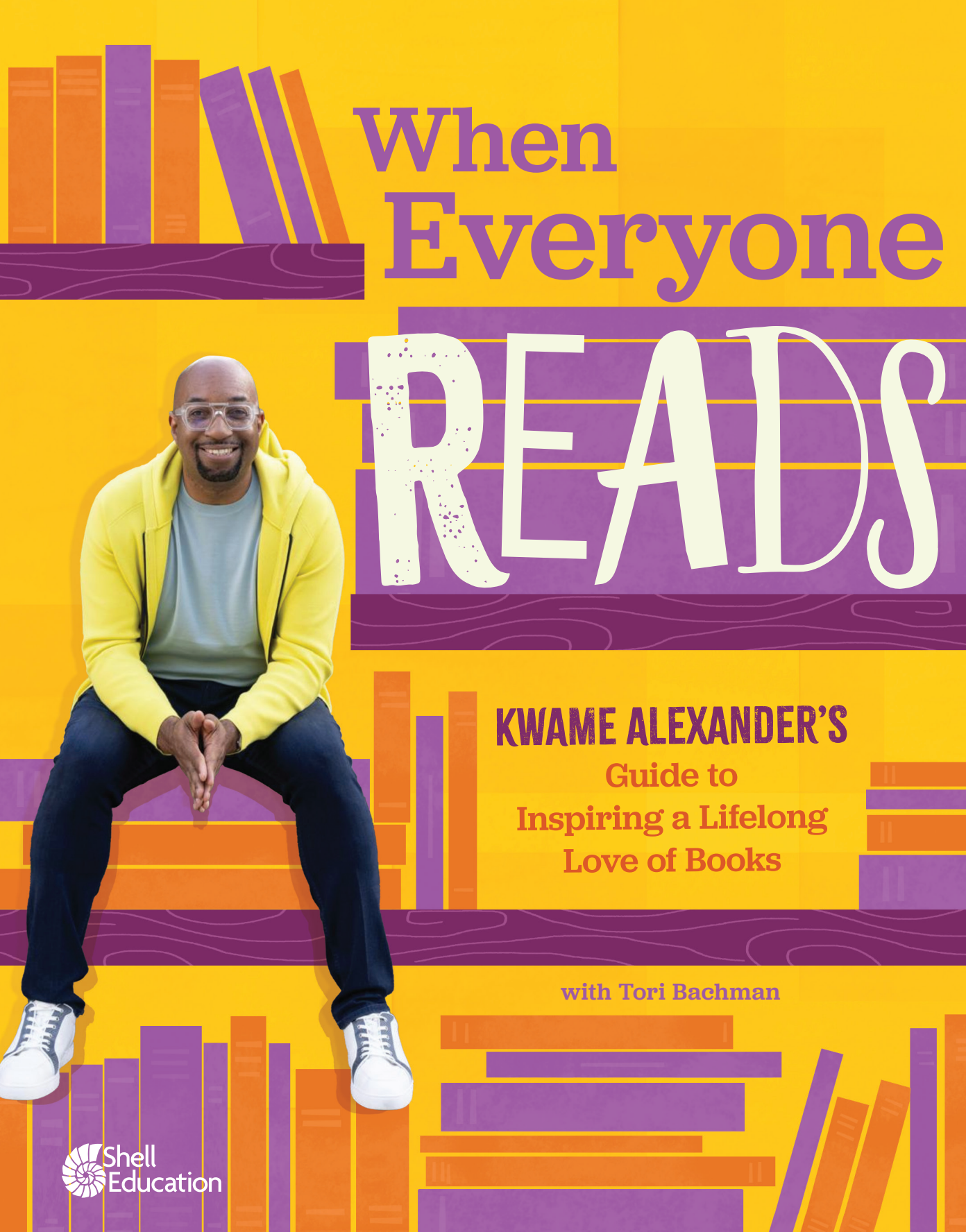


A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a bright yellow hoodie and dark pants, is sitting on a large stack of books. The books are represented by various colored rectangles (orange, purple, yellow) of different heights and widths, creating a stylized bookshelf effect. The background is a solid yellow color.

When Everyone READS

KWAME ALEXANDER'S
Guide to
Inspiring a Lifelong
Love of Books

with **Tori Bachman**

When Everyone



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**Guide to
Inspiring a Lifelong
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What Happens When Everyone Reads?

Tell me, before we get a sentence further into this book, what comes into your mind when you think of reading a book? Are you snuggled up on your sofa with a blanket, a cup of tea, and a Percival Everett novel? Staying awake too late to race through just one more chapter of Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir? Walking around Regent's Park in London listening to Renée Watson's latest middle-grade novel? Texting a friend immediately a poem you just read that blew you away (with eleven heart emojis)? Maybe your brain bubbles with new connections while reading about a period in history you never learned about in school. Or you find yourself daydreaming about a vacation to the coastal town where the story is set.

Now, I invite you to think for a minute about how you felt about reading as a child. Recall how you engaged with books both in school and at home. Did you reach for a book on a rainy Saturday when your friends weren't around? Or did you roll your eyes when it was time for SSR or DEAR time, fake your way through with one eye on the clock?

I had a love-loathe relationship with reading as a kid. Books were a reward and a punishment. Both my parents were educators, and our home was filled with books. In my early years, my mother made reading fun with African folktales and poetry books by Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni, while during my middle school years, my father made reading functional with dictionaries and his dissertations. And the books I was asked to read in school? Not my favorites. Please never ask me about *Tuck Everlasting* (I mean, now I dig it, but back then, I would have rather read *Manchild in the Promised Land* or *The Outsiders*). The turning point for me, when I moved from reading to *wanting* to read, happened when I was around twelve. Our home was filled with about 5,000 books, mostly spine out in green milk crates in our garage/laundry room/library. I was tasked with keeping the multi-purpose room clean, and after a few hours of picking up, tidying, organizing,

folding, etc., I would inevitably take a break and grab a book from the crates. It was during these times where I'd find some treasures that no one—parent, teacher, librarian—had ever put in front of me. There were books of love poems, books about sports heroes like Muhammad Ali, and my favorite, books about girls. I was captivated by the things I read and that I had chosen them all by myself. There, in my garage, through choice and independent reading, books lit up my interest, imagination, and sense of self.

Reflection time:

- What made you love books/love to read as a child? List words that describe your feelings about reading as a child.
- If you didn't love reading, what do you think was missing?
- Was there an adult (teacher, librarian, parent) or a book that turned you on to reading?
- Who were your favorite childhood authors? What were your favorite books? Why?
- How can you re-create reading joy for the children in your life?

So, how do the children you work with feel about reading? Is reading something they look forward to, or is it just another box to check? Do you see their faces light up when it's time to go to the library? *Does your school even have a library anymore?* Do you overhear the kids talking about books when they come in from the playground after lunch? Do their caregivers mention books during conferences? We know the answers that we should be giving to these questions. So, the real question is, how do we get to those answers, right?

When I go into schools, I meet a lot of young people who range in age from six to eighteen. They tell me their favorite scenes in *The Crossover* or ask me about plot decisions in *The Door of No Return*. Or they recite a couple of pages from *Acoustic Rooster*. Or they show me a drawing they created after reading *J vs. K*. I hear stories from teachers about sign-up sheets to read my books, and media specialists tell me they need to order more copies because they fly off the shelves. This is not a humblebrag, y'all; what I'm telling you is I meet kids who are *energized* about reading books! They are *choosing* to read in their free



time. These young people have busy lives—soccer practice and part-time jobs and homework—but they read my books for fun. For fun! And the cool thing is many don't even know that I'm really trying to teach them something (keep that between us).

I'm going to tell you a secret: My novels and picture books are not magical. There's no pixie dust sprinkled or incantation spoken over them. What they are is relevant and relatable. I write books that I would have wanted to read in my garage back in the day. I write books about young people who have responsibilities and problems to solve—like the kids you know. I write books that are, hopefully, inspirational and aspirational.

That's not to say that it's as simple as Relevant + Relatable = Readers. There's no question that we live and teach in an era when reading a book is not most kids' first choice as a leisure activity. Books have a lot of competition, both in school and out. In fact, I go into a lot of middle and high schools now where 1:1 devices have taken the place of textbooks. And how can we ignore things like Dana Goldstein's *New York Times* article headlined "Kids Rarely Read Whole Books Anymore. Even in English Class." from as recently as December 2025?

In many school curriculums, teaching the mechanics of reading has trumped making space for the joy of reading. In classrooms around the United States, children are being taught *about* reading without being given the opportunity to actually read. My friends, I worry sometimes that we've lost the plot.

So I ask you, why can't we have both? Why can't we teach kids the nitty-gritty of *how* to read AND infuse the *joy* of reading in our classrooms? Yes, let's get them reading, but let's also get them *wanting* to read.

We can. And we will. My hope is that in these chapters, you'll find sparks of inspiration that will help you do both.

Voluntary Independent Reading Is Good for Everyone

While a classroom full of reading joy is a beautiful goal, the even bigger goal is for kids to carry that joy home with them. Reading voluntarily and independently is the mission! Here's why: The more kids read, the more they can practice the reading skills you're teaching them. Seems simple, right? There's a few decades' worth of



research to back this up (see, for instance, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Cunningham and Stanovich 1997; Mol and Bus 2011; Stanovich 1986).

What's more, the effects of reading more (termed "reading volume" in the research) snowball as students progress through the grades. An increase in reading volume leads to gains in oral language skills, spelling, reading comprehension, and general knowledge (Mol and Bus 2011). And voluntary independent reading is especially important for children who aren't yet hitting grade-level standards:

"When low-ability readers have experience with books at home, they practice basic reading skills more and as a result they become more accurate and fluent in reading text than their lower ability peers who are less exposed to print." (Mol and Bus 2011, 287)

It's called **voluntary independent reading** because students are reading on their own by choice, not by force. This takes some doing on your part, of course, but it's a win-win. You'll light the flame by creating a culture of reading in your classroom . . . and the kids will carry the torch home. Then, once students are reading more outside of school, you'll have more time inside the classroom walls to focus on teaching reading and writing strategies that will help them be more skillful readers and writers (and guess where you'll see the benefits of this: TESTING).

It can be a virtuous circle: The more kids read, the better their reading skills get and the higher they score on the state assessments . . . and the more they feel successful, the more they want to keep reading. This can be true for every child at your school, regardless of the reading level they start from.

But wait! There's more: The benefits of reading for enjoyment span well beyond academic goals. Children (and adults) who read for enjoyment also have higher levels of empathy and feel more connected to others and a greater sense of belonging. They have keen critical-thinking, creativity, and conversation skills. And they have reduced stress, less anxiety, even better sleep patterns (Bush 2025; Sun et al. 2024).

I'd go as far as saying that reading every day outside of school should be added to what we teach children about healthy lifestyle choices. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. Stay hydrated. Get regular exercise. Sleep eight hours. And read at least twenty minutes a day. (Three days of this and you're finished reading *The Mighty Macy*).



The Myth of the Reluctant Reader

One of the most frequent questions I hear from teachers is “What do you recommend to engage reluctant readers?” I often pause and ask this question in return: “Could it be possible that this child just has not yet found the book that turns them on to reading?” Or, if I’m feeling salty, I ask it another way: *Is this child reluctant to read the way your curriculum approaches reading?*

I do not believe in reluctant readers. I believe children do *want* to read. They just don’t want to read stuff that doesn’t mean anything to them. My teachers thought I was reluctant. I was probably the most well-read student they’d encountered in a while (thanks to Mom and Dad’s bookish home environment). I just wasn’t interested in reading the books they selected for me, us (see *Tuck Everlasting*). So instead of using the term *reluctant readers*, let’s call them *disinterested readers*. And let’s take responsibility for this challenge: How do we get kids to feel not only interested in but, indeed, fired up about reading?

Listen to the children. Let them be your first guide:

- What do they want to read?
- How do they want to feel when reading?
- What do they like or dislike about reading?
- Are there topics, genres, or authors that they’re interested in?

To answer these questions, you’ve got to know your students, their interests, their woes, and their wonders. Of course, you can always just make them clean up the garage . . .

Teachers as Reading Role Models

We know that children need to see adults as role models in all things—so it should be no surprise that this is true for reading too.

A lot of excellent teachers I know use interest surveys at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to find out what their students are into. I’ve included examples of ones I like for grades K–2, 3–5, and 6–8 in the digital resources. These surveys are designed to help you understand your students’ reading preferences, attitudes, and identities. Use them to guide book recommendations, build your classroom library, and create reading experiences that honor where each child is on their literacy journey.



Research tells us that when teachers provide direct instruction in reading skills and strategies *and* foster a classroom culture that values reading, students become more engaged readers (Pressley 2002). In other words, when you model reading behaviors, create a print-rich environment, offer access to diverse and engaging reading materials, and explicitly teach foundational and comprehension-based reading skills, children are more likely to become motivated and proficient readers.

Choice and agency help too, of course. Guthrie and Humenick (2004) found that when students are provided with a choice of reading materials and autonomy in how they read, they show more intrinsic motivation and deeper engagement with reading. (That's what I call "fREADom!")

Remember when I asked you to think about how you feel about reading now, as an adult? If reading lights you up, I hope you'll express that to the children in your class. You don't need to stand up on a desk and shout about how much you love to read (unless you feel particularly moved by, say, *Black Star* or *The Undeclared*, then by all means, go ahead and desk-jump).

A simple yet effective way to start infusing your classroom with reading joy is to demonstrate that reading is something you choose to do. Here are some ideas that I've used, and that teacher friends have found success with, that can show your students that reading brings you joy:

- Keep a book on your desk that kids see you pick up and read while they're reading.
- As students enter the classroom in the morning or after lunch, let them see you holding a book in your hand.
- Write a sentence on the board from a favorite book, along with the title and author's name each morning (or even on just Monday or Friday morning each week).
- Start morning meeting by telling students about what's happening in the book you're reading (make it age-appropriate!). Talk about a character that you like or dislike, or a new idea you've learned.
- Take a photo of the cover of the book you're reading and print it out. Tape it to the wall outside your classroom right under your name plate.

Show students that everyone reads—particularly one of the adults who figure most prominently in their day-to-day lives: YOU. Your students look up to you and



will emulate your behavior. Before long, I bet they'll be greeting you in the morning by telling you something they read the day before.

When Everyone Reads . . .

"If you want kids to love reading, set up opportunities for kids to work together and with you around books. If you want them to be lifelong readers, work with them to encourage them to build reading into their daily life when away from school. If you want them to care about books, give them a chance to take on books that might be too hard for them. Give them ways to gain social rewards for using the knowledge that they gain from such reading." (Shanahan 2016, para. 16)

Esteemed reading researcher Tim Shanahan has written often about the pitfalls of practices such as reading choice and independent reading. Truth is, there's not a lot of empirical data that shows that these practices *on their own* increase students' reading scores. However, when combined with explicit reading instruction, independent reading and choice do boost reading gains (Spear-Swerling, n.d.). Again, here's that "we can have both" thing: Teaching kids reading skills and strategies AND offering guided choice and independent reading time can move the needle. Shanahan wholeheartedly supports immersing students into a reading culture.

When I say "When Everyone Reads," I really do mean everyone. Students. Teachers. Administrators. Custodial staff. Bus drivers. Caregivers. Community members. Reading is the tide that lifts all boats. It won't happen overnight. But it will happen, when you put loving intention behind the decisions you make for your students' reading lives.

How? First, create an immersive reading culture in your classroom and encourage all your colleagues to do the same. Students will carry this with them everywhere they go.

What does it look like? So glad you asked. Present students as many opportunities as possible to read for pleasure. Model a love of reading—I mean really sell it! Show children how bookish people engage with words and with one another. How many times have you finished a book and wanted to call your best friend to tell them about it? That's the kind of energy a book-hugging teacher embodies and demonstrates for their students.



Everyone reads when you listen to the children you teach. When you love your students enough to recognize and respect the genres and titles they want to read. Sometimes this looks like offering instructional scaffolds that lead to student agency. Or encouraging a child to work at a book that might be a bit above their reading level by reminding them that they know strategies. Or maybe it's a gentle nudge to take a breather from complex text and read another *Dog Man* book because it makes them happy.

Everyone reads when you ensure that the books in your classroom library represent the students sitting in the desks. And even if you have a room full of middle-class white students, you care enough about their development as humans that you'll be sure to have plenty of books by and about people who aren't in the room but can be there through books. That's the power of books! You'll have books by Black authors, Latine authors, American Indian authors, Asian American authors, and by and about LGBTQ+ people, with characters who are realistic and multidimensional, who represent the full spectrum of humanity.

Everyone reads when you and your colleagues work with families, caregivers, and community members to infuse children's outside-of-school experiences with books, authors, and words.

Everyone reads when we allow for child-centered, justice-oriented reading experiences to ripple through all aspects of the day. It is a journey. Most of all, it must be joyful. A classroom full of engaged, motivated readers who choose to read in their spare time, who talk about books with each other and with the adults around them, who have better mental and physical health, and who read more skillfully because of it. Can you imagine anything sweeter?

How to Center Reading in Your Busy Day

"This all sounds great, Kwame," you're saying. "But you don't know how much pressure I'm under, how many demands for my time there are every day!" I hear you. I was a teacher once (okay, I lasted one year, but still), and many of my favorite people were and are teachers. Both my parents were teachers. I know how hard you work. This book will not conquer the myriad challenges you take on every day.

That's why I'm not asking you to add anything else. I know you are required to teach specific curricula and meet rigorous learning standards, and with a broad spectrum of student skills, identities, and personalities in mind. Y'all work hard!



What I'm suggesting in this book, instead of doing more, is adopting a mindset and a few simple routines that can bring new energy and a passion for reading to your teaching AND to students' daily lives. I'm asking you to remember that you teach *readers* instead of focusing solely on teaching reading. I'm asking you to give kids the "freedom" they deserve so they can grow up feeling the joy and connection to books that you and I have always enjoyed. I'm asking you to center reading joy in your daily classroom routines.

And I'm going to show you how to do it. Plus, I've invited some very smart teacher friends to share with you what they're doing to center reading joy.

Here's our journey in the chapters ahead:

Chapter 1: Reading together. Interactive read-alouds, book talks, student-led discussion, access to books in and outside the classroom—this is where your reading community starts to gel.

Chapter 2: Words, words, words! It all starts here—noticing words, celebrating words, claiming words as our own. The ideas here can help kids, even the self-proclaimed disinterested readers, to notice that they're actually reading all the time.

Chapter 3: Choice is crucial, but it doesn't mean a free-for-all. This chapter contains ideas to guide students through independent reading and help them feel agency and autonomy—without having to completely hand over control.

Chapter 4: Reimagining how we approach beloved books and "classics" can be crucial in getting everyone reading. I know there are texts you have to teach because of curriculum mandates. Yet those texts aren't always the most meaningful to your students. Here we'll cover how to have a "yes, and" approach that values important themes while honoring the interests and lived experiences of the kids in your care.

Chapter 5: Remember, our ultimate goal for kids is more leisure-time reading. Let's look at ways you can bring in families, caregivers, and the larger community to help boost kids' excitement and energy around reading. Everyone reads when *everyone* reads!

Chapter 6: We want our young readers to feel personally invested in their reading. In this chapter, you'll find strategies to stretch out the reading joy and help kids apply their literacy skills in fun and interesting ways. (Remember making



dioramas of your favorite scenes in elementary school? Yeah, we're not doing that here.)

I'm going to offer a lot of ideas, activities, and strategies throughout this book. I realize that can feel overwhelming, like you have to do everything all at once. So every chapter includes a "Do One Thing" callout, as well as some Real Talk from educators who walk in your shoes every day.

Literacy is liberation, y'all. Imagine how bright and beautiful this world can be when we light the fire of reading in the young people we serve.



Books at the Center

Creating and Sustaining a Reading Classroom Community

My mother sparked a passion for reading in me way before I went to school. She read to me poems by Langston Hughes and children's books by Lucille Clifton and John Steptoe, but it was Dr. Seuss's *Fox in Socks* that was my favorite book as a three-year-old. My mother didn't just read these books. She acted them out. She danced around. She waved her arms. Like she was on stage. She brought the words alive. The words came right off the page.

So I tried to mimic that. I couldn't wait to get my hands on a book because I knew it would be an experience that was electric and cool, theatrical. I ran around the house screaming the words to *Fox in Socks*. I loved that story! I loved reading it and performing it for my mother.

Imagine what a different world this would be if every child had that sort of experience with books from a very young age. No, I don't expect you to dance around and perform for your kids (though I bet you do already—or at least you feel like you're performing at times), but what I do want you to do is think about how you can inspire children to get excited about reading. The suggestions in this chapter can help you make reading a centerpiece, a crucial and exciting part of every day. And while the goal isn't necessarily to get kids to run around reciting their favorite book . . . wouldn't that be a cool byproduct?

Before you read the next few pages, take a moment to look around your classroom and think about a typical school day. Now answer a few questions:

- Are books a visible and important part of the design of your space?
- Does the lighting and desk arrangement feel comfortable for reading?
- Do your students walk in and think, "Yeah, my teacher loves reading"?
- Is there time in your classroom every day for independent reading?

- Have you demonstrated for kids how to choose a book . . . and how to walk away from one that's not interesting?
- Do you talk about books together, so that kids want to read at home so they have something to tell you about tomorrow?

It doesn't matter what grade or content area you teach, I want you to answer YES to all of these questions. If that's not the case today, it's alright. I'll help you get there. And if you are answering yes right now, let's see how you might answer "oh heck yeah!" by the end of this school year.

One of the most crucial pieces—really, the foundation—of instilling a love of reading and writing that lasts a lifetime is creating a joyful reading and writing community in your classroom. We want kids to think about books even when they're not sitting at their desks. Especially when they're not sitting at their desks! This is the vision: young people reading on their own at home, nose in a book while standing at the bus stop, carrying a book with them to soccer practice and doctor's appointments. (Speaking of doctor's appointments, my teenager recently injured her ankle playing volleyball and to one of her physical therapy sessions, I brought a copy of Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* biography to read. Afterward, she told me that I should not bring a book to her doctor's appointments because I need to be paying attention to her. So maybe we should only bring books to our own doctor's appointments. Oh my!)

I hope you'll agree with me, too, that it's totally fine if the books they're reading are ebooks, anime, manga—whatever gets them reading joyfully. I'm even happy with audiobooks as an entry point. Imagine all the kids who have difficulty accessing traditional text who can become lovers of story with these other formats.

And we want kids talking about what they're reading. We want conversations about characters, excitement around magical settings, and information sharing about "fun facts" they've learned. The cherry on top is kids writing on their own, whether it's about the books they read or it's creating fan fiction or developing their own characters and storylines.

A classroom reading and writing community doesn't materialize overnight. It takes some time, cultivation, and thoughtful practice. In this chapter, I'll share activities and strategies that can help you with that.

Within a strong classroom reading community, literacy becomes a way for students to imagine what's possible for themselves and each other. Reading



is quite literally a gateway to freedom, the freedom to be our full selves. And the support of our literacy community offers a safe space to explore reading and writing in authentic, exciting ways. Creating and sustaining a community of readers fosters a lifelong love of reading and strengthens connections among students.

Don't take my word for it, though.

Research underscores that students are more likely to become engaged readers when they feel they belong to a reading community. Notable voices such as Marinak and colleagues (2016) and Fisher and Frey (2018) emphasize the importance of this connection—a robust reading culture can significantly impact students' literacy development and enjoyment.

I also have been inspired by the scholarship of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, whose books *Cultivating Genius* (2020) and *Unearthing Joy* (2023) provide research-based and culturally grounded frameworks that honor students' identities, build critical thinking, develop genuine literacy skills, cultivate intellectual curiosity, *and* center joy. Dr. Muhammad's work validates my belief that literacy education must go beyond decoding and comprehension to encompass who students are, how they see themselves, and their power to engage with and transform the world. I encourage you to read these books to learn more about how to fully engage with Dr. Muhammad's ideas.

In an interview, Dr. Muhammad said, "As I continue to teach young people, preservice teachers, and scholars, while working with school leaders, I find that we need joy more than ever. Teachers often tell me their hearts are overwhelmed and stressed. The pandemic exacerbated the need for joy. Also, there are ongoing attacks on literature and inclusive, humanizing curriculum. These are all reasons we need joy as I define it in the book. Joy should be the ultimate goal of teaching and learning" (Ferlazzo 2023).

I couldn't agree more. Joyful reading lifts everyone up. Students. Educators. Caregivers. The larger community. And this is where you come in! The reading community you establish in your classroom will ripple outward.

Three general ways to establish and cultivate a reading community include building a robust classroom library, scheduling reading time and "shopping time," and sharing about reading. Let's dig into these now.



Create a Reading-Friendly Environment

First step: Make sure your classroom library is a vital part of your students' everyday experience. They should see your collection of books as they walk in the door. If you teach primary grade students, it may be helpful to get down on your knees as you enter your classroom space so you can view the room from the vantage point of a six-year-old. (And if you teach eighth graders, you may want to stand on your tip-toes!)

Your library should be robust and inclusive. This doesn't happen by accident. Intentionally include and make available a variety of books that cater to a wide range of interests and reading levels. Include graphic novels, verse novels, and different genres that reflect students' experiences and interests. Ask your students what they want to read about. Ask caregivers what books are at home or what books their kids gravitate toward at the local library or bookstore.

And I've got good news for you. A classroom library doesn't have to take up a lot of space. In a self-contained classroom, you could set up bins or small stacks

around the room that contain books related to what you're studying in science and social studies. Rotate books in these areas throughout the year to keep it fresh. Put wordless books, picture books, chapter books, novels, memoirs, poetry, and informational books for pleasure reading in a prominent location—again, a bin is fine, or a small shelf with a few covers facing out—and make a point to add a book or two every week.

If you're a content-area teacher, showcase books about your subject area in one or two spots around the room. Call attention to new books as you add them. You can rotate books throughout the year too.

Building an inclusive library does not mean checking boxes off a checklist. And just having an inclusive classroom library is not the end of your strategy for inclusivity. We want our classroom libraries to reflect the children we teach and represent people, cultures, and situations that aren't well-known to our student population. Again, ask your students what they want! They will lead you.



But, Kwame, how do I stock a classroom library on a teacher's salary? I hear you. Check out thrift stores, online marketplaces, library sales.

The real challenge with thrifting books is finding books that are current, timely, and representative of the children in your classroom. So make a wish list before you set out. Share that with family and friends, and ask them to keep an eye out for great books in their travels. Share your wish list with classroom parents, the PTO/PTA, and community organizations like Rotary International and Lions Club. Make it a treasure hunt or a challenge to see who can find the most titles on your list.

Set up a DonorsChoose.org list. Talk to your local independent booksellers about setting up a wish list and posting it publicly in the store for patrons to donate.

Oooh! What if you have a book donation drive, organized and publicized by the students in your classroom? Imagine how getting kids involved in curating their classroom library can spark excitement about reading. Check out the work of We Need Diverse Books in the Classroom: diversebooks.org/programs/classroom/.

And don't forget about my good friends at FirstBook.org and the Library of Congress Surplus Books Program. They both offer free and reduced-cost books that are also current. Consider applying for a small grant specifically for purchasing books. Demco offers a free grant search engine for libraries and educators (demco.com/services/free-grant-search).

Bottom line: Think creatively and strategically—and ask for help. There's a huge reading community for you to tap into while building your own; we've got your back!

If you have space and even modest resources, you can create comfortable reading nooks. Bean bag chairs, throw pillows, yoga mats, a special cozy rug, and warm lighting. When my niece was a tween, she would read under tables, in closets, wherever she could find her own space. And it worked for her. I still remember her reading Harry Potter hanging upside down on my couch (I am not exaggerating, people). Think about your favorite reading environment and try to re-create that for your students. If nothing else, consider changing the lighting and/or playing soothing background music during any designated reading time. Consider refreshing your reading nooks throughout the year by making them thematic. (Check these beautiful and brilliant reading nooks for inspiration: weareteachers.com/reading-nooks/.)



Not every classroom has space for even a modest library. If that's the case for you, please carve out time every week for students to visit the school library. Or invite someone from the community library once every two weeks with a selection of books that are appropriate for your students.

We want kids to know that books are an important part of the environment, and we want them to be comfortable looking for books that appeal to their interests. When I think back to my own childhood, I remember being surrounded by books in my home. That's not common for many kids today—so surround them with books during the school day.

These are some questions to ask yourself as you evaluate, refresh, and/or build your classroom library:

- Is the library space visible as students walk into the room?
- Is it inviting, colorful, cozy, interesting?
- How often are the students using it voluntarily? Ask them what would make it more accessible and inviting.
- Are the books in my classroom library representative of the students in the class? Are their cultures, identities, interests represented? This helps students feel like they belong and are important.
- Do the books in my classroom library showcase peoples and settings different from my students' backgrounds too? Reading about others creates empathy and connection.
- Are students visiting the space and looking at books and/or borrowing them? Are you making time for this to happen regularly?

Time to acknowledge the elephant in the room: I know it's becoming more and more difficult to keep a classroom library, especially one with books that are challenged. It breaks my heart that this is the case in too many schools. You may have to get creative about what's considered a library. Maybe it's a milk crate of books in the closet that you pull out from time to time. Maybe it's even an actual book bag you carry in and out of the school building. I hope you will continue to make books available to the children in your care—while also keeping yourself and your career safe.



Schedule “Shopping” Time and Reading Time

So much of a child’s life is decided by adults. Reading is a place where they can have choice and autonomy. Let them “shop” for books in your classroom regularly, and make it part of the weekly routine to go to the school library.

Research shows that when kids choose what they read, their engagement increases because they’re likely to read books that resonate with their personal interests (Krashen 2004; Scholastic 2023). Your role is to guide them as needed, but please don’t ever dissuade a child from reading something because of their reading ability. A book that appeals to a child because of its topic or author may be highly motivating for them, though you may have to help with vocabulary or background knowledge.

And here’s a nonnegotiable: Provide in-class independent reading time.

I know you’ve got a lot to cover in a school day or class period, but I challenge you to carve out at least ten minutes in class for independent reading. Five minutes, even. Do you know that kids can read five to ten poems in that time frame?

In an elementary classroom, this could happen during a transition time, like coming in from recess or music class. Books are ready and waiting to be read! It could be right at the start of the day, a way to help students center themselves and get ready for the learning ahead. In a middle or high school classroom, ask students to take out their independent reading books as they enter the room.

Fifteen to twenty minutes of reading every day increases vocabulary and understanding of grammar and syntax, develops critical-thinking and reasoning skills, connects concepts, and invites imagination. It also increases relaxation, decreases anxiety, and develops empathy. If you give kids just ten minutes per day in your classroom, they’re halfway there. (Whoa, what if every teacher in seventh grade gave their students ten minutes of independent reading time per class period?! That would add up to at least forty minutes of reading every day. Life-changing minutes.)

Don’t be afraid to let students take home a book from the classroom library. I know you may have spent your own money on those books and you worry that they’ll never make it back. But if that’s the worst-case scenario, consider that there’s a student who now has a book at home that they didn’t have before. (Or, if they left it on the bus . . . another student has that book now!)



Refresh Read-Alouds

When my teen was in preschool, I would show up and read picture books to her class. She and her classmates loved seeing the pictures and listening to my animated performances. Whenever I walked into her class, she'd run and jump into my arms. "Daddy, read your Rooster book to us, please." The students helped me read, engaged with me in discussions around the book, and begged for more of my theatrical read-alouds. Those were the good ole days. Now, she's in high school and I am forbidden from stepping foot on the campus other than to drop her off at school. But I digress . . .

The simple act of reading aloud can anchor your reading and writing community. An interactive read-aloud, during which you read and discuss while you're reading, can broaden students' exposure to literature, promote empathy, and create shared experiences that build community.

For young students, interactive read-alouds support the development of foundational literacy skills (like print and phonemic awareness), listening comprehension, and social-emotional learning.



Watch Kwame doing a virtual read-aloud from his chapter-book-in-verse, *The Mighty Macy*.

For middle and high school students, interactive read-alouds provide access to complex texts; enhance comprehension, discussion skills, and fluency; and boost analytical thinking.

For all ages, interactive read-alouds encourage critical thinking and active listening. And they help kids develop oral language and vocabulary, especially important for students who are learning English as a new language or who experience reading challenges. Plus, interactive read-alouds allow students to access challenging texts without decoding or vocabulary barriers. This can reduce reading anxiety while promoting discussion-based learning.

As if that wasn't enough reason to incorporate read-alouds in your day, they also introduce young writers to a variety of writing styles. Read-alouds can be excellent idea generators for students. Plus, they give students models for structure, format, tone, and voice, which will prove useful when it comes time for them to write.

You ready to read aloud yet?



Shake up traditional read-aloud strategies by introducing some of these options:

- **Chapter books for younger students (K-2):** Sharing longer narratives over time builds listening stamina and fosters anticipation. Try *Wishtree* by Katherine Applegate, *The Season of Styx Malone* by Kekla Magoon, or classics like *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White or *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo. Now, don't forget about *The Mighty Macy* by, ahem, the author you're currently reading.
- **Picture books for older students (3-12):** Picture books aren't just for young children. Their visual storytelling and complex themes can spark deep conversations in older grades. For example, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family* by Ibtihaj Muhammad (illustrated by Hatem Aly), *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes (illustrated by Gordon C. James), or my personal favorite, *The Undefeated* (illustrated by Kadir Nelson).
- **News articles or long-form essays:** Try reading articles from Newsela or Scholastic Magazines to younger students, or *The Atlantic* or The Learning Network from *The New York Times* for older students.
- **A scene from a novel** you love, or a **short story** that relates to the whole-class novel y'all are studying.
- **Poetry:** Poetry is a fabulous read-aloud option for any age! Start with one of these: *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World*, selected by Naomi Shihab Nye; *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein; *Shaking Things Up: 14 Young Women Who Changed the World* by Susan Hood; *Firefly July: A Year of Very Short Poems* by Paul B. Janeczko (illustrated by Melissa Sweet); or *Black Girl You Are Atlas* by Renée Watson (illustrated by Ekua Holmes). The Academy of American Poets offers many child-friendly poems grouped thematically: poets.org/poems-kids. (They've also got lesson plans and resources for teaching poetry.)

The suggestions that follow for how to approach interactive read-alouds, which you can adapt to fit the students in your care, are based on what I've learned from Maria Walther's emphasis on joyful, interactive reading (Walther 2018, 2024) and Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Nancy Akhavan's focus on structured literacy instruction (2019).



How to Do It

Interactive read-alouds follow a simple three-part structure: before, during, and after reading.

Before You Read

- **Select a text** that aligns with your instruction goals, fits students' interests, and excites you. Pre-read to identify key stopping points for discussion, questioning, and modeling thinking.
- **Build background knowledge:** Connect the book's topic to students' experiences or prior learning.
- **Preview the text:** Show the cover, title, author, and illustrator. Make predictions based on visuals and text features.
- **Introduce key vocabulary:** Select three to five Tier 2 words and provide student-friendly definitions with examples. (These are words that are not naturally acquired in casual conversation but are important to understanding the story. Tier 2 words offer more precise ways of expressing ideas.)
- **Set a purpose for listening:** Share a focus question or strategy (e.g., "Today, we'll focus on how the author builds suspense.").

While You Read

With children in K-2, you'll want to read the entire book straight through one time before doing the interactive parts noted below; this helps children hear and comprehend the story.

In any grade, you'll want to incorporate any or all of the following, depending on your teaching goals, time, and students' developmental stage:

- **Read fluently and expressively:** Model appropriate pacing, tone, and phrasing to enhance comprehension. If you're really ready, use different voices and gestures to make the words come off the page.
- **Think aloud:** Verbalize your thinking to demonstrate comprehension strategies (e.g., "I wonder why the character did that").
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Pause at planned stopping points to encourage discussion (e.g., "What do you think will happen next?" "Why do you think the character made that choice?").

