

How to Help Readers Grapple With Challenging Texts

Instead of matching students to texts they can breeze through, literacy guru Tim Shanahan says that students should be engaging with challenging texts that push them out of their comfort zones.

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One philosophy of reading, often referred to as leveled reading, assumes that the best way to teach students is to match them to books they can already understand and get through easily, and slowly build up their capacity from there.

Professor and literacy expert Tim Shanahan taught reading like this, too, when he was a young primary school teacher. Mostly, he did so because that's how reading had traditionally been taught: "It is hard to change ancient traditions on the basis of research or anything else," he reflected more recently. "It's even hard to envision how instruction could be different."

But Shanahan says that if we are serious about higher reading achievement, we need an [evidence-based](#) shift in mindset—encouraging and helping students to read, struggle, and ultimately comprehend more complex texts.

"Grade level texts or higher are the best choice for most students," Shanahan [wrote](#) in 2020. "Those are often the texts that students can't already read well. The purpose of a reading lesson then is to guide students to make sense of a text that they cannot succeed with on their own and to develop the abilities to deal with such texts."

Shanahan notes that many teachers shy away from this approach, fearing that challenging students might undermine their motivation to read altogether. But he argues that students will become motivated as they see themselves making progress on more and more challenging texts, growing and strengthening their muscles as readers in the process. "When kids are challenged and their learning is obvious, you won't need to worry about discouragement or a lack of motivation," [he says](#).

In previous posts, we've argued for a [balanced reading diet](#): Students should regularly be exposed to challenging texts, but have the latitude to read at or even below grade level periodically. In the end, the need to push students towards texts that are just beyond their reach is strongly supported by research on literacy—and learning more broadly. Encouraging students to read for pleasure makes sense, as well, to send the signal that reading is not always utilitarian, and not always difficult.

In a recent webinar [covered by EdWeek](#), Shanahan, who has spent much of his career touting the benefits of students consistently engaging with complex texts, highlighted three strategies teachers can use to do this effectively in their classrooms.

Ask Students to Read Above Their ‘Level’

Beginning readers (Pre-K to Grade 2) benefit from reading easy to understand books full of common words with repetition—*Green Eggs and Ham*, or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, for example. But by the second grade, Shanahan said, research shows students who have mastered basic decoding skills make faster progress by grappling with texts slightly out of their reach.

In a [recent study](#), 3rd graders struggling with reading outscored their more proficient peers when working with teachers on texts two to four grade levels above their reading level. “When all assessments were considered, assisted readers reading texts two grade levels above their instructional levels showed the most robust gains in oral reading fluency and comprehension,” researchers noted.

In his blog, Shanahan cautions that aiming for incremental, linear progress—inching kids forward day by day as readers—leads to bad teaching decisions. The mindset, instead, should be to expose kids to challenging textual features like figurative language, advanced vocabulary, and text structure so that they can learn the tools to read challenging work on their own. That means that “grade-level texts or higher” should be front and center as students learn how to decode unfamiliar text, how to use context clues to make enough sense of new vocabulary to keep reading (or re-read to clarify and comprehend), how to follow complex syntax and punctuation, and how to identify and interpret more sophisticated literary devices.

Advanced texts “provide students with an opportunity to learn—to learn the unknown words, to learn how to untangle the complex syntax, to learn to track the subtle connections across a text, and so on. If students can already read texts reasonably well, there isn’t much for them to learn from those texts,” Shanahan [writes](#).

Background Knowledge, Plus Upfront Preparation

Scaffolding by teachers throughout the process is imperative. In his webinar, Shanahan highlights the importance of background knowledge for readers. [According to research](#), a poor reader who has an understanding about the subject they’re reading—say, for example, baseball, or the evolution of dinosaurs—can often make up for low comprehension by relying on this background knowledge.

To set the table for learners, teachers can scaffold comprehension, asking students to recall knowledge they might have about a text or topic by asking them to brainstorm, or to respond to prompts that tease out what they already know about ancient Rome, volcanism, or ecosystems, for example.

Alternately, teachers can design quick exploratory activities that allow kids to become familiar with a time period or new subject matter before they take on reading challenges.

Other instructional strategies Shanahan suggests [on his blog](#) include being forthright with students about the goal of the challenging texts you’re putting in front of them. “Explain to students what you’re up to when you intentionally place them in texts they cannot already easily read,” he writes. “They need to know what the goals are and how they can recognize if they are improving in their ability to handle these texts. Give the students some sense of self determination.”

He also suggests giving students agency in selecting complex texts. For example, you might present them with two or three options of books or passages to choose from. To make complex texts easier to parse, Shanahan recommends teachers divide a text into smaller bits for students to work through and “take on parts of it rather than trying to digest it all in one bite.”

Get Strategic About Vocabulary Gaps

According to Shanahan, you can easily spend too much time on vocabulary. While he believes that it’s important to increase students’ knowledge of words, he recommends focusing on about 150 words over the course of the school year that are different from ones they’ve previously learned in other grade levels, but appear frequent enough in texts for them to be of use. He also recommends teaching students a list of key morphological elements that are most frequent for their grade level, such as “pre-”, “able-”, “-re”, and “-ment.”

Although not possessing the requisite academic vocabulary is a common problem for struggling readers, Shanahan’s webinar promotes an approach that is equal parts tactics and strategy: Teachers and students tackle a limited set of new vocabulary terms, but spend more time learning useful strategies to help them recognize gaps in comprehension and utilize strategies to decode new words that aid in comprehension.

Rather than pre-teaching an extensive vocabulary list for a complex text, then, Shanahan recommends teaching students how to recognize and be honest with themselves about when they don’t know the meaning of a word and lean on strategies to infer its meaning enough to continue reading, or look them up in the dictionary if the texts don’t provide enough context clues.

“An important part of vocabulary learning is developing an ability to use context to determine meanings of unknown words,” Shanahan [writes in his blog](#). “Good readers can both figure the meanings of words they’ve never encountered previously, and they can decide which of a word’s meanings is the relevant one in a given context.”

Encouraging students to re-read a passage or section of a text to get a better understanding of words they don’t have a grasp of is also useful, Shanahan notes, and comes with its own benefits [according to research](#) he cites—such as improved reading fluency, improved comprehension and improved literary appreciation.

Most importantly, he writes, students need to be taught how to persist when encountering headwinds in the form of unfamiliar words and, more broadly, to embrace [the messy process](#) of trying to make sense of something difficult to do.

“Sometimes readers just need to power through, making sense of as much of a text as possible, accepting that they aren’t getting it all since they don’t know all the words,” Shanahan writes. That means discussing or modeling that reading behavior with students and explaining that while perfect understanding is ideal, very challenging texts often push even advanced readers beyond their limits. “Sometimes 50% understanding just has to be better than 0%. Too many readers encounter a couple of unknown words and call it a day.”