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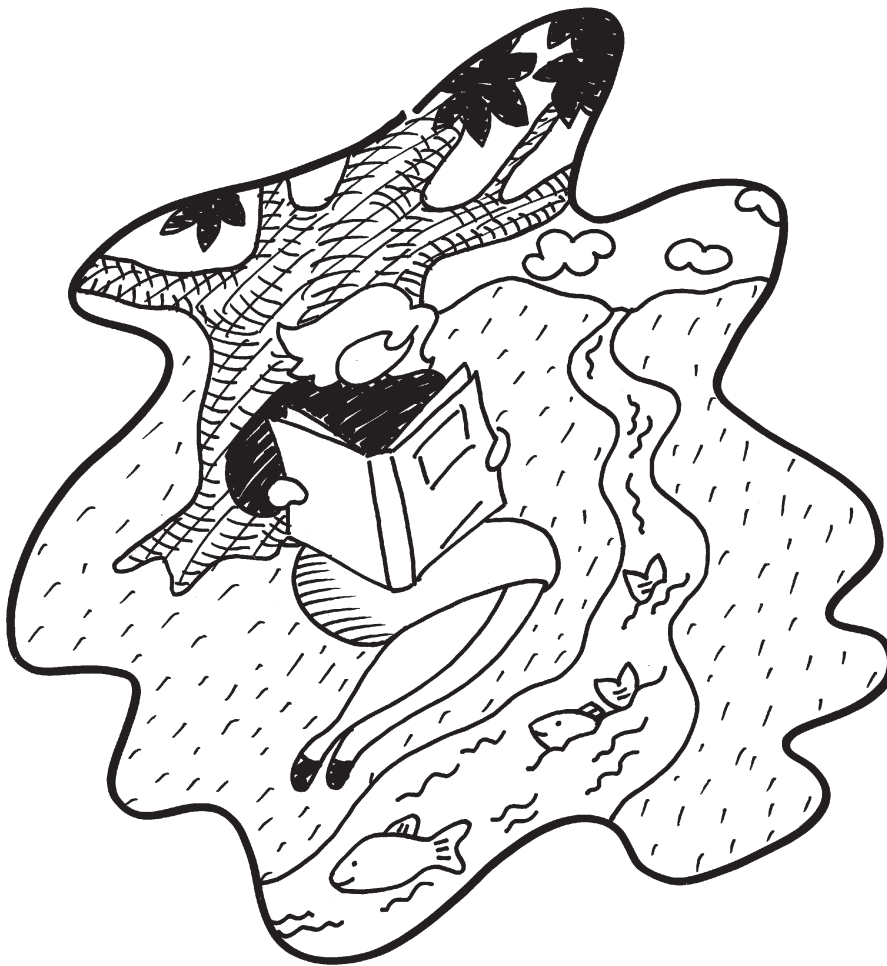
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# INTRODUCTION



*There are no areas of the brain that specialize in reading. Reading is probably the most difficult task we ask the brain to undertake.*

– David Sousa



## INTRODUCTION

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I was not trained as a reading teacher. I was an English major who became an English teacher. Being a teacher was something I wanted to do since I was a little girl with four younger brothers who let me 'pretend' that I was their teacher. After graduating from university, my plan was simple: I wanted to teach the subject I loved and instil that same love into the hearts and minds of all my students. I dreamed of making the classic books, plays and poetry come alive for them as they always had for me. I was going to share my passion and inspire them to love and appreciate literature as part of their lives.

When I finally became a secondary school teacher, I got the biggest shock of my life. Not only were many of my students unenthused about both school and my English class, but some of them couldn't even read! It had never occurred to me that I would get students who would be struggling readers or even non-readers. I thought that all children learned to read in kindergarten and grade one – at least by they time they were out of primary school! How could I be getting kids this age who couldn't even read? I was trained to be an English teacher; I wasn't trained to be a reading teacher.

Even worse, I found that some students could read and pronounce the words in their assignments, but when we discussed the content of what they had read, it was as if they had never done the reading. It was painfully clear to me that some of my so-called 'best' readers were only 'word-callers'! They could recognise the words, but they struggled (or failed) to extract meaning from what they had read. Some of these students even gained good marks. I was amazed that they been so successful in school without being able to truly comprehend what they had read.

I had so many questions:

- How did these students get so far at school in the first place?
- How could I teach students to appreciate literary content when they couldn't even read a short story or a simple poem – let alone a whole book?
- What was I supposed to do with these students?

For many teachers, teaching strategies are intuitive and based simply on the need to cope with day-to-day challenges in the classroom, i.e. the 'strategy' evolves as the day evolves. Therefore, if a student cannot read, the teacher 'covers' by making the textbook or content come alive for

the entire class, making the non-readers' lack of reading skill irrelevant. Teachers will make sure that students learn the important, basic content, but are rarely able (or trained) to address the fundamental issue at hand: if they cannot read, they cannot comprehend content.

For years, many teachers have used reading strategies without realising what they were doing. Every time a teacher breaks down a textbook into manageable units, highlights the features of a textbook, or provides specific content-related vocabulary from a textbook, that teacher is using a reading strategy.

Of course teachers recognise that most students who cannot read are instead smart in many other ways: they can recite every word verbatim from their favourite movies or CDs, or are quite surprisingly skilled at imitating their teachers' facial expressions, voices and mannerisms. Since their lack of reading skills are sometimes the only deterrent to class instruction, teachers assign projects, group work, graphic organisers, tapes, videos, or anything they can think of to help the students learn using different modalities. Additionally, teachers are so pressured and preoccupied with reaching state standards that they often forget that students who do not do well may be under-performing because they cannot read the actual questions on the test – not because they were not taught the material.

In this way, many well-meaning teachers unknowingly set their struggling readers up for future failure by doing two things:

- Not dealing with the problems for students in their own classroom
- Allowing students with reading disabilities to move forward to the next teacher (who may not care if they cannot read).

Good teachers – in all content areas – must adopt the attitude that any child who comes into their class with a reading disability is one thing: their responsibility. Teachers must show students how to use thinking and reading strategies that will enable them to comprehend the content as well as the individual words. Teachers must model thinking processes when reading for content so students can learn by example. Teachers must show students how great writers, historians, scientists and mathematicians process information and arrive at conclusions.

If you are worried that this practice will inhibit individual student creativity, here is an example: in school, student teachers are forced to

create extensive lesson plans to show if and how they can apply what they have learned. This type of assignment forces student teachers to think carefully about every step in the teaching process and choose the specific strategies that will work best for each different type of content or lesson. In teaching reading to secondary school students, as well as teaching student teachers, creativity comes only after mastering the fundamentals. Learning to read is a process, and content is the vehicle teachers use to drive that process toward creativity and comprehension.

For any teacher who has a student who cannot read, for every teacher who has never been taught how to teach reading, and for every teacher who loves their students and wants each of them to be successful in life, this book will be useful. Outlines provided in the book are strategies that, when used on a regular basis, will help all students become better at reading. However, for students to become good readers, they must first read, write, speak and listen to something, and that something is the content of the subject areas.

In *How to Teach Reading When You're Not a Reading Teacher*, my goal is to make secondary school teachers aware of which reading strategies they already use, then introduce and amplify additional strategies they can incorporate into any subject area. Using current research on teaching reading and how students learn, the practical approach presented here is focused primarily on teaching reading to 10- to 14-year-olds. Also included are notes about the important physical, intellectual, emotional and social development of secondary school children – something every secondary school teacher should understand in order to meet their students' needs as learners. So, before we talk about reading, let's talk about the kids.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Researcher David Bloom says that 13 is the most critical age for students because of hormones, peer pressures and social forces.

As Theodore Roosevelt once said, 'Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em, "Certainly I can!" Then get busy and find out how to do it.' That is what this book is all about. We are going to get busy and find out how to teach reading when you're not a reading teacher!

## What kind of readers are at the middle level?

*Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.*

– Theodore Roosevelt

After I had been teaching a few years, I began to be able to identify my students' reading ability as early as the first day of school, and I could do this without their ever having to open a book! Based on my experience, I developed a theory that I think may be true on the first day of school for all secondary school teachers. I call it 'The three reading groups theory'. My 'scientific method' was to hypothesise that my students generally fell into one of three groups, and I defined these groups by where the students sat on the first day of school, before I made my seating plan. Think about your classes and see if this description fits your students.

### ■ Kids who choose desks in the front of the classroom

The kids who choose to sit in the front of the classroom come from homes that are more like their teachers' homes. They probably have parents who value education and school success. These are the kids who have been read to, and who have homes with magazines, books and newspapers available to them. Their parents have taught them the rules of school, such as: be attentive, do your homework, do not make crude noises in public, be polite and respectful to the teacher, and raise your hand before you answer a question. These kids come to school and know that learning is important. In fact, these are the kids who make a teacher's job so enjoyable. They always say things like, 'I love school; I love to learn; You are my favourite teacher.' What teachers do not realise or *maybe we do* is that these students go to every one of their teachers and tell them the same things. In teacher terms, these students are 'reading ready.'



### ■ Kids who choose desks in the middle of the classroom

The students who choose to sit in the middle of the room are almost as delightful as the students up front. The only real difference I have found with the kids in the middle is that they choose to do *only* as much work or to behave *only* as well as will keep teachers off their back. They tend to be realists who know they have to go to school because that's what kids do; it's the law. They come to school every day to see their friends, they do the required work at a minimal level, and they behave right to the limits of their teachers' tolerance levels. Most students are in this middle group, and in teacher terms, they are 'almost reading ready.'

### ■ Kids who choose desks in the back of the classroom

As most educators know, the further back in class students sit, the more at-risk the students become. The kids who choose where they sit want to be invisible – they want to disappear into the back wall and they do not want teachers to notice them. Many of them have attitude problems. Their body language often says it all; they have their heads on their desks or they are slouched over their desks with their legs stretched out and their faces reflecting a bored expression. By the time they get to secondary school, for many of these students, it isn't 'I cannot read,' it has become, 'I *will not* read.'

These kids have to save face at all costs. No wonder some of them have become discipline problems. School has not been a good place for them to be, and for any number of reasons (many out of the teacher's control), they have decided they will simply stay in school until they are old enough to leave. In teacher terms, they are 'not reading ready, they are highly at risk of failure, and probably struggling or non-readers.' Our prisons are full of people who dropped out of school, and, sadly, some of these kids have the potential to become one of those statistics.

Year after year, I saw these same three reading groups in my classes, and I did everything I could to make the class a successful experience for all of them. Until the last few years, I thought I had done a good job, but when I began to learn about teaching reading, I found I could have done so much more.

After recognising that students fit into the three reading groups, it suddenly occurred to me that there were struggling readers in all three groups, at different times. The students' ability to read actually depended on the text they were reading. Even good readers struggled when they read difficult or unknown text. (I still remember how I hated my statistics book at university and how hard I struggled to make sense out of all that gibberish!) I found many of my students – although they could already read at varying levels – also needed to be taught specifically what they were doing as they read successfully, so they could help themselves later when text became more difficult.

This book is a compilation of the ideas and strategies collected from many sources over many years, organised in a way that busy teachers will find useful. Since there is no one 'best way' to teach reading (or anything else for that matter), tailor these techniques to your curriculum, your students and your teaching style. In other words, take what you want and leave the rest.

There are many explanations for why some kids cannot read by the time they are in secondary school. However, one of the reasons is often that when they were taught to read in primary school, they were not ready to learn the skills. Just like their teachers, students are all very different. They come to us in all shapes and sizes and, especially in the case of secondary school students, at a difficult time in their lives. It is our job to take them where they are developmentally (physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially) and help them become the best learners they can be. *It is important to teach reading strategies intentionally.* If teachers truly believe that they make a difference – and I do – then teaching our students reading skills and strategies must become an important part of teaching them in every subject. This book is my way of sharing ideas that I have collected on how secondary school teachers can accomplish this awesome task.

*Setting a goal is not the main thing. It is deciding how you will go about achieving it and staying with that plan.*

– Tom Landry, football coach

