chapter 4

Finding the "Sweet Spot" of Instruction

The road to readicide is paved with the chop-chop reading philosophy widely found in our schools. Overteaching books not only prevents students from achieving reading flow, it creates instruction that values trivial thinking over deeper thinking and damages our students' prospects for becoming lifelong readers. Paradoxically, this chapter is going to address another key contributor to readicide—the underteaching of books. This may seem strange coming on the heels of a chapter that argues that there is too much teaching going on, but simply handing students difficult books and asking them to fend for themselves is not the answer either. There is a huge difference between assigning reading and teaching reading, and students need teachers who recognize the balance between chopping books to death and handing books to students without the proper level of support. I contend that students who are handed *The Grapes of Wrath* to read without any help from the teacher often reach the same level of readicide as those students stuck in a classroom plodding through a 122-page curriculum guide. Underteaching can be as damaging as overteaching, and this chapter will explore what we, as teachers, can do to give our students the proper level of instructional support without abandoning them or without drowning them in a sea of sticky notes, double-entry journals, and worksheets.

Teaching Matters

In examining the area of instruction found between overteaching and underteaching, we need to examine the overall importance the teacher plays in the classroom. In "Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap," Kati Haycock (1998), director of The Education Trust, notes that the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year. Haycock cites a number of studies:

- A study conducted in Tennessee showed that "on average, the least-effective teachers produced gains of about 14 percentile points during the school year. By contrast, the most-effective teachers posted gains among low-achieving students that averaged 55 percentile points" (1998, 4). The Tennessee data also showed "dramatic differences for middle- and high-achieving students, too. For example, high-achieving students gain an average of only 2 points under the direction of least-effective teachers but an average of 25 points under the guidance of most-effective teachers. Middle achievers gain a mere 10 points with least-effective teachers but realize point gains in the mid-30s with the most-effective teachers" (1998, 5). Haycock highlights the long-term effects of teaching when she notes that "even two years after the fact, the performance of fifth-grade students is still affected by the quality of their third-grade teachers" (1998, 6).
- A study of teacher effectiveness in Dallas of an average group of fourth graders found that those students "assigned to highly effective teachers three years in a row rose from the 59th percentile in fourth grade to the 76th percentile by the conclusion of sixth grade. A fairly similar (but slightly higher achieving) group of students were assigned three consecutive ineffective teachers and fell from the 60th percentile in the fourth grade to the 42nd percentile by the end of the sixth grade" (1998, 7). Haycock reminds us that "a gap of this magnitude—34 percentile points—for students who started off roughly the same is hugely significant" (1998, 7).
- A study in Boston demonstrated that although "the gains of students with the top-third teachers were slightly below the national median for growth (5.6 compared to 8.0 nationally), the students with teachers from the bottom third showed virtually no growth" (1998, 9-10). When the numbers are examined further, they show "that one third of Boston public school teachers are producing six times the learning seen in the bottom third" (1998, 10).

These studies strongly demonstrate the importance teaching plays in student achievement. Having a good teacher versus having a poor teacher, particularly in the early years, can determine whether a young student is put in an honors track or a remedial track. As Haycock notes, a student's teacher may determine the difference "between entry to a selective college and a lifetime at a burger joint" (1998, 10).

Haycock's findings are echoed in a study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (Pianta et al. 2007). Researchers spent thousands of hours in more than 2,500 first-, third-, and fifth-grade classrooms tracking students through elementary school. Among their findings:

- The typical child "stands only a one-in-fourteen chance of having a consistently rich, supportive elementary school experience" (1).
- Teachers are spending way too much time on drill-and-kill activities. As a result, students are not getting enough time developing deeper problem-solving and reasoning skills.
- Students are spending way too much time listening to their teachers and not enough time developing critical thinking skills through collaborative work.
- An overemphasis on basic reading and writing skills comes at a significant cost; students are getting less instruction in science and social science. Their prior knowledge and background experiences, those experiences foundational to becoming strong readers, are being narrowed.
- The typical teacher scored only 3.6 out of 7 points for "richness of instructional methods" and 3.4 for providing "evaluative feedback" to students on their work (1).
- Students in private schools did not fare any better than students in public schools.

The lead researcher, Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia, notes that his findings support previous research that has found that highly skilled, engaging teachers can help close the achievement gap. Unfortunately, only one out of every fourteen kids are in a consistent classroom environment that helps them do so. The study found little difference between experienced teachers and inexperienced teachers or between those teachers deemed "highly qualified" and those deemed average. What does this mean? Unfortunately, it suggests there are a lot of experienced and "highly qualified" teachers out there drilling and killing. They are playing a significant role in maintaining the achievement gap, and, when the achievement gap is maintained, readicide occurs.

Finding the Sweet Spot

To understand where the most effective teaching occurs, it might help to introduce a term used in baseball and other sports—the "sweet spot." In baseball, the sweet spot is the spot on the bat that, when hit, carries the ball the farthest. Unfortunately, batters don't always hit the sweet spot. Sometimes they are jammed and hit the ball off the handle; other times they swing too soon and hit the ball off the end of the bat (which can really hurt the hands). When the sweet spot is missed, the result is almost always the same: the batter is out. However, when the ball hits the sweet spot, the batter knows it immediately. The ball really flies. Hitters describe the feeling of hitting the sweet spot as "true" or "pure."

When motivating adolescents to read, I am constantly searching for the sweet spot of instruction. Teaching matters, but what kind of teaching matters most? Where is the reading sweet spot? It certainly is not found buried in a 122-page curriculum guide. However, it is also not found when we hand students books that are too difficult for them and ask them to navigate on their own. The sweet spot lies somewhere between these two extreme instructional approaches.

In exploring where that sweet spot might be, it is wise to start with what we know works, and when I start with what I know works, I always return to the work of Nancie Atwell. I can't think of a single professional book that has shaped my thinking about the teaching of reading more than *In the Middle* (Atwell 1998), which remains the eminent call for teachers to "come out from behind their desks to write with, listen to, and learn" from young readers and writers (Atwell 1998, 12). She reminds us that we, the teachers, are the best readers and writers in our classroom, and as such, each of us should be a "mentor," a "mediator," and a "model" (21). Atwell's model for setting up a reader's workshop—surrounding students with tons of high-interest reading materials, providing students with ample reading choice, carving out significant time in the school day to read, conducting reading mini-lessons to help students find the reading zone—is still a model I emulate and one that I recommend to new and experienced teachers alike. Certainly, developing our students' recreational reading habits play a crucial part in helping them to discover the reading flow. We all have been so lost in a book that we lose track of time and place, and we want our students to discover this experience. In this quest, Atwell's work has been indispensable in building the recreational reading habits of my students.

However, when it comes to helping students become excellent readers of difficult texts, finding the sweet spot of teaching becomes more problematic. It is much easier for a student to find reading flow while reading *Harry Potter* than it is for them to find reading flow while reading *Hamlet*. This is where the impor-

tance of teaching comes into play. If we overteach *Hamlet*, we not only run the risk of killing the play, we also run the risk of creating a dislike of reading that may spill over into recreational and academic reading. However, if we underteach *Hamlet*, students will drown (or turn to CliffsNotes for rescue). Both of these approaches produce dead readers.

Works such as *Hamlet*, *1984*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* are why you and I are in the classroom. Most students cannot navigate these works expertly on their own. Our expertise is needed, and how this expertise is applied will determine whether our students have meaningful reading experiences. So how can we approach difficult works such as *Hamlet* in our classrooms in a way that will not kill off our reluctant readers? Certainly, as Chapter 3 illustrates, chopping up the work into a million pieces is not the answer. Unfortunately, having students fly solo is not the answer either.

"Lousy Classic" Is an Oxymoron

In *The Reading Zone*, Atwell (2007) reminds us that high school students "are trying to make sense of adulthood—it is really just around the corner now—but their schools too often engage them in a version of reading that is so limiting and so demanding, so bereft of intentionality or personal meaning, that what they learn is to forgo pleasure reading and its satisfactions and, for four years, 'do English'" (107). In moving away from doing English, Atwell suggests that students "learn how to select: Which books do they need to let settle inside themselves? Which are page-turners, about which there isn't a whole lot to say? And which do they want to think about more deeply and consider as works of art by writing about them?" (2007, 115).

As much as I respect Atwell, this is where she and I part. For one thing, in my school district, and in most of the districts that I have visited across the country, particular titles are mandated in the curriculum. Nearly every ninth-grade student in the United States reads *Romeo and Juliet*. Other classics, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Julius Caesar*, are taught nationwide because they are required. Most teachers don't have the wiggle room in their school year to deviate from the required readings. These are the books they have on their shelves, and their school boards and district offices have dictated they be taught.

I also differ from Atwell because I believe a required reading canon is a good thing and that there is a real value that can only be found when the entire class is reading the same title. When every student in the country reads *Romeo and Juliet*, it means we all acquire a "shared cultural literacy," a sharing that is foundational if

we, as a culture, are going to be able to communicate with one another (for more on this, see Hirsch's *The Knowledge Deficit* [2006]). Beyond gaining cultural literacy, students who read assigned classics will receive adequate practice when it comes to reading demanding texts. Thus, rigor is not avoided; it is guaranteed. Furthermore, wrestling with *Romeo and Juliet* in a whole-class setting produces richer conversation and deeper thinking than occurs when the work is read individually or in small groups.

As much as I understand how doing English has ruined books for students such as Mem Fox's daughter, Chloe, all students should be required to do English, meaning all students should be required to wrestle with "limiting" and "demanding" works. All students should be engaged in books they might normally avoid. This doesn't mean it has to be an awful, reader-killing experience. If taught in the sweet spot, *Hamlet* should be a work that motivates students to take additional English classes, not convince them to avoid English courses at all costs. *Hamlet* isn't the problem; the problem lies in how the work is taught (or how the work is not taught). Doing English is not the issue; how students do English is the issue. The question isn't whether classics should be taught; the question is how do we get students reading classics to reach the sweet spot?

Identifying the Sweet Spot

When I bring a difficult book into the classroom for students to read, I always struggle with my level of involvement. How much help is too much help? How much help is too little help? What is the right balance? Let's address this delicate balance by first examining the experiences of my daughter, Devin, who was asked to read two difficult books in her high school English class. First, she was given *The Grapes of Wrath* to read on her own. She was not given any purpose or focus. The book was not "framed" at all. Like a good student, she struggled through most of the text, finally giving up from "sheer boredom." She admits now that she turned to SparkNotes to get her to the finish line. When the due date came, she was given a test and an essay question. Now, two years later, she tells me the book "is horrible," and she does "not remember a single thing in it." And she's a good reader.

Later that year her class read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. They were asked to stop repeatedly to work with the text. They had to choose scenes they thought exhibited different levels of satire and go home and film these scenes from the book. They spent hours filming, editing, and presenting these scenes. Not surprisingly, after all this chop-chop, Devin finds *Huckleberry Finn* "stupid and pointless."

Devin graduated from high school in 2008 still believing that *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are awful books. She is wrong, of course; they both hold great value to the modern reader, but this is how readicide occurs when books are undertaught (*The Grapes of Wrath*) or overtaught (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). If a student reads a major literary work, and exits the work finding it "bereft of intentionality or personal meaning" (Atwell 2007, 107), this is an indictment of the teaching of that work, not of the work itself. Classics found in the canon are there for a reason; there is a wisdom, a universality of truth found in them that helps the modern reader to garner a deeper comprehension of today's world. I am a wiser adult because I have read *The Grapes of Wrath*, even though it was written in 1939. Because our students are at an age in which they are trying to make sense of adulthood, they need exposure to as many other wise works as possible. These books provide our students' imaginative rehearsals for the real world, and in today's complex world, our students need as many of these rehearsals as possible.

So it is here I propose a radical stance: there is no such thing as a lousy classic. "Lousy classic" is an oxymoron. By its definition, a classic has something valuable in it or it would not have survived as a classic. Those classics you and I hated in high school actually contain greatness. Every one of them. If we were unable to discover this greatness, if we didn't recognize the value found in these books, it's because our teachers did not help us recognize this value. Because a teacher kills a great book by mishandling it doesn't mean the book is stupid and pointless. It means the reader was not put in a position to discover the book's greatness.

In trying to help my students find that greatness, my teaching of classic literature focuses on the value they will take from the works. I am not suggesting that every classic should be liked; in fact, I never focus on whether my students will like the books. Sure, I'd like my students to enjoy the books as much as I do, but it is important that they take away something valuable after wrestling with them. As I said in Chapter 2, I know some of my students will like *1984*, and I know some of my students will not like *1984*, but my goal is that all of them will attain something valuable from their reading. After reading *1984*, for example, I want them to begin to see privacy issues differently. I want them to recognize how language is manipulated. I want them to learn to question authority. These are valuable considerations to take into adulthood. My students might not like *1984*—not all students are enamored of dark, dystopian science fiction—but they will leave this book as wiser, more culturally literate human beings. That concerns me much more than worrying about whether the book is liked.

I am a wiser, more culturally literate human being because I was required to read difficult "texts" in my life. I enjoy museum visits today, for example,

because I was required to visit museums with my parents when I was a child. Though I certainly did not start out liking museums—I'd have rather done almost anything than spend a day inside a museum when I was an adolescent. I enjoy the music of Joan Armatrading, even though the first time I listened to her I was put off by her unconventionality. I stuck with it because of a friend's prodding and have since grown to love her music. I enjoy poetry today because I was required to take a course in it in college and was fortunate enough to find a professor who led me to discover its value. Many of the pleasures I enjoy today are a result of the required guidance of others who helped me discover the beauty and value of these pursuits I would not have found had I been left on my own.

Let's never forget there is beauty and value found in reading difficult literature. Our job is to lead our reluctant students to discover this beauty and value.

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One of things I like about Atwell's approach is that she eschews the chop-chop philosophy by trusting her students to tackle large chunks of text. As she states, "it just makes sense for English teachers to pass out the books, give students a set amount of time to read them on their own, give a just-the-facts quiz on the day of the deadline if they don't feel the kids can be trusted to read a book without it, then engage in discussions about the whole work of art that the author intended and created, just as many of these students will in their college English classes" (Atwell 2007, 115).

Atwell, of course, is illuminating the dangers that occur when we do not trust our students to read long passages of text. When a good book gets chopped up too much, it ceases to be a good book. However, I cannot hand my students challenging literary works and tell them I will meet them at the finish line. They simply do not have the skills to take that journey on their own. I am a teacher, not an assigner, and my students need me most while they are reading. My job is twofold: (1) to introduce my students to books that are a shade too hard for them and (2) to use my expertise to help them navigate these texts in a way that brings value to their reading experience. Let's explore what achieving these two goals might look like in a classroom.

What You Can Do to Prevent Readicide

The following are specific suggestions on how to find the sweet spot when teaching difficult literature to adolescents.

Recognize the Importance of Framing

Let's revisit the importance that framing a text plays in reading comprehension. Read the following passage and score your level of comprehension on a scale of 1 to 10:

> The pitcher's stuff was filthy. He was bringing cheese. He mixed in some chin music. Along with the heat, Uncle Charlie would occasionally show his face, producing a number of bowel-lockers. Only two batters got a knock. No one came close to dialing 8.

How well did you score? The answer to that question hinges more on your knowledge of baseball than it does on your reading ability. People who know baseball will comprehend the passage completely. People who are unfamiliar with baseball will say it looks like gibberish. You might be an excellent reader, but if your baseball knowledge is limited, you will need considerable assistance to reach even the simplest level of comprehension. (For the uninitiated in baseball, Figure 4.1 provides a translation.)

What does this mean for teachers when we teach difficult books? That what we do before students begin reading is paramount. For many of my reluctant

Original Text	*Translation*
The pitcher's stuff was filthy.	The pitcher had excellent control, and his pitches were very difficult to hit.
He was bringing cheese.	He was throwing the ball exceptionally hard.
He mixed in some chin music.	To keep batters from crowding the plate, the pitcher mixed in some high and tight pitches.
Along with the heat, Uncle Charlie would occasionally show his face, producing a number of bowel-lockers.	Along with his fastball, the pitcher occasionally threw curveballs. Some of them were so effective they froze the batters in their tracks.
Only two batters got a knock.	Only two batters got a hit.
No one came close to dialing 8.	No one came close to hitting a home run (8 is the first number used in most hotel rooms to dial long distance).

FIGURE 4.1
BASEBALL CHART

readers, the difficult texts that I am requiring them to read look like gibberish as well. For example, let's take one of the difficult texts that I require my students to read, Robert Louis Stevenson's classic mystery, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Looking at the first paragraph of the novel reinforces the notion that this is not a book I can simply hand my reluctant students to read:

> *Mr. Utterson, the lawyer, was a man of a rugged countenance that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary and yet somehow lovable. At friendly meetings, and when the wine was to his taste, something eminently human beaconed from his eye; something indeed which never found its way into his talk, but which spoke not only in these silent symbols of the after-dinner face, but more often and loudly in the acts of his life. He was austere with himself; drank gin when he was alone, to mortify a taste for vintages; and though he enjoyed the theater, had not crossed the doors of one for twenty years. But he had an approved tolerance for others; sometimes wondering, almost with envy, at the high pressure of spirits involved in their misdeeds; and in any extremity inclined to help rather than to reprove. "I incline to Cain's heresy," he used to say quaintly: "I let my brother go to the devil in his own way." In this character, it was frequently his fortune to be the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence in the lives of downgoing men. And to such as these, so long as they came about his chambers, he never marked a shade of change in his demeanour.* (Stevenson 1886, 1)

From experience, I know that I cannot simply assign Chapter 1 of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to my students and ask them to get started. I have to prepare them for the reading by "framing" the text. This framing might include:

- A preview of the final exam essay question so as to provide a very specific reading purpose for the novel.
- Some vocabulary preview to help them with the archaic language.
- A discussion of the historical context of the story. An explanation of how the time in which it was written (the Victorian Age) contributes to the meaning of the work.
- Background on the author and what he was trying to accomplish with this work.
- An anticipation guide to help students begin recognizing the universal truths found in the novel.
- A discussion on why we are reading this book and the value it offers to the modern reader.

These steps are taken *before* the reading of the novel commences. Remember, this kind of framing is not necessary when students are reading recreationally. My students do not need a teacher's expertise to begin reading a Harry Potter or Gossip Girl book. But reading *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and other books of equal difficulty, is a different matter. By the nature of their difficulty, they require a teacher's presence, and if readicide is to be avoided, this presence should be asserted before students encounter page one.

Remember the Value Found in Second-Draft (and Third-Draft) Reading

I have taught *Romeo and Juliet* for more than twenty years now and I have never had a student stop me in the middle of act 1, scene 1, and ask excitedly, "Mr. Gallagher, do you notice what theme is developing here?" On the contrary, they ask questions that typically come from teenage readers struggling through a first-draft reading:

"What is happening?"
"Who is a Capulet?"
"Who is a Montague?"
"What side is Romeo on?"
"What side is Juliet on?"
And my favorite: "Who the heck would name their kid 'Benvolio'?"

Students in this stage of reading are in survival mode, simply struggling to understand the text on a literal level. If I have framed the text properly, I will have helped them to achieve this initial level of comprehension (a level that is foundational before deeper reading can occur). But there is a much richer level of craft inside most classic works of literature—a level of beauty that usually is not discovered until students revisit the text on a second-draft (or third-draft) reading. I might add that most students will only discover the deeper, richer level of comprehension found in a second-draft reading through the guidance of a teacher. To illustrate this idea, let's revisit the first paragraph of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but this time, you will read it with a specific purpose in mind. As you reread it, look for the opposites that Stevenson has intentionally embedded in the text. In this first paragraph, there are at least nine of them, beginning with one in the first sentence:

> *Mr. Utterson the lawyer was a man of a rugged countenance that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in*

sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary and yet somehow lovable. At friendly meetings, and when the wine was to his taste, something eminently human beaconed from his eye; something indeed which never found its way into his talk, but which spoke not only in these silent symbols of the after-dinner face, but more often and loudly in the acts of his life. He was austere with himself; drank gin when he was alone, to mortify a taste for vintages; and though he enjoyed the theater, had not crossed the doors of one for twenty years. But he had an approved tolerance for others; sometimes wondering, almost with envy, at the high pressure of spirits involved in their misdeeds; and in any extremity inclined to help rather than to reprove. "I incline to Cain's heresy," he used to say quaintly: "I let my brother go to the devil in his own way." In this character, it was frequently his fortune to be the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence in the lives of downgoing men. And to such as these, so long as they came about his chambers, he never marked a shade of change in his demeanour.

How many did you find?

Opposites Found in the First Paragraph of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Mr. Utterson was cold, dreary.	Mr. Utterson was lovable.
He was a lawyer.	He didn't like to talk.
He spoke quietly.	His actions spoke loudly.
He had something "eminently human beacon from his eye."	This humaneness never found it into his speech.
He enjoyed the theater.	He never went to the theater.
A reference is made to the Bible.	A reference is made to the Devil.
He was a good influence . . .	. . . on downgoing men.
He liked to help.	He did not like to reprove.
He was an upright (and uptight) citizen.	He sometimes looked at his defendants "with envy."

I have taught this novel for many years, and I have shared it with many teacher groups, and not once while reading the first paragraph has a reader ever raised a hand and said, "Do you notice that Stevenson has hidden many opposites in his writing?" Because readers are in "survival mode" when they read this

chapter for the first time, discovery of the opposites embedded in the text is something that only happens on a rereading of the text, and this is a discovery that only happens when the teacher provides that specific purpose for revisiting the text.

You might ask, "Why have them revisit the text to look for opposites? What value is there in that?" I have my students read the text in search of opposites because even as they begin to read the novel I have the final exam question in mind:

> Discuss Stevenson's idea of duality in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and share how this duality is still found in today's world.

On the final exam, students are then asked to pick a topic in today's world and discuss its duality. Last year, their essays ranged from looking at both sides of humankind's treatment of the environment, to particular political candidates who have flip-flopped, to both the wonders and the abuses of the Catholic Church. This is the real value that emanates from reading *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—when my students are able to recognize Stevenson's duality in their world. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* prepares my students to understand that everything has two sides, and when they are able to recognize this they become much better equipped to read politicians, to read advertisements, to read ballot initiatives. Again, they might end up liking *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or they might end up not liking it, but after they've finished reading it, my students will have mined some value from reading the novel and will be better equipped to read and negotiate today's world. This new, sharper lens is rarely, if ever, developed without the guidance of a teacher.

Adopt a "Big Chunk/Little Chunk" Philosophy

If students aren't directed to read small chunks of text closely, they will never learn to reach deeper levels of analysis. However, if we chop up the books and have them analyze too many segments, they will succumb to readicide. It is a delicate balance, one that I try to achieve with what I call a "big chunk/little chunk approach." In the simplest terms, students do a lot of first-draft reading of large chunks of text on their own (after initial framing from the teacher). This is followed with second- and third-draft close readings of excerpts in the classroom (which require teacher expertise). In the *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* example, the search for opposites occurs after students complete a first-draft reading of Chapter 1. Once they return to class, I redirect their attention to a feature of the

novel (in this case the opposites) they would most likely not have discovered on their own.

Students must be eased into large chunk reading. Once the work is properly framed and my students are ready to commence reading, I often read the first few pages aloud to them, often pausing to think out loud. I am the best reader in the room, and as such, it is imperative that I let them in on how I tackle the initial confusion of a new book. I want my students to know that reading difficult text is hard even for the teacher—that it is normal to be confused. I wrestle with the text in front of them, and in doing so, will often have students chart the strategies I use to make sense of the book. By modeling my own confusion, and by demonstrating how I cope with the confusion, my students are eased into the difficult text.

At some point early on, however, my students are pushed to accept the challenge of reading large chunks of the book on their own. I am aiming for flow that only occurs when readers are stretched. Achieving flow in recreational books is one thing; finding flow in academic text, however, is much more difficult. To help students find this flow, I almost always provide a purpose for their reading before they read the assigned large chunk. Because reading a new novel or work of nonfiction can be overwhelming, I ask my students to focus on only one or two elements while they read. I provide a specific purpose for the reading that scaffolds students toward the final exam essay.

Take Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees,* for example. Before my students read it, I hand them the final exam question:

> Discuss Kingsolver's central theme and how this theme emerges through the author's use of symbolism.

Before my students begin reading, they already know what lens they are going to read this book through (examining the symbolism found in the novel). After framing the text by explaining its historical context and by previewing some vocabulary, I begin reading the novel with them, pausing to model my thinking out loud. Once they are eased into the book, I start assigning large chunks of reading. For example, I might frame the first chapter with the following instructions: "Please take Chapter 1 home and finish reading it tonight. Remember, you are reading this chapter with the idea of looking for possible symbolism in the novel. With this in mind, you will note in tonight's chapter that the author makes references to things that grow. Pay attention to this. If you do so, I think you may have some insight by the end of this chapter as to why Kingsolver titled her novel *The Bean Trees.* I would like each of you to come to

class tomorrow with a brief reflection in your writer's notebook on what all these references to things that grow might mean." My students then begin reading the large chunk of text with this specific purpose in mind.

When students return to class the next day, they share their thinking. To make sure they are focusing in the direction I have chosen, we shift to a close reading (which, in actuality, is a rereading). To facilitate this, I have prepared a focused reading for them—a small chunk from last night's chapter that they will reread closely to hone their analytical skills. I am not chopping up the entire chapter; rather, we are revisiting one small piece taken from a large chapter they have already read.

To prepare my students for a close reading, I share Patricia Kain's "How to Do a Close Reading" (1998), which was developed at the Writing Center at Harvard University. Kain introduces students to the three important steps of conducting a close reading:

1. **Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.** This entails "underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you as surprising or significant, or that raises questions—as well as making notes in the margins" (1).
2. **Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, similarities.** In the case of *The Bean Trees*, my students look for those patterns that might hint at the author's use of symbolism.
3. **Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially "how" and "why."** Why, for example, does the notion of planting things and nourishing them recur throughout the novel?

In Figure 4.2, you will see an example of a ninth-grade student's close read. Alex had read a large chunk of text the night before, and when he returned to class, he was asked to reread this specific passage. This close read was chosen with the final exam question in mind. Notice Alex is moving in the direction of the prompt when he states, "Hmm . . . I smell a metaphor." Close reads are invaluable in getting students to deeper levels of comprehension. Without them, many students will not move beyond surface-level comprehension.

The big chunk/little chunk approach to reading academic texts addresses both worlds. By assigning large chunks of reading, students can get into a reading flow; at the same time, through occasional carefully selected close readings, students have a chance to sharpen their analytical skills. Once the students hit stride with the book, I lengthen the chunks they read. It might be equally important to recognize what this approach doesn't do: it doesn't chop the book up into

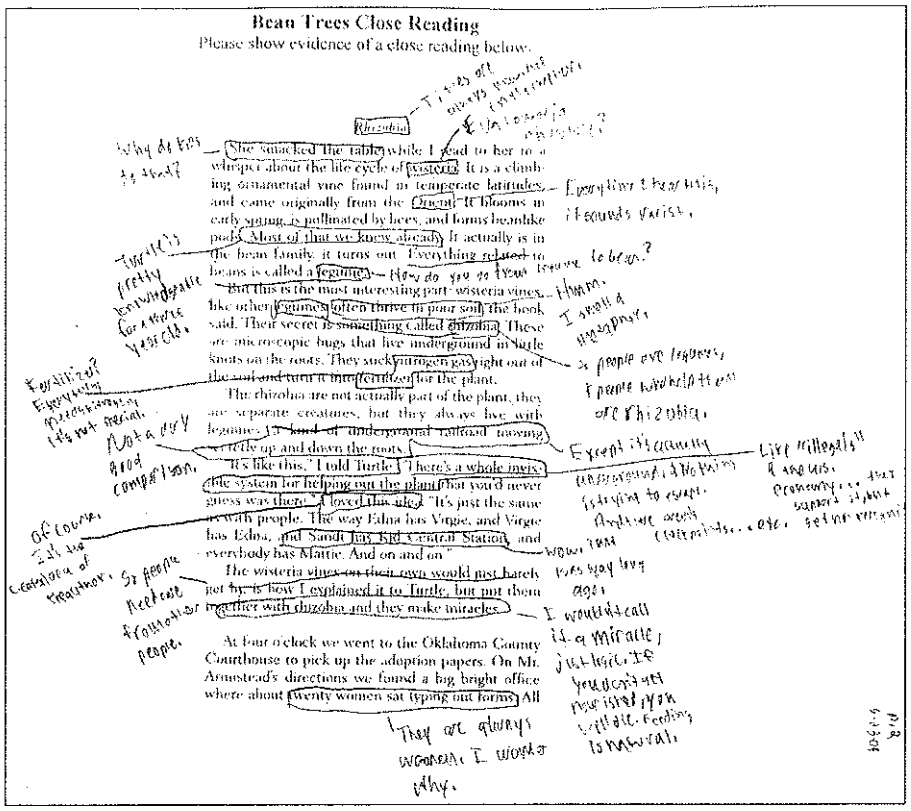

FIGURE 4.2
A CLOSE READING OF *The Bean Trees*

a million pieces, it doesn't value the trivial over the meaningful, and it doesn't try to teach all things in all books. To paraphrase Billy Collins (1996), it doesn't flog the novel with a hose.

Finding the Metacognitive Sweet Spot

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007), many reading researchers once believed "that if students could master the basics of literacy in the first few years of school, that would be sufficient to carry them successfully through the middle and high school years. Increasingly, though, research has made it clear that students need ongoing support in order to handle the more difficult kinds of reading and writing they must do in the upper grades" (1–2). The ongoing support that students need, of course, must come from very active teaching.

To underscore the importance of active teaching, consider this question: have you ever given your students a passage and asked them to highlight what is important? When I ask my students to do this, the results are usually disastrous. They don't discriminately highlight; they color everything! Yet, when I give a passage to adults and ask them to highlight what is important, they do not bathe their passages in highlighter. Unlike students, they are very discriminating when they mark text. Why? Why are mature readers more restrained when identifying what is important? What do mature readers know that immature readers do not know? In this particular example, for instance, adult readers might know where to look to find "what is important." They pay more attention to text structure. They recognize both the author's purpose and intended audience. They have a better idea of where to look in the text, paying closer attention to topic sentences, or knowing where they might find a thesis statement. A mature reader might scan quickly, looking for bold headings, or might skip the body of the passage and go straight to the concluding remarks. In short, mature readers have much better clues than immature readers on how to mark text. We know stuff our students do not know:

What Good and Struggling Readers Do

	Good Readers	*Struggling Readers*
Before	✖ Think about what they already know / search their prior knowledge ✖ Identify a purpose for reading the text ✖ Make predictions ✖ Have a sense of how major ideas may fit together	✖ Read without thinking about what they already know ✖ Don't know why they are reading text ✖ Make no predictions ✖ Don't have an idea how the major ideas might fit together
During	✖ Pay attention to meaning / are able to identify key information ✖ Monitor comprehension while reading ✖ Stop and use "fix-up" strategies ✖ Visualize while reading ✖ Make inferences ✖ Make connections, both inside and outside the text ✖ Have a high tolerance for ambiguity ✖ Ask questions of the text ✖ Are active and engaged	✖ Overattend to individual words / are often unable to make meaning ✖ Do not monitor comprehension while reading ✖ Are unaware of "fix-up" strategies ✖ Are unable to visualize while reading ✖ Cannot make inferences ✖ Are unable to make connections, both inside and outside the text ✖ Have a low tolerance for ambiguity ✖ Do not ask questions of the text ✖ Are passive and unengaged
After	✖ Can summarize ✖ Understand how ideas fit together ✖ Can answer implicit, explicit, and application questions ✖ Can revisit text and make deeper meaning	✖ Are often unable to determine main idea(s) ✖ Focus on unimportant or peripheral details ✖ Are unable to answer comprehension questions at various levels ✖ Are unable to revisit text to make deeper meaning

Adapted from Ciborowski (1992).

In *Deeper Reading* (Gallagher 2004), I discuss *assumicide*, the death of reading that occurs when it is assumed students possess the tools necessary to reach deeper levels of reading. Even as our readers get older, they still need ongoing support to become proficient readers of academic text. From the "What Good and Struggling Readers Do" chart, for example, we know that good readers monitor their comprehension and apply fix-it strategies when their comprehension falters. In short, good readers are "consciously strategic" when confronted with challenging text.

Unfortunately, many of our students are not strategic when confronted with difficult text. For example, all teachers have participated in the following exchange with a student:

Student: I read the chapter last night but I don't get it.
Teacher: Really? What part did you not get?
Student: All of it.

When a student says, "All of it," what she is really saying is that she doesn't know how to monitor her comprehension. When she gets confused, she simply continues to plow through the text. Good readers, however, do not do this. We have all experienced that feeling of getting to the end of a page and asking ourselves, "What the heck did I just read?" What do we do when this occurs? We stop, gather our focus, back up, and reread. This is not, however, what many of my students do. When they get confused, they keep on reading, thus minimizing their chances of reaching deeper levels of comprehension.

What these examples illustrate, of course, is that in our classrooms we know things about reading that our students do not know. When reading gets tough for us, we consciously choose tools to help us make sense of the text. For example, I had a group of adult readers tackle a difficult passage, and as they read it, they noted the strategies they employed when the reading got hard. Here is what they did:

Reread
Changed speeds
- ✖ Slowed down when difficulty increased
- ✖ Skimmed when the reading got easy

Asked about the author
Asked when it was written
Considered how this time frame influenced the author
"Chunked" the text

Read around nonessential clauses
Skipped ahead
Skipped hard parts and returned to them later
Considered the author's purpose
Searched prior knowledge
Highlighted confusion
Considered the author's intended audience
Subvocalized
Visualized
Made predictions
Examined the text structure
Stopped and thought about the passage
Asked questions
Used context to clear confusion
Noticed how the punctuation was used
Paid close attention to the syntax
Made note of italics
Made note of headings
Shifted body position in chair
Told self to focus
Tracked with finger
Paraphrased
Summarized
Commented
Argued with the author
Evaluated the author's idea(s)
Attacked unfamiliar words by looking at the context
Attacked unfamiliar words by looking at prefixes, suffixes, and roots
Lived with ambiguity
Drew conclusions
Made connections to:

- Other books
- Other films
- Other languages
- Real-world events
- Personal experience

When the reading got hard, good readers used all of the strategies found in this list. Now, ask yourself the following: when the reading gets hard for your students, how

many of these strategies do they employ? In my classroom, some of my students do some of these strategies, but, unfortunately, some of my students do not know any of these strategies. Many remain at a complete loss when the reading gets hard. Because students don't know what to do when confronted with confusion, these strategies need to be made visible to them, and that is where the teacher is useful.

In determining how and when to make these strategies visible to our students, we must again carefully consider the sweet spot—that area found between underteaching and overteaching. To help us find this sweet spot, it is helpful to define what "underteaching" and "overteaching" of these reading strategies might look like:

Classroom That Underteaches Reading Strategies	*Classroom That Overteaches Reading Strategies*
✖ Students are given little or no help in understanding what good readers do when the reading gets hard.	✖ Metacognition is overemphasized. Too much time is spent on "noticing what you notice" as a reader.
✖ Discussion is always based on what the text says; little attention is paid to how understanding is reached.	✖ The text gets lost in overanalyzing what is done to make sense of the text.

Teaching Both the Reading and the Reader

In *The Reading Zone*, Atwell (2007) implores teachers, "Do not risk ruining the reading of stories by teaching children to focus on how they're processing them" (63). Atwell asks "teachers to consider whether a curriculum of study skills is the soundest way to help students become skilled, passionate, habitual, critical readers of the stories we—and they—adore" (63). It's an important point. If you want to kill the love of reading in a student, plant innumerable stop signs in the text that will require the student to examine his reading processes at each stop.

Atwell's advice is particularly true when it comes to reading recreational books. Right now I am reading Robert Crais's *The Watchman*, a lightweight but highly entertaining crime novel. However, if you stood over my shoulder and repeatedly asked me how I was making meaning from this text, it would not take long for me to hate this book. I don't need to root around in my metacognitive toolbox to make sense of this book. I am already in the flow. Leave me alone.

Reading much more difficult text, however, poses a different problem. Although I appreciate Atwell's warning that we risk ruining books when we ask students to look at how they are processing them, I have found my students can't process them until they become explicitly aware of those things good readers do. The texts are so hard that they have to look at how they are processing them, or

the processing itself will not occur. These are not books that we can curl up at the beach with and fall into an immediate reading flow. These are books that require the teacher to be in the room, and as such, they require a different approach.

As a teacher, I know what good readers do when reading difficult text (as evidenced by the previous list). Ignoring or withholding this information from students might be a good idea when they are reading a Lemony Snicket book, but it is a recipe for readicide when they are reading *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* When tackling difficult text, underteaching can be as damaging as overteaching. Atwell (2007), for example, cites Julie Lausé, a high school English teacher in New Orleans, who was worried that meaningful reading experiences were getting lost because teachers were overteaching the books. To avoid the chop-chop approach, "Lausé distributed all the school's required readings at once, in September—in tenth grade honors English, that was eight books—then assigned deadlines across the school year for the completion of each title, based on what she had determined as the speed of the slowest reader in the class. She and her students discussed each assigned book following its deadline, as a whole work, not in a chapter-by-chapter analysis, and she noted the 'increased depth' of those literary conversations" (Atwell 2007, 111).

I admire how Lausé avoids the chop-chop approach by handing students books and giving them deadlines to read all the works, but I can say unequivocally that this approach would not work with my students. Unlike Lausé, I do not teach honors-level classes, which means I am working with students who come to each book with far less reading experience and thus far less prior knowledge. I cannot simply hand students who are unaware of the Holocaust copies of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and ask them to have it read by October 15. I cannot hand a ninth-grader who is reading at the sixth-grade level a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* and ask him to have it read by Thanksgiving. My students are ill-equipped to take these reading journeys on their own. These books are rigorous and heavy. Without their teacher involved, my students will either give up or make a beeline to CliffsNotes. These works must be taught, and they must be taught while the books are being read.

The challenge, of course, is not overdoing it. So what is the proper balance between underteaching and overteaching those metacognitive skills that good readers employ? To explore this question, let me share an anecdote from one of my freshman classes. They were reading *Night*, and I had framed Chapter 1 for them, eased them into the first few pages, given them a purpose for that night's reading, and asked them to go home and read Chapter 1. When they came back the next day, I had prepared a close reading—a revisitation of a chunk of text. As

they worked on their close reading, I gave them highlighters and had them monitor their comprehension by marking spots they found confusing. I circled the room, taking note where they were confused.

The close reading led to a rich discussion, and soon I glanced at the clock and noticed there were four minutes left in the period. My students keep a chart in their notebooks titled, "What Good Readers Do." I had them take them out.

"I noticed as I walked around the room," I said, "that many of you have highlighted the word 'genocide' as a word you do not know. Mike, I noticed that you did not mark the word. Does that mean you know what it means?"

"I am not entirely sure," Mike replied, "but I think it has something to do with death."

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"Well, it ends with 'cide'," he said. "It reminds me of suicide, homicide. So I think it has something to do with death."

"And pesticide," someone in the back of the class added.

"Good job," I replied. "Mike has done something that good readers do. (Turning to class.) What did Mike do when he didn't understand the word 'genocide'?"

"He looked at the parts of the word," someone replied.

"Right," I said. "Good readers attack unfamiliar words. Take out your 'What Good Readers Do Chart' and add 'attack the word' to it" (as students do this, I also write "attack the word" on a master list of "What Good Readers Do" on the overhead projector). I look up at the clock and notice there are still two minutes remaining in the period. I have a brief discussion with the students about where a word might be attacked—prefix, root, suffix—and then I give them a word to practice before the bell rings.

"Quickly," I add. "Try attacking a different word." I write the word "unenviable" on the board, and they spend the last minute of class attacking the word. We share some thinking on the word and the last thing they hear me say before they leave is, "Remember this as readers when you come to a future word you do not understand. Good readers, when faced with an unfamiliar word, become aggressive. They become active, not passive. They attack, and looking at the prefix, root, and suffix is one strategy good readers do."

This seems a reasonable balance to me. In five minutes, I introduced a strategy that good readers do when reading gets hard and gave my students an opportunity to practice it. As the year progresses, we occasionally (maybe once a week) take out our "What Good Readers Do" charts and add to them, five minutes here, five minutes there. I am making these strategies visible to my students, and I am doing so in a way that does not drown their reading. I am not simply teaching the reading; I am teaching the reader.

This approach contrasts a bit with what I see in the many classrooms I have visited. Often, teachers take one extreme approach or the other. Either they focus so heavily on metacognitive strategies that the actual reading gets lost (and critical reading time gets drastically cut), or they ignore these strategies completely, assuming their students already know many of them. The sweet spot, however, is found somewhere in between.

Donald Graves once said, "The teacher teaches most by showing how he/she learns" (1985, 38). This is certainly true when it comes to teaching reading. What the teacher does is more important than what the teacher says, and one of the most important things we can do as teachers when our students are wrestling with academic texts is to show them those things that good readers do.

Don't Lose Sight of the 50/50 Approach

In this chapter, I have suggested that underteaching can also lead students down the road of readicide. To avoid readicide, I suggest that teachers

- ✖ recognize the importance of framing.
- ✖ understand the value of second-draft (and third-draft) reading.
- ✖ adopt a big chunk/little chunk philosophy.
- ✖ start with the guided tour, but ease students into the budget tour to find the sweet spot of instruction.

These suggestions about avoiding the perils of underteaching are really suggestions that prove valuable in reading difficult text. But allow me to close this chapter with a reminder of the 50/50 approach I discuss in Chapter 3—that half the reading I want my students to do is recreational. That means there is no framing, no second- and third-draft reading, no big chunk/little chunk approach, no guided tour, and no time examining metacognition. No stop signs whatsoever. These approaches discussed in this chapter are valuable when reading academic texts, but let's not forget in the shadow of all this testing that our primary goal is to help our students to become lifelong readers. This will not occur if they are only doing academic reading. Although my students are wrestling with *Romeo and Juliet*, they are also reading books such as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* or Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It."* My students are always reading two books at a time: one that requires the teacher to be in the room, and one that is a high-interest, fun read. Ignoring the recreational side of reading is a recipe for readicide. Both sides of reading—the academic and the recreational—need extensive emphasis.