Chapter 3

Kittle, P. Book Love © 2013

# Building Stamina and Fluen

## Setting Realistic and Challenging Weekly Goals

During the first week of class I ask students to find a book they would like to read and to read silently, at a comfortable pace, for ten minutes. I emphasize the importance of reading at a pace where the text is making sense—slow reading to enter the story, not skimming like they do online. If rereading increases understanding, do it. The goal is understanding, not speed. I also seek confidence in readers and the idea that reading can be enjoyable—twin goals that run throughout my teaching. At the end of ten minutes each student records the number of pages read in that time. I make sure my students understand that this reading rate is for the current book they're reading and really says nothing about them as a reader. What I'm trying to establish is a measure to make the homework reading I'm going to assign fair to all.

Students read at vastly different rates, even if assigned to a leveled English class. Richard Allington (2001) analyzed the words per minute for *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, and found that it would take an average fifth grader eight hours to read it, so a student reading at half that speed would need sixteen hours (36–37). This means the typical English class assignment of two chapters a night might take Heather twenty minutes and Andre three hours. I am not exaggerating this gap, since I have measured it with my seniors. I tell my students their homework is to read at a comfortable pace for two hours or more each week outside class. In order for that to be a fair assignment, I explain, we need to determine an individual reading rate. It can also help us understand how their pace changes over the course of a quarter, a semester, and a school year with regular reading.

I recognize that this is not a scientific measure. I am not a fluency expert. I'm a classroom teacher trying to devise a way to challenge all my readers to read more each week. I don't want to improve the stamina of just my lowest-skilled readers but to challenge my strongest readers to read more widely and deeply than they

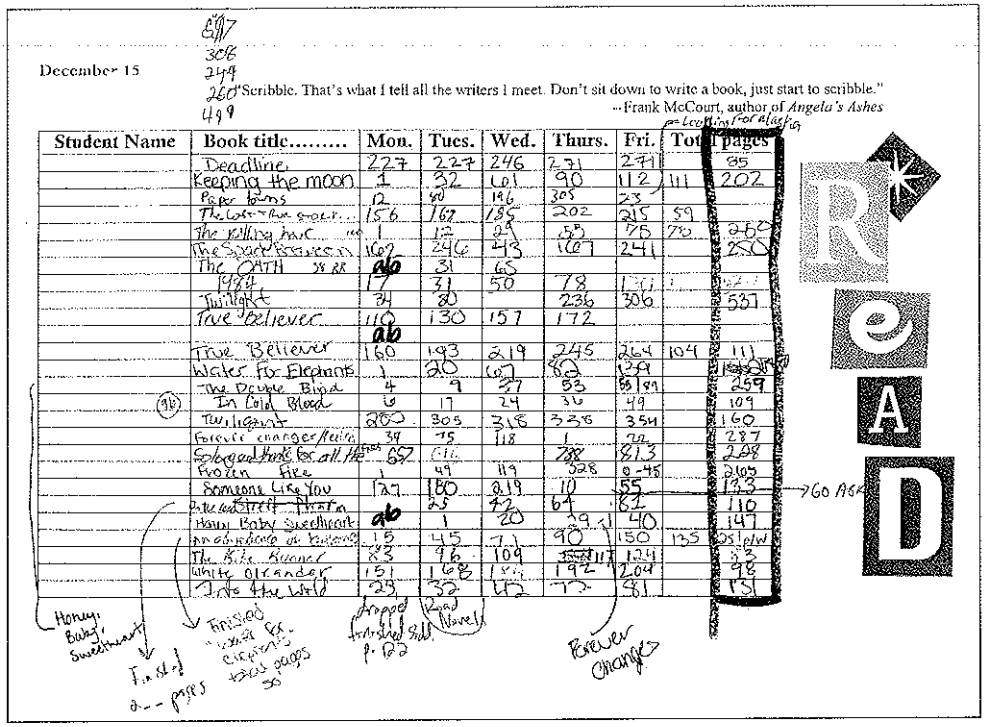
have in the past. I need a way to measure independent reading that empowers and encourages students to improve their skills at a pace that honors the efforts of all the readers in the room.

Each student records pages read in ten minutes. A student who reads nine pages multiplies nine by six to calculate how many pages she can comfortably read in that book in one hour. Doubling it results in her expected-pages-per-week goal ($9 \times 6 = 54 \times 2 = 108$ pages per week). I also explain that increasing stamina means they may only read for ten minutes at a time at first but should gradually increase to an hour or more in one sitting. This alone is a challenge, and students must learn strategies for building stamina. As a senior, Colton, wrote on his final exam, "I have never been a reader, so when I started to have trouble while reading a book, I would take like a five-minute break just to get my mind off it so it was fresh to come back and try to tackle it again. I learned that reading isn't as bad as I made it out to be in the past. In the past I made myself try and drag through other books, but then I just gave up." When students measure stamina through pages read each week, it is easier for them to see growth and also to keep track of the reading they need to do for homework.

Students have an intuitive sense that reading rate varies based on the difficulty of the text, so we discuss how changing books puts different demands on them as readers and may require calculating a new reading rate. Since we read for at least ten minutes in class each day, a new rate is easily determined. In order to receive full credit for homework, each student needs to meet or exceed his or her reading goal each week. Students record their rates in their writing notebooks, which I collect so I can record individual rates in my own records. Over the year I record a student's reading rate at least once a month, but numbers alone do not tell the story. Many students see a decline in reading rate because they begin to choose more difficult books as they become more confident readers. All students begin to work toward the college expectation of at least two hundred pages a week, no matter how many hours it takes them. I think the combination of a long-term goal and monitoring progress on a weekly goal is important. Students need both.

In my class this fall the range of reading rates was wide. Richard could read 60 pages in two hours, Melinda read 92, and Ciera read 312. Lissa read 32, but considering that was more than she remembered reading since elementary school, I considered it quite an achievement when she beat that goal every one of our first five weeks of school. Students record the title of the book they are reading and the page they are on every day in class, adding up the total pages read each week (see Figure 3.1). Students are expected to find the time to read during the week, but if sports or other responsibilities intrude, they can catch up on the weekend. What I don't accept is the excuse that they can't find the time at all. They can. They do. We calculate total pages for the week each Monday, and the majority of my students beat their reading goal almost every week all year.

Figure 3.1 *Weekly reading recording sheet*




Goals are important. When investigating what teachers can do to boost motivation, Quirk and Schwanenflugel (2004) found: "Researchers advise practitioners to help children self-set goals that are challenging but reachable. A teacher might spend a few minutes each week helping a child monitor his or her progress in meeting these goals. Accomplishing these goals may bolster the child's belief that, with effort, he or she can become a better reader." Weekly goals help me convince my students that they can improve with practice, but the goals don't turn them into readers. The wonder, the magic, and the heart-stopping joy of books is the only consistently effective tool for that.

## Keeping Track of What Twenty-Five Students Are Doing in Twenty-Five Books

The recording sheet in Figure 3.1, which makes its way around the room during our daily silent reading, lets me see at a glance which students are reading at night and which are not. Since the reading rates are not on the sheet, there is nothing to hide. Contrary to what some believe, students are honest. Will students cheat? Yes. How many? Remarkably few. My students know I value honesty and want to help them.

They also know they can catch up on the weekend, so they do tell me what they've read each night. Every day when we read in class I can see their engagement. When it is clear a student is bored with the book, I stop by for a conference. I confer with several students about their reading every day, so this isn't unusual. Students take note of what others are reading, but most fill in their page number and pass our recording sheet on quickly in order to get back to their book. I know teachers who keep track themselves via roll call, and on some days I carry the clipboard with me and record the page for each student in the room. It is a nice way to check in with everyone, but it can't take the place of a reading conference. The truth is, when we trust students and help them find books, they rise to our expectations in remarkable ways.

## Goals for a Semester or a Year

This spring I tried an experiment with a semester-long elective English class of grade 10–12 mixed-ability students. Five weeks into the semester we used ten minutes of silent reading to calculate the pages per week they could read comfortably. I then asked them to take the pages per week and multiply it by 18 weeks in a semester. We then divided the total pages by 200—since two hundred pages is a reasonable length for a book. Students did the math and arrived at their goal for number of books to read that semester.

I shared reading lists from students I had the year before (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3).

I showed them interviews with both girls who confessed to being nonreaders before coming to my class. I challenged my students to consider what they could accomplish in just one semester. You might think I'm crazy. Many of the kids did.

We discovered that all the students could realistically read between ten and thirty books during the semester. I explained that this represented two hours of reading outside of school each week, that's all. As they got to work on writing that day, I went to each student individually and wrote down the number of books they had calculated and said, "What do you think? Can you do it?" Every student in the class except two said yes. Both girls who said no had calculated more than fifteen books and hadn't read that many books since picture books in elementary school. I assured them they could if they found the right books. This big goal-setting moment is going to happen in each of my classes every September. I will nurture the commitment; I will keep track of progress; I will dare them not to become readers.

## To Grade or Not to Grade?

Grades, stickers, star charts, and prizes are all unnecessary rewards in the process of creating readers. As Alfie Kohn (1993) says, we punish students with rewards. Books matter; the rest just gets in the way. I must pay attention to whether or not

Figure 3.2 *Meaghan's reading ladder*

**BOOK LIST RANKED MOST DIFFICULT (1) TO EASIEST (23)**

1. *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov
2. *Columbine*, Dave Cullen
3. *Incendiary*, Chris Cleave
4. *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, Benson Deng, Alephonsion Den, Benjamin Ajak
5. *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker
6. *Lost in the Meritocracy*, Walter Kirn
7. *The Freedom Writers Diary*, Erin Gruwell
8. *Scratch Beginnings*, Chris Crutcher
9. *One Amazing Thing*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
10. *The Other Wes Moore*, Wes Moore
11. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, Mark Haddon
12. *Little Bee*, Chris Cleave
13. *After the Wreck*, Joyce Carol Oates
14. *Because I Am Furniture*
15. *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac*, Gabrielle Zevin
16. *Winter Girls*, Laurie Halse Anderson
17. *Twisted*, Laurie Halse Anderson
18. *If I Stay*, Gayle Forman
19. *People Are Unappealing*, Sarah Barron
20. *Inexcusable*
21. *Shooting Kabul*
22. *A Bend in the Road*, Nicholas Sparks
23. *Rules*, Cynthia Lord

Total pages read quarter 4: 2715/9=302

Q1=192, Q2=169, Q3=70, Q4=302

My reading rate increased significantly from quarter 1 to quarter 4. Quarter 3 was so low because I was reading *Lolita* pretty much the whole quarter and quarter 2 I was doing college applications, but I am very surprised by how much it increased over all. It is obvious that the amount I read changes depending on what the book is.

kids are reading. I must observe and talk with kids every day. I keep track of page numbers as a way to manage the large number of students in my classes. However, the weekly goal in reading has to be about more than a grade or a calculation or we'll never create readers.

I consider all grading a necessary evil. It is healthier to assess progress through deep discussions about books and ideas, but changing assessment measures in this country is a battle for someone else to fight. My interest is in improving literacy within the confines of my current school system, and I live in the world of points and grade, so I've compromised.

Figure 3.3 *Taylor's reading ladder*

**TAYLOR'S READING LADDER, QUARTER 4**

**Order by Difficulty** (1=most difficult)

1. *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, 317 pp.
2. *Columbine* by Dave Cullen, 370 pp.
3. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, 304 pp.
4. *Say You're One of Them* by Uwem Akpan, abandoned at page 75.
5. *Slumdog Millionaire* by Vikas Swarup, 336 pp.
6. *The Freedom Writers' Diary* by various writers, 285 pp.
7. *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, 384 pp.
8. *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen, 335 pp.
9. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, 213 pp.
10. *Because I Am Furniture* by Thalia Chaltas, 352 pp.
11. *Hate List* by Jennifer Brown, 405 pp.
12. *Miles from Nowhere* by Nami Mun, 286 pp.
13. *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous, 193 pp.
14. *Shooting Kabul* by N. H. Senzai, 253 pp.
15. *I Am Messenger* by Markus Suzak, abandoned at page 105.
16. *Deadlines* by Chris Crutcher, 316 pp.
17. *If I Stay* by Gayle Forman, 201 pp.
18. *Brutal* by Mark Harmon, 227 pp.
19. *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Sanderson, 278 pp.
20. *Twisted* by Laurie Halse Sanderson, 272 pp.
21. *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac* by Gabrielle Zevin, 271 pp.
22. *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Bates* by E. Lockhart, 342 pp.
23. *The Secret Story of Sonia Rodriguez* by Alan Lawrence Sitomer, 311 pp.
24. *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* by Tucker Max, 326 pp.

**Total pages read during Q4:** 1318/9 = 146.4 pages per week

**Comparison:** First quarter my average reading rate was around 180 pages per week and my second quarter rate was slightly larger. I was reading easier and lighter books; I think that played a huge role in my rates. Third quarter my reading rate went down to 124 pages per week. Even though it was lower, I was more satisfied with my book choices. Fourth quarter I read 146 pages per week. My reading rate went up this quarter because I had more time to read and I think my books were easier. Honestly, I think I became lazier in the fourth quarter.

I give students a weekly grade for homework reading, and these grades are 10 percent of their course grade. I tell them that reading for two hours a week outside class is essential for their stamina as readers. It is a reasonable expectation for teenagers. It should be pleasurable—I emphasize that—but it has to happen. If they meet their reading goal for the week, they get full credit. If they fall short, they get partial credit. I don't share a formula for determining partial credit; that's my decision, which I negotiate with individual students. However, a student who reads

anything at all never gets less than 50 percent—I believe in "The Case Against the Zero" (Reeves 2004). My students quickly lose interest in the grade as they find books they want to read.

## Increasing Complexity over Time

What do we want from the books students read in class? We want joy, yes, but we also must expect an increased complexity of texts over time. We want our students to be climbers. We want progress in their ability to read. It isn't enough to encourage kids to read outside class and expect somehow that it will happen. But it is also not enough to have kids read one easy junk title after another. Kids can get stuck—as can adults—on a genre or an author. It is true that being stuck can have its benefits I read my way through all of Wallace Stegner's books one summer, then all of Ian McEwan's the next, just as I had read all of the Brontës, then Edith Wharton, and yes, tried but failed to read all of Henry James. I learned more about each writer as I looked at early and late books and began to see patterns emerge in the composition of a novel. Getting stuck can be powerful. Jake read all of Orwell while in my class as a senior, but I see other teenagers get stuck and I think, I want more for you.

Parker—graduating third in her class and heading off to Tulane in the fall on a full scholarship—transferred into my class halfway through her senior year. She had spent her first semester reading pop fiction, and this became the subject of our first January reading conference. "Why are you continuing to read books by this author?" I asked, with genuine curiosity. New to my class, she probably thought she was in trouble. She mumbled a vague, "Yeah, I should read harder books," and ducked behind her bangs.

"My intent is not to make you feel badly about your reading choices, Parker. I read easy, light romances and other escape books." I pointed to my current reading list in my notebook. We both snickered at *Manny*, by Holly Peterson. I continued, "But I wonder why your list lacks variety. I get tired of books that don't challenge me. I crave something that will surprise me—surprise me with the skill of the writer—the knowledge of a place I'll probably never visit—the deep exploration of questions about life that I didn't even know I was asking. Do you ever feel tired of the same old thing in these books?" She nodded. I got to the heart of why I thought she was stuck. "What's on your to-read-next list?" I asked and turned her notebook to the last page.

She didn't have one.

My colleague, Parker's teacher first semester, is a dynamic teacher who has begun integrating book talks into her teaching. But she has yet to develop a systematic approach to two things that really matter if we want to move kids from where they are to where we want them to be: the to-read-next list, so each reader has a plan; and

reading conferences that put the teacher one-on-one with a student, asking where she is in her independent reading and what she plans to read next.

Of course, the other students in the room also matter. Parker sits at a table with two other girls. As they recommend books they've read, she will likely be infected by their enthusiasm. If she follows their lead, she'll see the difference for herself as she makes the leap to deep engagement with literature, biography, and nonfiction. This is why I have students create reading progress reflections each quarter and update their goals so that I can continually nudge each one to reach for more (see p. 124 and Figures 3.2 and 3.3).

I want a balance for my students because easy reading builds confidence and hard reading builds skills. Anything that is always hard becomes something I avoid. Ann Patchett (2009) sums it up this way: "I'm all for reading bad books because I consider them to be a gateway drug. People who read bad books now may or may not read better books in the future. People who read nothing now will read nothing in the future."

I don't read only what's good for me. I read junk magazines while getting my haircut each month; I look forward to it. I gather recommendations for romance novels—girl-gets-perfect-man stories—and inhale them in an afternoon. I've read so much truly great literature in my life that some might ask why I bother with a paperback that is only entertainment. It's all about balance—which applies to most things we do. I know I'm not a better person for the hours spent watching *What Not to Wear*, but sometimes I appreciate the break after a day of the serious work of teaching. I tune in so I don't have to think too hard. And yes, our students have this need, too. If we want to create lifelong, satisfied readers, we need a balance between the careful study of complex texts and time to pursue personal passions in books of choice for pure pleasure. The key is we have to *teach* both.

I call it roller coaster reading, and I believe all readers do it. The long, slow climb of a dense and difficult text, followed by something easy, flying through the pages, racing past turns breathless and engaged in the ride. The big climb goes up and up and you feel the pull against the back of your seat it's so steep. (That's a classic novel for most teenagers, even for really good readers.) That feeling of exhilaration at the top—at the end of a climb—should be real. I think all kids deserve that feeling, deserve to slowly make sense of something really difficult, like the *New Yorker* article on capital punishment I'm assigning for homework next week, or *Great Expectations*, which Elizabeth has chosen to read this month. The exhilaration at the top is partially born of the difficulty of the climb. Let's get kids there. But if we're smart, we'll recognize that all readers need the ride down, too. No one I know wants to work all the time. I remember this when I look out at the teenagers in my class whose current interests in reading are a mixture of challenge and ease. I am determined to help my students find a balance in their choices as a prelude to their

reading lives once they finish high school. I know that one important thing we can do for struggling readers is help them glide through books they enjoy.

## Good Teaching Is Based Not on a System But on a Relationship

You might read this book and think that a system of book talks, conferences, accountability, and text study might change a classroom of readers. I know it won't. It's not about the system.

The most important condition in my classroom is my relationship with my students. My students are not moving through a system that guarantees they'll read; I am moving them through a system that helps me manage the large number of students I teach. The magic formula is the relationship we form and my ability to meet them where they are, accept where they are, and then put books in their hands that will ignite their own intrinsic motivation to read.

I value engagement more than any particular text, and helping students learn to make good choices rests on suggestion, not coercion. I believe the only real and lasting interest in reading comes from engagement, so it is at the heart of what I do. The secret of my system, perhaps, is the accepted and encouraged diversity of the books that line my shelves.

My measurement of success is how students talk about themselves as readers—as self-engaged, curious readers. Like Meaghan did in an essay last spring:

> The worst feeling in the world is starting a new book, opening it up and feeling the entire book on the unread side, and having nothing but the cover in your other hand, or at least I thought so before this year. I thought that this was both intimidating and daunting. I never liked to read before, and I think that a lot of it was because I hated the feeling of starting a new book. After this year however, I am now excited when I open a new book, because I get excited for what is in store for me in my full, right hand.
>
> Before this year, I hated reading. I could never find books that I liked, and I always had better things to do with my time than read. Reading was boring. It was intimidating and important and I figured that it was better to ignore it than to face it. I knew that I was a slow reader and I knew that I needed to work on it, but I never wanted to. I justified my lack of reading by telling myself that I didn't read because I didn't have any good books, but I now know that I never looked very hard either.

In this past year, I have read over twenty books, and I have grown to love reading. I have found books that I am interested in, and I have challenged myself and learned a lot. I think that finding books that I like was one of the best things that could have happened to my education, because reading was something that I was really lacking in. Since the beginning of this year, all of my classes have become easier because it is easier for me to read and comprehend things quicker and more thoroughly.

My favorite books this year were probably *One Amazing Thing, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, Rules,* and *Lost in the Meritocracy. Rules* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* were very interesting to me because I want to go into working with people with mental disabilities. *One Amazing Thing* was really good because I love books about people from different backgrounds, and that was exactly what that book was all about. *Lost in the Meritocracy* is very interesting because I know a lot of students, including myself sometimes, who float through school the way that Walter Kirn did, and this book clearly demonstrates why that is not the way to do things. It has caused me to think differently, and I know that that is a path that I never want to go down. I did not like the book *Incendiary*. For some reason it felt really forced to me. For some reason I was not able to get into the plot. I did, however, love *Little Bee* by the same author.

In spending more time reading, I have learned a lot about my own writing. I have found that it is easier to write for myself. It is kind of like having an unending supply of mentor texts. Every time I read something, I notice how it is written and what is different. I think one of the biggest things that I have taken to use in my own writing is that I learned that jumping from topic to topic can still be organized if you do it in the right way. Things don't always have to go in chronological order or flow into each other, because sometimes the jumps and disorganization illustrates the point in a whole new way.

If I could go back and do high school over I would start reading earlier, even before high school. Reading makes everything easier and it is very enjoyable. I never would have guessed that I could learn so much just by reading novels, but I have really learned a lot.

A system will not create readers, but the books that keep a reader seeking will.

If the trajectory in our teaching is focused on lifelong reading as I believe it must be, then I believe we should be moving readers toward greater choice as they age. It just makes sense. Students are more compliant in elementary than in middle school and more compliant in middle than in high school. Yet we narrow their choices to the deep, slow study of a few novels a year in high school, just when their interests are expanding and growing and their potential for consuming many books in a year has reached a peak. Just as students are less likely to trust our choices (because they seek independence and adulthood) and just as the pressure increases on teachers to lower failure and dropout rates (because each course counts toward graduation), we narrow reading to a small number of books that students quickly learn they can fake their way around.

I am not advocating eliminating the study of literature and hope that there will always be a host of choices in the deep study of literature at all ages, but I am questioning the balance between content and kids. The study of literature is a rich experience, but literature study alone cannot offer the volume of reading that professors are after and that employers want. The volume of reading that leads to an informed population at the ballot box. The volume of reading that lasts.