# Making Teacher Evaluation Work

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## A GUIDE FOR Literacy Teachers and Leaders

Rachael Gabriel and Sarah Woulfin

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INTRODUCTION

# Understanding Teacher Evaluation Policy

- *How did we get to where we are with teacher evaluation policies?*
- *What do these policies mean for teachers' literacy instruction?*

## Logics of Evaluation

When Connecticut passed its new teacher evaluation law in 2011, we sat around a conference table with four other university professors—all policy analysts and former teachers in their own right—trying to sketch out a model that would capture the underlying logic of each part of the new policy. It took us two weeks, three meetings, ten Post-it posters, and about eighty emails back and forth to come up with several sketches of possible models, none of which were fully complete or fully compatible. Our attempts to clarify and graphically display the internal logic of the new teacher evaluation policy largely failed. In fact, Rachael's final draft was named the "illogic model," because it still contained question marks and arrows to nowhere from some of the policy's key components.

The illogic model highlighted crossed purposes and processes in the policy, but it also highlighted some glaring points of tension within the model. For example, the same measures of effectiveness are applied to teachers of all grades and all subjects. This creates strange absurdities like art teachers being evaluated in part on students' math scores and kindergarten teachers being evaluated using the same criteria as high school teachers. But it also creates significant difficulty when it comes to using teacher evaluation systems to support and develop individual teachers. For example, the structure, pace, and content of first- and tenth-grade science are not the same, yet they are evaluated using the same tools, which are likely to draw an evaluator's focus to the same indicators and sets of suggestions. Teaching all grades and content areas is not a singular, generic activity, so criteria for rating quality cannot be generic.



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As we began the process of interviewing several hundred teachers and administrators across the state as part of an evaluation of the teacher evaluation pilot (Donaldson et al. 2013), we quickly began to see that the problem was not a lack of logic within teacher evaluation policies, but competing logics that explain the deeper values and aims of evaluation. We learned from educators in Connecticut that mixed messages about the purposes and processes of teacher evaluation have made teachers and leaders frustrated, confused, anxious, and often disillusioned about the entire process of evaluation.

## Do We Measure and Sort or Support and Develop?

New-generation teacher evaluation systems invariably contain at least two competing logics: the logic of accountability and the logic of development. The logic of accountability holds that a state must set clear criteria for educator excellence, measure each educator against this criteria every year, and use this information to inform employment decisions like hiring, firing, promotion, and tenure. We call this the *measure and sort* logic for short, because it includes efforts to measure and sort teachers based on quality.

The logic of development holds that states and districts must offer support and learning opportunities for all educators to ensure positive student outcomes. We call this the *support and develop* logic for short, because it includes efforts to highlight existing expertise by offering recognition and addresses weak instruction by offering learning opportunities (e.g., mentoring, coaching, professional development activities; see Figure I.1).

| | **Measure and Sort** | **Support and Develop** |
|---|---|---|
| Purpose of evaluation | • Use observations to assess quality of teaching<br>• Assign a rating label to teachers based on the quality of their teaching | • Use observations to gain data on what to support teachers on<br>• Connect to school improvement plan |
| Role of evaluator | • Observe instruction and assign a rating | • Observe instruction and conduct feedback conversation with teachers |
| Role of teacher | • Teacher as employee | • Teacher as professional learner |

FIGURE **I.1** Measure and Sort Versus Support and Develop



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The challenge of new-generation teacher evaluation systems is that both logics are obviously implied, and both could potentially lead to better outcomes, but when they are applied to the same set of tools, they cause conflict and thwart each approach's intended purposes. For example, consider the following situation a teacher shared with us at a workshop on preparing for classroom observations sponsored by a regional reading association (identifying details have been changed).

Allison, a fourth-grade teacher, was preparing for a scheduled classroom observation. To show off her best instruction, she arranged for the observation to occur in the second part of her lesson when students would be engaged in independent practice while she conferred with individuals one by one. She considers conferencing the most powerful portion of her lesson as well as the practice she most wants to improve to address her goals of supporting students who struggle with reading. Her planning shows an expectation of a support and develop approach to the observation: showing the meatiest part of her lesson in the area that she thinks she can grow the most. She is hoping for specific feedback on her interactions with individual students and ideas about how she can improve.

Ricki is an assistant principal assigned to observe and evaluate Allison. Rather than sitting in on an entire period, Ricki prefers to do multiple, brief, unannounced visits so that teachers cannot put on a show full of dogs and ponies just because they know she is coming. The evaluation policy requires some announced and unannounced visits, so she asks teachers to send her preferred times for the announced visits.

When Ricki visits classrooms, she brings the state rubric and takes notes on the criteria listed in each row. By keeping her observations focused only on specific rubric criteria, Ricki ensures all teachers are being held to the same standard and that feedback can be linked to actionable next steps for professional development options that are linked to each rubric row (e.g., planning, management, assessment, and so on).

Ricki is applying a measure and sort approach to her observations: trying to collect the most objective, reliable data over time to make the best decisions about teacher quality. When she enters Allison's classroom midway through her lesson, she finds the students reading independently. Some are also writing in their journals, and some are reading next to each other on the classroom rug. Allison is kneeling next to one of them whispering something. No students are interacting, there is no explanation of content, no one states the lesson objective, no group work is facilitated, there is no evidence of active listening, and no expectations are stated. In short,



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Ricki sees nothing she can rate on the state rubric. She writes a quick note on a sticky note to Allison telling her she's sorry she got the time wrong and will come back some time when she can catch Allison teaching.

Ricki didn't get her objective, reliable data. Allison didn't get her specific actionable feedback. No one discussed suggestions or resources aimed at instructional improvement. What went wrong?

Both educators had good intentions and were thoughtful about this observation, but each applied a different logic to address what they viewed as the purposes and possibilities of classroom observations.

If their shared goal had been to measure and sort, Allison would have been better off showing Ricki the first part of the lesson, where teacher-directed instructional patterns would allow her to clearly highlight each indicator on the rubric—from stating the lesson objective to facilitating student discussion. Allison may not have gotten feedback in the area she was hoping for, but she would have ensured that her evaluator had evidence she should be sorted positively (e.g., renewed, promoted, tenured). Perhaps Allison's goals for support and development could be addressed outside the evaluation system by a mentor or coach.

On the other hand, if their shared goal had been to support and develop, Ricki might have been better off meeting with Allison before the observation so that she could be sure she understood what Allison was hoping she would observe. She might have consulted or brought an expert in literacy instruction who would have ideas about how to rate and extend specific practices that are not on the rubric, like conferencing with students. Ricki would not have been able to gather objective, reliable data on Allison's classroom that could be compared to data from all of her other observations, but she would have recognized the instruction Allison wanted to show. Perhaps data for comparisons could be gathered during instructional rounds or trend visits instead.

Both approaches are valid ways to engage with the tools and routines of goal setting, classroom observations, and feedback conversations. However, each logic must be used intentionally and separately. Segments of instruction designed to invite support and development are difficult to measure and sort. Evaluation tools designed to measure and sort do not easily generate feedback for support and development.

Using either system of logic only requires a decision, but it is not one that teachers or evaluators can make on their own. Teachers and evaluators are both influenced by their backgrounds, current professional environment, and other reform pressures when they draw upon these logics. This means that different logics may be in play at one time, and that some might



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be used more often depending on context. For instance, leaders in chronically underperforming districts may naturally select the measure and sort logic more often because they consistently face accountability pressures. Leaders in other districts may naturally select support and develop logics more often to push teachers whose scores are consistently satisfactory. Either way, the teacher–evaluator duo has to be on the same page for evaluations systems to produce any of their intended outcomes.

The success of teacher evaluations does not depend on the decisions of teachers or evaluators; it is an interactional accomplishment between the two. As we note above, this means that the successful teacher–evaluator duo:

1. shares a common logic which guides their engagement with evaluation activities
2. approaches evaluation activities with a common understanding of effective literacy teaching.

Such interdependence is not just limited to observation: it applies to all components of a teacher evaluation system, including goal setting, and the selection of measures for student growth and achievement. So, this book is written for teachers and evaluators to read together, to work toward a common vision of effective literacy instruction and a common understanding of the logics that exist and, at times, compete, within teacher evaluation systems.

## Why We Wrote This Book

As former reading teachers, literacy coaches, and current researchers who prepare both teachers and leaders, we have watched the proliferation and reach of this new generation of teacher evaluation policies change the volume and focus of conversations about teaching and learning in schools. This has led us to ask two questions that are the driving forces behind the research, examples, and strategies presented in this book:

1. How can evaluation be implemented as a lever for improving literacy instruction?
2. How can teachers and leaders learn about and advocate for high-quality evaluation practices that support student literacy learning?

In the chapters that follow, we present our answers to these questions. In doing so, we argue that evaluation can indeed be used to support literacy teaching and learning, but only if teachers and leaders have a shared



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understanding of excellent literacy instruction, and of teacher evaluation in the context of accountability policies. Shared knowledge of both is required if teachers and leaders are to make teacher evaluation work for them.

Without this shared understanding, leaders may struggle to look and listen for best practices in literacy instruction as they observe and rate teachers in their buildings. Teachers may struggle to articulate the intention and value of their practices as they set goals and prepare for observations, and they may feel they have to abandon or hide their best instruction behind closed classroom doors. Both may experience the stresses and controlling aspects of evaluation without a clear link to opportunities for growth that might benefit students.

## How to Use This Book

We organize the book into eight chapters on evaluation, literacy instruction, and each component of new-generation evaluation policies. Key questions frame each chapter and are followed by descriptions of scenarios that highlight the importance and complexity of focusing evaluation on literacy instruction. These scenarios are based on common stories that we see unfolding across schools, districts, and states as they tackle new policies. Some happened this way, but others are composites of stories we hear over and over again from teachers and evaluators in different settings. We discuss each scenario in terms of the research and practice principles that could guide teachers and administrators in similar situations. Then, we present how topics tie to the measure and sort and support and develop logics. Finally, we conclude each chapter with a shareable list of key points and a take-and-go activity to share with your professional community.

Though you can read through the chapters in order, we invite you to use the detailed table of contents to find what you need when you need it. For example, you may choose to read Chapter 7 on goal setting prior to setting your evaluation goals in the fall. Or, teachers and evaluators may choose to read Chapter 4 on literate environments in June to plan for next year.

With the goal of increasing communication about literacy in the context of teacher evaluation, this book is designed to be used in multiple ways by multiple audiences:

1. for teachers reading on their own to understand the policy context and to gain ideas to advocate for focused, meaningful evaluation



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2. for administrators/school leaders reading on their own to learn what to look for when observing literacy instruction across grades and content areas
3. for teachers to read in grade-level teams, data teams, or professional learning communities (PLCs) to discuss elements of effective literacy instruction and goal setting
4. for leaders in PLCs working to encourage more consistent and thoughtful evaluations that improve literacy learning in their buildings
5. for teachers and leaders to read together, to build a common understanding of literacy instruction and teacher evaluation policy.

## Key Points

1. Mixed messages about the purposes and processes of teacher evaluation have made teachers and leaders confused, anxious, and often disillusioned about the entire process of evaluation.
2. For teacher evaluation to be used to improve literacy instruction, teachers and evaluators need common understandings, language, and tools for talking about literacy in the context of teacher evaluation.
3. New-generation teacher evaluation systems invariably contain at least two competing logics: the logic of accountability (measure and sort) and the logic of development (support and develop).
4. The success of teacher evaluations does not depend on the decisions of teachers or evaluators, but is an interactional accomplishment between the two.



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Figure 4.3: Purpose-Audience-Format Triangle from "Designing Writing Instruction That Matters" by Hannah Dostal and Rachael Gabriel in *Voices from the Middle*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 61–71 (December 2015). Copyright © 2015 by National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Figure 6.1: Positive and Negative Supervisor Conversation Behaviors from "The Neurochemistry of Positive Conversations" by Judith E. Glaser and Richard D. Glaser in *Harvard Business Review* (June 12, 2014). Published by Harvard Business Publishing. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. https://hbr.org/2014/06/the-neurochemistry-of-positive-conversations.

Figure 7.1: Correlation Between Standardized Assessment and Teacher Observation Scores from "Gathering Feedback for Teaching: Combining High-Quality Observations with Student Surveys and Achievement Gains," MET Project Policy and Practice Brief by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2015). Reprinted by permission.

Appendix 3C: Cycles of Reading Success/Failure from *Reading's Non-Negotiables: Elements of Effective Reading Instruction* by Rachael Gabriel. Copyright © 2013 by Rachael Gabriel. Published by Roman & Littlefield Education, a division of Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, MD. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.



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CHAPTER

4

# Effective Literacy Instruction

- *What are the active ingredients that make literacy instruction effective?*
- *What does each look like in a classroom observation?*

Literacy instruction presents a special case for teacher evaluation because there is such range and division among practitioners and researchers about what constitutes best practice. Teachers and leaders hold deep-seated beliefs about what counts as appropriate and effective literacy instruction. Ideas about teaching and learning contained in evaluation systems may align or clash with an educator's perspectives on literacy. In the face of passionate arguments for contrasting approaches to literacy instruction, it is easy to become brittlely narrow in focus, or overly liberal—accepting any- and everything. The goal of this chapter is to highlight the non-negotiables of literacy instruction that must be in place, even if they may at times be intangible or difficult to observe.

The first questions I (Rachael) ask when I walk into any literacy classroom at any grade level are:

- What are they reading?
- What are they writing?
- What are they talking about?

If there is no reading, writing, or talking going on in a literacy classroom, the students are doing something other than literacy at the moment, in which case the question becomes:

- Will this activity efficiently lead to reading, writing, or talking about text?



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## How Teachers Use Time

There are lots of things that might be happening besides literate practice (reading, writing, talking about text) that may eventually support literate practice (taking out materials, listening to directions, and so on), but they have to actually lead to practice for literacy learning to occur.

In other words, while all teachers spend some time on community building, logistics, and incidentals, exemplary teachers routinely spend 80–90 percent of allocated time with students engaged in literate practice, while a teacher next door may spend far more time on "literacy-related" activities and fail to get to the literacy efficiently enough for growth (Allington and Johnston 2002).

In a short observation or walk-through, you may not expect to see reading, writing, or talking about text for a certain percentage of your visit, but asking yourself (and students) how the action you observe *will lead to* literate practice will help you predict the overall pattern of how this teacher uses time better than looking at a schedule or lesson plan.

For example, in two fourth-grade classrooms next door to one another, I watched the same scripted lesson being taught by two teachers with the same years of experience, the same curriculum and materials, and similar populations of students. Both classrooms paused for discipline incidents, took time to engage in an organizing procedure, and spent time listening to multiple announcements over the PA system. Still, in one room, the students were either reading, writing, or talking about text for nearly sixty-eight minutes of the ninety-minute period. Clear goals for reading and audiences for writing were discussed throughout the period so that students had a reason to initiate and persist with reading and writing tasks.

In the other room a combination of long explanations, disciplinary standoffs, disorganized materials, teacher anecdotes, and student questions left only about thirty minutes for literate practice—less than half the allocated time in the scripted lesson. When this classroom veered off-script, it was not to set or reinforce reasons for reading and writing, it was to reinforce classroom rules and discuss how to redo work. In other words, when students weren't reading, writing, or talking, what they were doing was not very likely to lead to literate practice. With half the opportunities to learn, we wouldn't expect the students in the thirty-minute room to do as well as their peers who had 50 percent more practice (Figure 4.1).

Researchers have literally sat in the back of classrooms with stopwatches keeping track of the time spent on various classroom tasks. However, we do not recommend that evaluators do this because effectiveness in teaching is not about the minutes. It's about the volume of opportunities to develop literacy,



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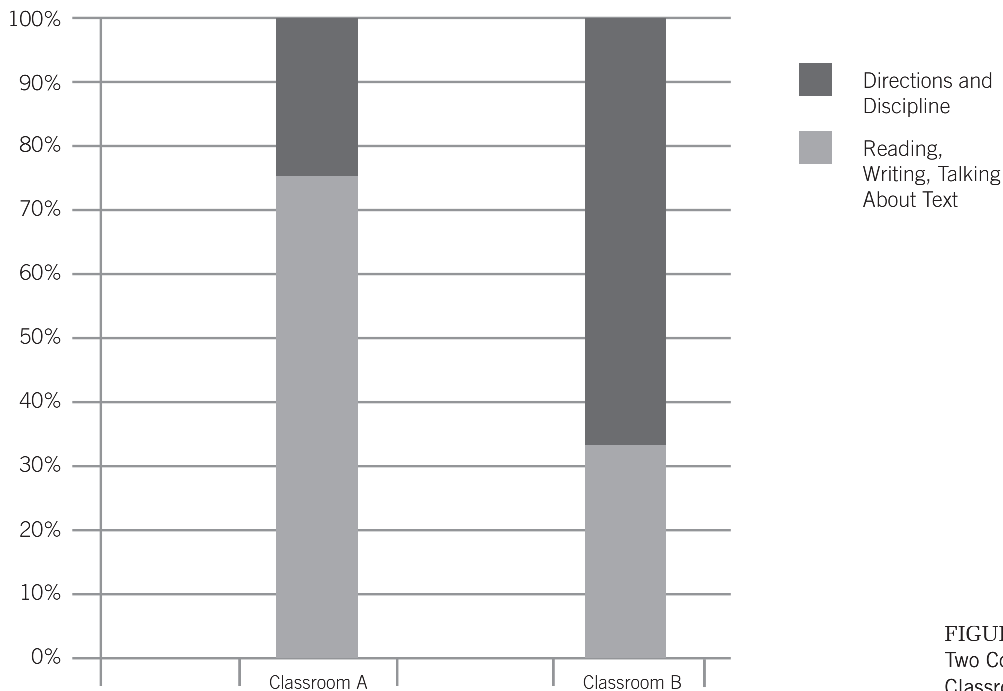


FIGURE **4.1**
Two Contrasting Classrooms

each of which requires a coordination of time, materials, and instruction. In other words, not all practice opportunities are equal. A few active ingredients are needed to make student growth curves rise as a result of engaging with literacy instruction. As in baking, the mere presence of active ingredients (like baking soda) does not guarantee success, but success is unlikely without them.

## Active Ingredients

1. Reading accurately with a purpose
2. Writing with a purpose and audience
3. Talking about text with teachers and peers
4. Discussing models of fluent reading and expert writing
5. Interventions that support individuals and focus on meaning.

### Reading accurately with a purpose

As with exercise, we know that there is such a thing as too easy, too hard, and "just right" for growth. This has led to the popular use of ideas like the "Goldilocks principle" or "five-finger rule" for text selection, in which



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students are instructed to find a book that they can read with at least 95 percent accuracy by counting the number of unfamiliar words on a page of text (5 per 100). Though widely accepted as a tool for selecting independent reading books, there is less consensus about how texts might be selected for whole-group reading—with some people arguing that challenge and complexity are necessary and others advocating for texts that match the readers and not the grade.

A range of studies have confirmed that the volume of accurate reading is directly correlated with achievement during regular instruction and the amount of growth in intervention settings. As Allington, Billen, and McCuiston (2015) describe, the ways we measure text difficulty (or now: complexity) has changed over time, but the central premise that accurate reading matters has remained a constant in studies of the last fifty years. Here are just a few examples of how studies have demonstrated that accurate reading matters over time:

- Linnea Ehri and colleagues (2007) compared the reading growth of first graders involved in a tutoring program that required reading independent-level materials with paraprofessionals compared to small-group instruction from a reading specialist using instructional-level materials. Those tutored using independent-level texts outperformed those reading instructional-level texts in small groups despite their access to a certified reading specialist.
- Elfrieda Hiebert (2005) compared the fluency growth of students who engaged with repeated reading of grade-level materials from their classroom, or passages, and content-specific passages that were controlled to limit the number of unknown words. Both groups made more gains in fluency than a control group that did not do repeated readings, but the group that read texts with greater accuracy (controlled for unfamiliar words) made significantly more growth than the group with uncontrolled text.
- O'Connor and colleagues (2002) compared the efficacy of a reading intervention using texts drawn from students' classrooms versus the same intervention using texts that tutors matched to each student's reading level. Though both groups made more growth than those not receiving any intervention, the reading-level-matched group made significantly more growth than the group using classroom texts.
- Anderson, Evertson, and Brophy (1979) found that the number of errors second-grade students made during classroom oral reading was negatively correlated with their achievement compared to peers who



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read orally with fewer errors in class. This difference was less substantial for fifth graders, indicating that oral reading accuracy may be most important for beginning readers.

There are also studies that demonstrate growth is possible when using instructional or even more challenging texts. However, such growth has only been identified in programs that are designed to provide significant support before and after reading, as well as intensive assistance (by peer or teacher) during reading (Stahl and Heubach 2005; Morgan, Wilcox, and Eldredge 2000). In studies of adult readers, psychologists have found that interest mediates the effect of text difficulty such that readers are able to understand and remember more challenging texts even better than easy texts because the challenge increases attention, but only if they are intrinsically motivated to do so (Fulmer et al. 2015).

At the most basic level, reading development requires *practice* to solidify skills and strategies and *exposure* to new words, structures, and ideas to increase one's vocabulary, understanding of text structures, and background knowledge. This requires a balance of challenge and ease that is difficult to achieve in a single text or for large groups of students at a single time. To ensure all students have *some* exposure to text they can read accurately, teachers either provide two or more options of texts to read, use multilevel or multimodal text sets, or allow students to independently read self-selected texts to ensure a match between reader and text for some part of the lesson.

If every classroom observation involves students reading the same text, a leader might ask when students have the opportunity to read on their own level. If the answer is never or only for homework, then a key ingredient is missing from this lesson. Though students can read on their level independently, independent reading should sometimes happen in class so that teachers can observe and coach while it's in progress. Otherwise, they are only engaging with students around the *result* of independent reading (a log, response, or summary) instead of the *process* of independent reading.

A leader might also ask what supports are in place for students who cannot read the class text with accuracy, and whether these supports are likely to allow students the same opportunities to develop content and literacy knowledge as their peers. These should be honest open-ended questions, not quizzes with a short list of known answers. Teachers, especially content area teachers, often have thoughtful and creative ways to support students' understanding and use of texts at and above their independent levels. So, asking about supports is as much about ensuring teachers *have* a



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plan for differentiation as it is about helping administrators gather practices to share with those who don't.

Asking also tells you why differentiation is happening or not. If an administrator knows that a teacher's intention to differentiate is limited by resources, he can focus on identifying such resources. If, on the other hand, an administrator sees teachers avoiding differentiation altogether, he can focus on supporting the teacher's knowledge and skills in this area.

**Motivation to read** We often think about motivation like a physics problem: There is an object that needs to be moved, inertia presents a challenge for initiating that movement, so some kind of force is required to accomplish the move. There are two levers that educators can pull to exert force on that object and make it more likely that inertia will be overcome by movement: confidence and desire. Offering a choice makes use of both levers at once. When students are invited to choose between two or more options of what to read, they are likely to choose the text that interests them the most, and the text they are most confident they can read. It follows that students will read more when they have chosen an accessible text.

Motivation theorists challenge us to complicate this mechanical understanding of motivation by considering a few more factors that have been found to contribute to engaged reading (Klauda and Guthrie 2015). To imagine the forces at play, it is helpful to think about motivation as if it is fuel in a fuel tank. Some students may come in with a certain level of "fuel" from their own *intrinsic* motivation to engage with particular literacy tasks. They may also (or not) have a sense of the *value* of the reading/writing task based on how the teacher framed the purpose for reading. To this level of motivation they may (or may not) add a sense of *self-efficacy*—the confidence that they can do this literacy task successfully. Finally, they may (or may not) come with *social* support for reading—access to social reasons to read and social identities as readers that support their engagement. Each of these sources of motivation adds to the level of fuel driving students to initiate and sustain their effort and engagement.

As students encounter challenges, their levels of motivation may decrease as this fuel is used up. As they encounter instruction that supports each of these factors, they have the opportunity to add fuel and top up their supplies. In this way, literacy instruction can either be additive or subtractive: it might fuel engagement by considering *intrinsic interest*, *value of the task*, *self-efficacy of readers*, and *social support for reading*, or it might burn up any existing motivation by failing to account for these factors. Readers



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with a history of successful literacy experiences often come with fuller tanks to begin with, and thus are less impacted by instruction that does not offer additional fuel. But students who are not intrinsically interested, or confident, need the addition of supportive contexts for engagement to initiate and sustain efforts.

**Purpose for reading** To fuel motivation and ensure successful reading experiences, students need a purpose for reading every single time they read. The purpose can be short or long term, formal or informal, but it has to exist. Otherwise students will be forced to use motivation reserves to fuel their engagement, and they may pay attention to all the wrong things. For example, if you tell a classroom full of students to read a chapter of a novel at the end of class, but tell one third to read it as if they are movie producers trying to find the best scene for a trailer, one third to read it as if they are actors preparing for a role, and one third that they can go to recess as soon as they finish, they will each pay attention to different things. The producers will attend to the climax scenes and not even notice the characters' names, the actors will pay attention to physical features and details and emotions, and the third group will be watching the clock most of the time, missing most of the details. Likewise, if you assign a chapter of a science textbook with no particular purpose (e.g., to find something out, to see what happens, to check if something happens), students may remember different details or none at all.

Similarly, if you give the same current events article to teachers across all the departments in your middle or high school, the science teachers will pay attention to different details than the history teachers, who will pay attention to different details than the math teachers. If we don't set a purpose for reading, people read with their own individual lenses and keep track of what is most interesting to them. If students are lucky, it matches what their teachers were interested in and they do well on tests and tasks related to that reading. If they're unlucky, they read the text with comprehension, but may deprioritize some of the details that they could lose points for not knowing. Readers have a right to know why they are reading what they are reading in school contexts so that they can use text successfully in class.

Sometimes teachers assume students have a purpose for reading because it is implied by the lesson or unit. However, when a purpose is explicitly (re)stated before reading, students read and understand more with less support. For example, I asked a group of high school teachers



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representing different content areas to use this fill-in-the-blank sentence at least once over a two-week period and report back about what happened:

> Today we are going to read ________ by ____________ -ing in order to ___________.

The sentence frame ensures students have a purpose (*in order to*) and process (*by*) for reading before they begin. To my surprise and delight, when I asked the sixteen teachers to share what they found, not only had all sixteen tried it, but nearly all sixteen had used it three or more times because they were so happy with what they saw. Observations ranged from students getting started more efficiently and finishing the reading without prompting, to understanding texts better on their own and asking better questions when they were finished reading. In one class where students often asked, "What are we doing again?" five, ten, and twenty-five minutes into an activity, the teacher reported no such questions and a decrease in requests for the hall pass. Setting a purpose for reading fuels motivation and success.

**In observation** Lessons where students read accurately with a purpose can be identified based on these criteria:

1. You should be able to identify clear purposes for reading by:
   a. examining the board or recent posters and anchor charts to see if there is a visual reminder of a goal or reason for reading
   b. asking students, "Why are you reading what you're reading?" or "What made you choose this text?"
   c. asking students what they will do as a result of their reading when they have finished it: "What will you be able to do/say/have when you have read this text?"

A clearly stated purpose for reading develops *value* and *intrinsic* reasons for motivation and engagement. Some students may need some prompting if their primary reason for reading was to comply with directions. However, if students cannot come up with a reason for reading a particular text on a particular day, it is unlikely that they have a sense of the task's *value* to fuel their motivation and engagement.

2. You should find evidence that students had the opportunity to read accurately by:
   a. noticing that more than one text was available for students to read during some part of the lesson either because students were given several options, a set of texts, or a choice of what to read



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**b.** noticing that students have opportunities to engage with the same text in more- and less-supported environments (whole group, small group, independently)

**c.** noticing that students had the opportunity to read and reread a text that was read aloud if it was particularly challenging: repeated reading of a challenging text, when supported by a model, indicates an investment in developing accuracy despite text complexity.

These demonstrate the possibility of *most* students having an opportunity to read accurately. This develops knowledge and *self-efficacy* simultaneously. If everyone is always reading the same text in the same way, you can guarantee the majority of students are not engaging in optimal practice even if they are compliant.

## Writing with a purpose and audience

There have been a series of great debates that run through the history of writing instruction. Should there be explicit grammar instruction? Should paragraphs and essays be free-form or formulaic? Can writing be graded objectively? Can good writing be taught?

Writing (like reading) is, at its core, a purpose-driven activity. It uses visual representations for connection between people and ideas across time and space. All of its rules, structures, and conventions are derived from the human imperative to communicate. Too often, however, writing is taught as either mechanical or mystical: as a set of rules to be learned, or an art form that only a few people are born to practice well.

If we want students to become flexible, powerful writers, we cannot teach writing in a way that is divorced from purpose, audience, or creativity. Similarly, we cannot teach writing without making the tools, conventions, and norms of communication explicit to students as we go. Though writing instruction can take many forms, the hallmarks of powerful writing activities are a clear purpose and audience, which become the target and rationale for learning about conventions like grammar and punctuation, or genre-level features like sentence, paragraph, or essay structures and devices.

After synthesizing research on writing and the connection between the reading and writing, in some of the most-cited reports in literary history (see Graham and Hebert 2010), Graham and Harris (2016) published a list of eight evidence-based practices for writing instruction in *The Reading Teacher*. The first one is: Write.



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Write. Yes. But, how? Summarizing a set of surveys from students and classroom teachers conducted periodically over the last several decades, Applebee and Langer (2009) noted, "What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length" (18). More recent surveys of middle and high school teachers confirm that teachers and schools have yet to incorporate writing into the curriculum in systematic ways (Applebee and Langer 2011, 2009; Graham et al. 2014).

Still there is a long and rich history of research to support evidence-based writing instruction. The list in Figure 4.2 from Graham and Harris (2016) could be used as a starting point for discussions about writing instruction, but more importantly, it offers support for the idea that purpose and audience matter.

What unites each of the evidence-based practices is the sensitivity to the weight of the task of composition: it requires practice, purposes, comfort, direction, explanation, knowledge of process, and specialized tools. These features are interconnected so that if you invest in one, it supports the others like spokes on a wheel with purpose, audience, and format at the center.

As Graham and Hebert (2010) have shown, the most successful writing instruction balances explicit instruction on grammar and mechanics, with explicit instruction about the process of writing with genre-specific features. A well-formed sentence in the midst of a poorly organized piece with an incoherent voice and a mishmash of genre features will not be well understood by any audience. And a well-organized piece with sentence-level errors of spelling and punctuation is not only difficult to understand, but likely to be misunderstood.

By the same token, if writing instruction focuses only on the nitty-gritty details of convention and form, students will not know how to communicate with an audience for a purpose.

Much of the writing students do throughout the school day is not in the context of formal writing instruction (Applebee and Langer 2009). Especially in content area classes, students are most often writing down notes, answers to questions, and short demonstrations of knowledge. These informal writing tasks may not address Common Core State Standards language or literature objectives, because they are aimed at teaching/learning discipline-specific knowledge. In these cases, it is even more important for students to have a purpose, audience, and format in mind, so that the very form and function of their discipline-specific writing reflects the nature of that discipline.



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| 6 Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Evidence | Questions for Discussion |
| **1. Write** | • Students in classrooms that write more average a 12 percentage point gain in writing quality and a 14 percentage point lead on measures of reading comprehension compared to students who write for less time on average. | • When students write each day: Who are they writing to? For what reason are they writing? |
| **2. Write to comprehend and learn** | • Students who write about what they are reading jump 24 percentile points on measures of text comprehension.<br>• Students who write about content they learned in class jump 9 percentile points on content knowledge. | • At what stage(s) of a lesson do students write most often? Where else could short, informal writing be used? |
| **3. Create a pleasant and motivating writing environment** | • Exemplary writing teachers encourage self-regulation, positive messages about effort and high, realistic expectations.<br>• Feedback on what and how students are writing is associated with a 16 percentage point jump in writing quality. | • How would students know they are writing well? How do students know the impact of their writing?<br>• Is student writing visible in the room or school building? |
| **4. Facilitate students' writing as they compose** | • A clear, specific goal for writing is associated with a 28 percentile point jump in writing quality.<br>• Students who plan, edit, and revise with their peers demonstrate a 31 percentage point gain in writing quality. | • How do you set clear goals for each pocket of time spent writing?<br>• What resources can students use to support their writing during these sessions? |
| **5. Teach critical skills, processes, and knowledge** | • Gathering and organizing ideas before writing is associated with a 21 percentile point jump in writing quality.<br>• Teaching sentence construction and combination is associated with a 21 percentile point jump in writing quality because students can then compose grammatically correct sentences automatically.<br>• Teaching attributes of specific types of writing and conventions of specific genres is associated with a 21 percentile point jump in writing quality. | • When you co-construct text with students, what is easiest/hardest for them to contribute? What do you do as a writer that you have yet to see your students do? |
| **6. Use twenty-first-century writing tools** | • Writing on a computer or tablet allows students to create publishable drafts of their work.<br>• Writing online increases the audiences, purposes and formats to which students have access as writers. | • What formats and genres might be available if some assignments are completed online?<br>• What audiences might be reached if students published their work digitally? |

FIGURE **4.2** Graham and Harris' Six Evidence-Based Practices with Related Questions (2016)



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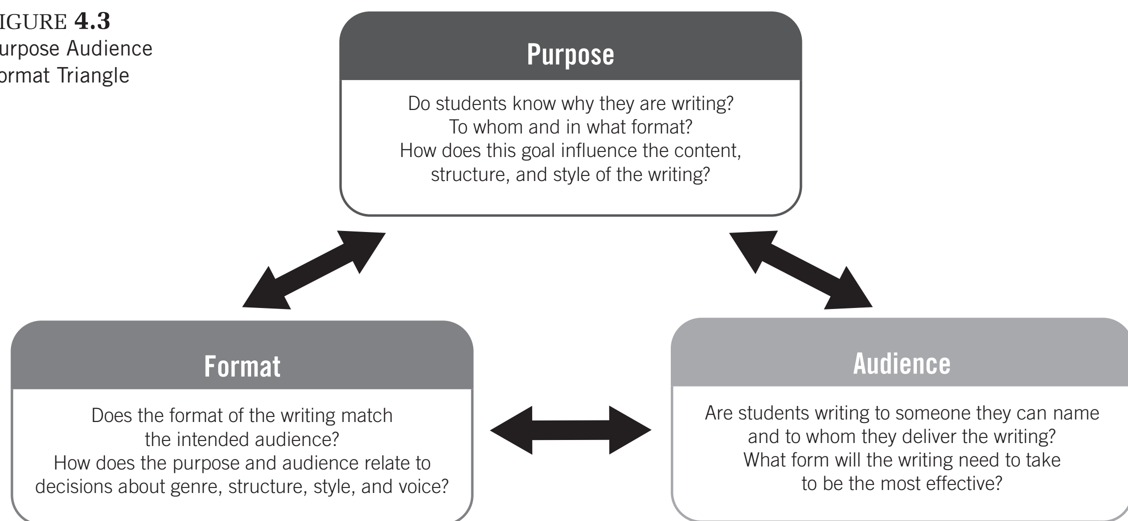
It is also important for them to see and discuss good examples of writing—both formal and informal—so that these examples can serve as mentors that can be copied and critiqued to provide support and understanding of how written texts work. Writing assignments, even brief exit slips, that include an intentional match between purpose, audience, and format can contribute to both content and literacy learning simultaneously (Gabriel, Wenz, and Dostal 2016)—especially when students have the opportunity to write after viewing and discussing model/mentor texts. (See Figure 4.3.)

**In observation** Writing with a purpose to an audience can be identified based on these criteria:

1. Both teachers and students reference a specific person or group (audience) when making decisions about what to write and how to represent ideas using words, sentences, and punctuation. Students should be able to fill in these blanks: I/we are writing to ______ because/in order to ______.
2. The format of the writing task matches the stated purpose and audience every time, whether students are writing to demonstrate what they know about content or writing in the context of a lesson focused on the writing process.
3. There is a balance between language and literature objectives within and across lessons to be sure students have both the *what* and the

FIGURE **4.3**
Purpose Audience Format Triangle



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*why* of composition. If you see teachers addressing only one or the other, you might ask about when this will be balanced out in upcoming lessons.

## Talking about text with teachers and peers

Classroom discourse is a feature of every commercially available observation rubric. Though each rubric specifies features of talk—like questioning, discussion, and participation patterns—in different ways, there is profound agreement that classroom talk is a marker of classroom quality. According to comparisons between observation tools in the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, measures of classroom discourse are among the most predictive of all other measures of teaching quality, including student achievement and teacher effect scores (MET Project 2012; Hill and Grossman 2016).

The reason talk is so important for learning, specifically literacy learning, is that it involves and provides occasion for the kind of cognitive processing required for learning in an efficient and observable way. Reading a text, watching a movie, or listening to a teacher are all forms of gathering—as if ideas, tools, and processes are being activated and loaded into a blender.

The result of this largely passive gathering is not immediate learning or proficiency: learning requires some sort of active processing of this new information, practice with new tools, or application of a new skill.

Saying something in your own words and discussing or asking/answering questions about it all require that students select and organize language to communicate about this new raw material they have gathered. Talking is pressing "blend." Students are, in effect, using language to learn language.

A few other activities can also press blend in different ways—writing, drawing, or acting things out—essentially taking raw information and expressing it in a different way than it was received. The important thing about talk in particular is that it is a social medium; it directly involves or encourages social interactions (unlike journaling or drawing), thus students have social support for learning as well as the benefit of the dynamic, diverse approximations of their peers to shape and refine their emerging understandings.

Classrooms where students are talking about text are classrooms where students are learning about text. In observation, evaluators can differentiate talk about text from "just talk" by listening for mention of the text, the act of reading, or the content of the text. What sounds like social talk about characters, chapters, authors, and so on may very well be an example of literate



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practice: the social discussion of the printed word. Sentence stems and formal discussion or debate do not mark the presence of literate talk as much as the mention of texts and their authors.

The goal for literacy classroom discourse is to apprentice students into the practice of textual chitchat. This is why Harvey Daniels describes literature circles as similar to adult book clubs without the wine: the purpose of learning to be literate is to have social discussions about texts, authors, contexts, content, and the process of being a reader with others—to connect with others around the printed word. Of course many adults do not join these kinds of book clubs, but still read for work, pleasure, and a combination of the two. Even without the social scene of book clubs, reading is very often a social activity: we read and write to be able to talk to one another about what we've read or do something together as a result of what we've read. Very often, our colleagues, peers, friends, and family are each other's reasons for reading.

**In observation** Talking about text with teachers and peers can be identified based on these criteria:

1. Students have the opportunity to engage in back-and-forth discussions with the teacher (in a conference) or with peers (in small- or whole-group settings) that focus on something they wrote or read.
2. When students are talking in class, they are talking about texts they are preparing to read/write or in the process of reading/writing.
3. Teachers and students can name examples of discussions they have had, either individually or in groups, about the texts they are reading or writing this week. Evaluators that see reading/writing in progress might ask, "Have you gotten to talk to someone about this piece yet? Do you think you will?"

## Discussing models of fluent reading and expert writing

Language is naturally and implicitly acquired, but literacy isn't. We need to welcome students into the reading and writing club not only by exposing them to text and purposes for reading and writing but by showing them exactly *how* we read and write. More specifically, students need to be able to identify the processes readers use to make meaning and send messages using text to internalize these processes for use on their own.

Notice that it is not just "models of expert reading and writing" that count as an active ingredient. Mere exposure may be supportive of some



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students, but a discussion of what is being modeled, how the work of reading and writing is being accomplished, is supportive of many more. Studies of teacher think-alouds with discussion of how and why the teacher is doing what he's doing consistently demonstrate better transfer of practices from teacher to student.

Naming, showing, and discussing skills and strategies in action is what translators say Lev Vygotsky (1978) described as the necessary "defossilization" of complex practices: the cognitive disassembly of what experts experience as automatic or fluid motion. Instead of showing a snapshot of reading in progress, teachers show it step by step, as if in slow motion, with language and discussion attached to each step. This approach to making thinking visible, or externalizing thinking, shows the hidden magic behind skilled practice and exposes the process to students who can then attempt each step while being coached or assisted with the process as a whole. It also requires that teachers know what they are doing when they read/write so that they can explain to students how and why they have strategically, if unconsciously, modified their process to accomplish certain things.

The need to not only narrate but discuss literate process as it occurs is familiar within learning-by-doing approaches and apprenticeship models. The focus of instructional language is on the *process*, of doing skilled tasks, not on the product. For example, you would not hear hockey coaches teaching players to take slap shots by telling them "watch and then try," over and over again. You see them slow the swing down into slow motion, narrating what they're doing as they go in a series of steps that each has a purpose: line up the puck with your inside foot, reach back while your lower hand slides down, twist from your hip, connect with the ice an inch before the puck, lift and snap your wrist while your weight comes forward. That's a mouthful to say all at once, so it takes a few models, with a few different narrations and observations from different angles. Once students know the process and have language to discuss its parts, a coach can truly coach: "Almost there, but next time slide your left hand lower." "Didn't work because you forgot to line up the puck." "Yes, but snap your wrist harder." They can identify the part of the instantaneous, automatic process that needs fixing or finesse in a way that promotes the conscious acquisition of complex skills.

Of course, some players, like some readers, get lucky or pick things up faster than others, or seem to naturally do efficient, effective things without being told. But, at some point we all need language attached to defossilized practice in order to reanimate it and appropriate it as our own.



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**In observation** Discussing models of fluent reading and expert writing can be identified based on these criteria:

1. Teachers name and narrate what they are doing and why as they engage in reading or writing in front of students (model). They may leave a visual reminder of the processes they demonstrate, as steps, directions, reminders, or anchor charts to which students may refer. However, these charts cannot exist in isolation: their contents also require live demonstration and opportunities for student practice.
2. Descriptions of all steps of the writing process and exemplars of informal writing are outlined on anchor charts or other visual reminders. These are then demonstrated by teachers and practiced by students.
3. Students can describe or reference lists of criteria for success as readers and writers (e.g., what expert readers do, what expert writers do, what "we" are working toward).

## Interventions that support individuals and focus on meaning

Interventions, by definition, are meant to *alter the course of events*. That is, reading interventions must either correct the course of development by addressing misconceptions or inefficient habits or alter the trajectory of development by dramatically increasing the rate of change. We can increase the rate of change by making interventions more *intensive* and more *expert* than regular instruction in either subtle or profound ways. But, when interventions are neither more expert nor more intensive, they are more than just a waste of time: they may cause cycles of reading failure by reinforcing confusion, frustration, or inefficient/ineffective reading habits.

**Intensive** There are two major strategies for making intervention instruction more intensive than regular classroom instruction. The lightest is simply allocating more time for more practice or exposure. This strategy assumes students are on the right track, have developed the appropriate skills and strategies, but simply need more opportunities to apply what they know to solidify and extend it. This gift of time, however, is only helpful if the student does not require additional support or targeted instruction and feedback.

One way to increase the intensity of extra time is to limit the student-teacher ratio, so that students have greater access to individualized explanations, coaching, and feedback. A smaller group size also allows teachers



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to individualize the focus of the intervention so that students receive instruction in the areas they need support, rather than in all areas at once. A family of studies conducted over the last fifteen years have consistently confirmed that there are several predictable profiles of struggling readers, each of which requires a different instructional focus (Spear-Swerling 2014; Dennis 2012; Leseaux and Kieffer 2010; Valencia 2010). In other words, struggling readers are not a homogeneous group that will all benefit from the same intervention (Figure 4.4). If interventions are the same for all readers who struggle, some will inevitably waste time working on areas of relative strength and not receive intensive instruction in the areas of relative weakness.

FIGURE **4.4**
Studies That Identify Profiles of Struggling Readers

| Profiles of Struggling Readers | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Word ID** | **Meaning** | **Fluency** |
| Valencia and Riddle-Buly (2002); Valencia (2010): 108 fifth graders | | | |
| Automatic word callers | ++ | – | ++ |
| Struggling word callers | – | – | ++ |
| Word stumblers | – | + | – |
| Slow comprehenders | + | ++ | – |
| Slow word callers | + | – | – |
| Disabled readers | –– | –– | –– |
| Dennis (2012): 94 sixth to eighth graders | | | |
| Slow and steady comprehenders | + | + | – |
| Slow word callers | + | – | –– |
| Automatic word callers | + | – | + |
| Struggling word callers | – | –– | + |
| Rupp and Lesaux (2006): 1,111 fourth graders | | | |
| Below expectations with significantly lower word-level skills | –– | –/+ | –– |
| Below expectations with significantly higher word-level skills | + | – | + |
| Leach, Scarborough, and Rescorla (2003): 141 fourth graders | | | |
| Word-level processing deficits accompanied by adequate comprehension | – | + | – |
| Weak comprehension skills accompanied by good lower level skills | + | – | + |
| Both kinds of difficulty | – | – | – |



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The possibility of greater differentiation and more personalized instruction makes group size a consistent predictor of the power of an intervention. One-to-one instruction is consistently found to be the most powerful, and small groups of 2–5 students are more effective than larger-group or whole-class settings (Hong and Hong 2009; Taylor et al. 1999).

**Expert** We can make interventions more expert by ensuring students interact with teachers who can do more than just reiterate or simplify classroom instruction. To dramatically change a student's trajectory of development, someone, most often a human, must be able to provide explanations, guidance, or feedback that is *more* specific, clear, or individualized than whatever students receive in their regular classroom. We know "expertise" has been increased if we see the interventionist provide missing background or prerequisite skill practice and provide thoughtful feedback to students as they engage with literate practices in small groups or individually.

Few people would argue that the knowledge base for teaching reading is common knowledge. Yet, there are examples of intervention programs carried out by minimally trained volunteers, paraprofessionals, peers, or close-age mentors that support development simply because the explanations, practice, and feedback are more individualized and therefore more intense (Fitzgerald 2001). However, in general, advanced degrees and certification in reading are good indicators that an educator can provide more and better explanations, coaching, and feedback to students who need it.

A recent meta-analyses of studies examining the efficacy of a range of reading and writing interventions have consistently highlighted four features that separate effective programs from ineffective programs (see Gabriel and Dostal 2015).

1. Effective programs make use of *texts on students' independent level* and/or provide extensive teacher or peer (not computer) support for meaning making with texts at instructional or frustration levels.
    a. Programs that *allow teachers or students to select texts* are consistently more effective than those that prescribe a single program-selected passage for each lesson. The freedom to select texts, even when selecting from a limited set of options, not only supports engagement but allows teachers to personalize text selections for particular students.
2. Effective programs *focus on identifying words and reading fluently* to make meaning. Those that use isolated word lists, nonsense



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passages, or disconnected lists of sentences for practice are consistently less effective than those that use meaningful, leveled passages.

3. Effective interventions *involve extensive individual feedback from teachers or peers* that helps students shape and solidify their skills and strategies. Though computer programs can immediately tell students when they are right or wrong, they cannot coach them into correct answers or identify the misconception that underlies their mistakes. Therefore, computerized feedback is therefore generally experienced as frustrating and rarely leads to growth. Conversely, teacher or peer feedback that helps students reshape their processes is associated with significant gains in achievement over time.
4. Interventions that target comprehension include some kind of *discussion*, either oral or in writing, between teachers and students or among students (as with peer-assisted learning). To internalize skills and strategies, even those associated with beginning reading like phonics or phonemic awareness, students need to talk about them. Such talk not only builds metacognition, but may also build background, interest, and knowledge of alternatives that dramatically change students' trajectory of growth.

In addition to the four features listed above, there is no evidence within peer-reviewed research that a computer-delivered intervention can match or exceed the efficacy of a teacher- or tutor-delivered intervention. This is likely because the nature of explanation and quality of feedback within human interactions is key to the success of the intervention. If students merely need more practice and exposure, computer programs may provide an engaging context for this, but should not be considered either more expert or more intensive than regular classroom instruction.

You may also notice that there are parallels between the four features listed above and the active ingredients addressed earlier in the chapter. The difference is merely intensity: where the regular classroom involves discussion between twenty students, an intervention group of two to five students requires four to ten times more interaction, which means up to 400 percent more opportunities for feedback and five times greater likelihood that students will be interacting with a text they can and want to read. Likewise, students struggling with beginning reading skills are more likely to receive explicit modeling and feedback, personalized scaffolds for memory, and practice on exactly the sounds and patterns they need if they are practicing in a small group with an expert instructor.



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**In observation** Interventions that support individuals and focus on meaning could not possibly be the same for every student. Rather, intervention settings should meet the following criteria:

1. Students are grouped according to specific individual needs.
2. Students receive frequent, explicit coaching and feedback from someone who can identify difficulty and address it specifically.
3. Students regularly apply their skills to texts that carry meaning, which are selected by the teacher or student to ensure a good match for optimal practice.
4. Students are invited to discuss what they are doing, why, and how so that they not only perform but internalize the skills and strategies they will need for independent success.

Just as readers learn to identify, analyze, and often emulate elements of author's craft, administrators observing teaching in action often need a nudge to discern where the action is in a literacy lesson (Croninger and Valli 2009). Many of our most powerful teaching moves—like providing a range of interesting and appropriately leveled texts—are indirect, invisible, or asynchronous within a single lesson (Allington 2014). Similarly, many of our most powerful literacy lessons occur in individual one-to-one conversations with or between students, while others are reading quietly in the background. In short, as Nystrand (2006) and others have argued, that which is immediately observable in a literacy lesson may not be what is most important for student growth. Rather, the hallmarks of effective literacy instruction are often in the coordination of activities, the facilitation of opportunities, and the presence of "active ingredients" that prove their value only over time.

## A Measure and Sort Approach to Ensuring Effective Literacy Instruction

Because reading, writing, and talking are important, the sort and measure approach to ensuring effective instruction is to mandate a certain number of minutes be spent reading, writing, and talking. This often involves:

- visiting classrooms to ensure appropriate amounts of time are spent on each task
- rewarding teachers who meet or exceed minimum expectations
- creating plans for improving teachers who fail to read, write, and talk enough in class.



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A measure and sort approach to effective literacy instruction might also identify "best practices" and create systems that ensure teachers consistently employ those practices in ways that can be monitored and analyzed by supervisors. Compliance with the implementation of these practices would be monitored by school leaders and literacy coaches as evidence of effective teaching. Doing prescribed instruction would be synonymous with doing good teaching. Clearly articulated expectations for teacher behavior, like "teachers call on at least 50 percent of the class to participate in discussions" are easier to enforce than broad statements like "students should be engaged."

Unfortunately, this often overemphasizes the outward appearance of "best practices" while strangling possibilities for personalized, responsive teaching. It is, however, a starting point—and sometimes a necessary starting point, when teachers are transitioning into a new model or out of ineffective practices for the first time.

## A Support and Develop Approach to Ensuring Effective Literacy Instruction

Where a sort and measure approach might count turns per student to measure the quality of student discussions, a support and develop approach would keep track of the nature of student contributions (e.g., asking questions, stating opinions, giving examples), not because some of these contributions are better than others but to see what sorts of contributions students are able to make as readers/writers, and whether this repertoire could be extended. In other words, the goal is not to evaluate, but to find possibilities for extending what is going well. When we take a support and develop approach to effective literacy instruction, we're essentially saying, "When it comes to reading improvement, we believe in noticing and extending what individuals do to help them do it more, better, or more efficiently."

Everything from the focus of professional development resources to the focus of instruction itself is aimed at ensuring students (and their teachers) have wide repertoires of skills and strategies to help them accomplish their goals as readers and writers. Instead of measuring the number of behaviors associated with growth (e.g., counting minutes spent reading), evaluators may analyze how individual student needs are/are not being met by the organization of instruction.

This means that each teacher may get different feedback or guidance than their colleagues, or even different feedback for different class periods,



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based on the needs of the students in their room at the time. There would be few schoolwide mandates about class time, materials, or configurations. Rather, each teacher would be coached to make decisions based on the students they engage with in each class period. The investment here is in teacher thinking rather than teacher behavior. One teacher might be trying more group work with F period and more independent practice with G period. Similarly, though the fourth-grade team members might be focused on persuasive writing, their goal is not to teach it the same way, but to let common principles and shared ideas guide the decisions they make in response to their students.

In a support and develop approach, we assume that what counts as "best" practice varies from classroom to classroom and year to year. This variation by design makes it difficult to sort or measure quality. However, the active ingredients can serve as a litmus test that ensures this flexible approach doesn't just let anything go. If teachers can explain how they are working to optimize opportunities for reading, writing, and talking in their classrooms, evaluators can coach them into strategies that might accomplish these goals given particular students and contexts.

## Key Points

- Effective literacy instruction is built using five main active ingredients that you should expect to observe in action for every student, every day:
  - » reading accurately with a purpose
  - » writing with a purpose and audience
  - » talking about text with teachers and peers
  - » discussing models of fluent reading and expert writing
  - » interventions that support individuals and focus on meaning.
- That which is immediately observable in a literacy lesson may not be what is most important for student growth. Rather, the hallmarks of effective literacy instruction are often in the coordination of activities, the facilitation of opportunities, and the presence of "active ingredients" for literacy learning that prove their value only over time.



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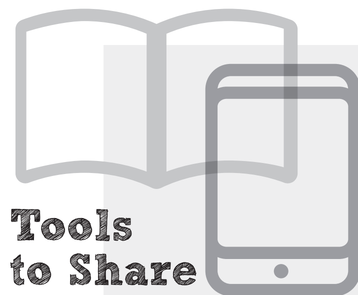


**The following tools for Chapter 4 can be found in the appendixes:**

- Pocket Version of the "Look-Fors" for Key Ingredients of Effective Literacy Instruction
- Accountability First and Just Read Case Study
- Create Your Own Case Study



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