

# Independent Reading Inside the Box

*How to organize, observe, and assess reading strategies that promote deeper thinking and improve comprehension in K–6 classrooms*

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2nd Edition



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## Introduction

Have you ever looked at a group of students while they were reading independently? What does independent reading look like? What does it sound like? I found myself faced with this scenario not too long ago. I gazed at my students strewn around the room, some seated at their desks, some stretched out on the carpet, and others comfortably sprawled in various positions. Books in hand... open. One little girl had wedged her tiny body into a small crevice between a tall bookshelf and the classroom wall, her knees pulled to her chest and her book perched on them. A quiet hush filled the room, and I prided myself on having such a great session of independent reading in full swing. It *looked* like independent reading should, it *sounded* like independent reading should. But something was missing.

As I examined my students further, different questions began to form in my mind, questions of value, authenticity, and accountability. My thoughts changed from wondering what the readers were *doing* to what they were *thinking*. If I could somehow access their thoughts as they sat with their books, I would have a much greater insight into their learning. How could I ensure that they were actively engaged in their texts? How could I make this a time for students to effectively practice the many skills that I had been teaching through other aspects of my literacy program? Could I guide their learning when they were all reading different books? Was it possible to assess their comprehension of the material they were reading? How could I use their independent reading books as tools to support their language acquisition and understanding of word usage? Would I actually be able to help students to identify text elements using their own independent reading books? And, finally, what could I do that would keep students engaged in their reading, and yet provide me with these valuable teaching opportunities? I didn't want to bog down my students with piles of work, and the last thing I wanted to do was trek home each week with mountains of writing to which I had to respond. I had to find a simple tool—easy to use, easy to assess, and obviously effective. The answers to these many questions were what eventually evolved into the Reading Response Boxes introduced in this book.

Reading Response Boxes are very versatile teaching tools that allow teachers to strengthen and monitor students' comprehension of their independent reading. Response Boxes provide students with a variety of tasks intended to target a range of skills. Students are able to apply these skills to their self-selected independent reading texts, and teachers are successfully able to monitor, guide, and assess students' reading. These important tools serve to provide students with a range of graphic organizers and open-response opportunities to strengthen their thinking and responding about their books. They give teachers the opportunity

to provide guided practice for skills, and the tools to assess student acquisition of these skills in order to facilitate further instruction. Reading is a complex skill set, and yet much can be accomplished with such a simple tool—student engagement, focus, and progress are maximized.

Response Boxes differ from reading journals: in a reading journal, students and teachers write letters to each other to guide the students' reading; Response Boxes provide students with a variety of focused learning activities to consider while reading. The individual tasks are open-ended, and teachers can have direct influence over what skills are being reinforced through independent reading time. Teachers have the opportunity to provide students with a range of learning experiences, and students can choose which activity to complete at each stage of their reading. Reading Response Boxes can be individually tailored to meet the needs of individual classes and students.

When students write book reports, they are required to have completed reading the book in its entirety before beginning to respond to its content. By the time the teacher is able to provide feedback, the student has long since moved on to another text. There is little opportunity for a teacher to monitor and guide student learning. However, Response Boxes allow teachers to assess and guide the students' learning during the reading process. The student receives regular feedback about their reading, and the teacher has regular opportunities to monitor students learning and strengthen skills as necessary.

Reading Response Boxes are tools that provide teachers with countless opportunities to assess their students' understanding, guide their learning, and ensure that students are accountable during their independent reading time. Miriam Trehearne (2006) recommends that students read independently for 30 to 40 minutes every day. During this time, teachers are able to turn their attention to small-group instruction. The challenge, however, is making the 30 to 40 minutes of independent reading focused and purposeful, as well as building in the opportunity for accurate assessment and feedback to students. Thus, it becomes ever more important that students who are reading on their own, not directly involved in meeting with the teacher, are actively, purposefully engaged and accountable for their learning.