

BUILDING A BLENDED CURRICULUM FOR FICTION- BASED UNITS

In this chapter, we look at *The Scarlet Letter* and see how to create a unit that uses this novel to help students transfer skills to their own novels. Just as your daily lessons will model smart reading of the class novel so students can apply it to their novels, we'll think through one book together so you'll feel confident duplicating this process with the books in your curriculum.

You might wonder where to start with this kind of planning. I recently worked with a group of high school teachers who decided to start with their least accessible class novel unit, based on *Great Expectations*. Revamping the entire curriculum at a go is a lot to ask of yourself. Think about what class novel results in the most fake reading, and begin there.

Why Start With Fiction?

Quick! Think of a favorite book from your teen years. My hunch is it's a fiction title. Fiction is a great place to try out this planning work for several reasons. Most reluctant readers are more easily hooked with stories than with dense fact-packed nonfiction. Narrative plots have a power to grip us; fictional characters stir up our empathy, affection, and disdain; and the evolution of those plots and characters provide powerful ways to teach us about ourselves and the world. Fiction doesn't just help us read; it helps us be better human beings. Why not take advantage of that potential?

Also, despite the valid push for nonfiction in the standards, it's still our job as English teachers, and our job alone, to teach literature. As stated in Chapter 2, a footnote in the introduction to the Common Core State Standards explains that although students' reading should weigh heavily in favor of informational texts, that includes all the texts students see across the scope of their day. Since students get only nonfiction in history, science, health, and every other class besides English, we are still doing our job by emphasizing literature.

Another reason to start with story is that we tend to feel confident teaching fiction. If you're an outlier and your heart is with nonfiction, skip to the next chapter. It will include a similar breakdown of planning steps and walking through the process using a nonfiction book. By starting with our strengths, we'll make our enthusiasm contagious to our readers.

What's Important to Know About This Planning Process Before Diving In?

Whether you're a novice or you've taught for years, adopting a new approach will demand a learning curve. Most of us were never taught this way, so we can't rely on what we know best: our own lives as students. We will rely on our expertise with class novels, but a shift in how we use that expertise is needed. Just like we swear we'll never be like our parents and then find ourselves saying the exact same things they did, we tend to regress to what we know best. After a stellar training in education, I found myself re-creating my student life in Mrs. Dayton's ninth-grade English class, teaching *A Tale of Two Cities* for an entire marking period. The routines we know best from our own student histories not only won't help us; they won't even fit.

This careful planning work will help us avoid that comfy old sweatshirt of the class novel anytime we feel frustrated or challenged by resistant students.

YOU'RE PLANNING A UNIT THAT TEACHES HOW TO READ WELL

We'll plan using what we do as readers of fiction, and that can be hard to articulate at first. Often we can't look back on how we were taught reading skills—most of us just *are* good readers. We got good at it by doing a lot of reading, not necessarily by having someone show us what to do.

Conversely, when we plan lessons to show students how to *write* well, we dive in. We recall everything we were taught about organizing ideas or composing a strong thesis. But when we think about how we learned to come up with a book's theme, our minds draw a blank.

There's no tangible example like a rough draft to show what we do as readers. It's tucked away in a series of subconscious moves. So, we'll need to look at how to make those moves visible and therefore make them tangible for students, too. We'll listen in on ourselves as readers, and it will remind us, as well as our students, that good reading results not from some secret genius ability, but rather from specific strategies that we can all employ.

In just a minute, we'll get started on demystifying what it means to be a good fiction reader. First, however, it's helpful to problem-solve for potential issues.

YOUR OWN IDENTITY AS A READER PLAYS A PART

Many of us harbor insecurities about our own résumé of reading expertise. We don't have a wealth of markers or milestone achievements for “good reading.” Maybe we remember being put in the high-level reading group in elementary school or making the cut to AP English. Those moments, however, exposed not what we did as “readers,” just that we passed a certain test.

Usually, we feel like good readers because we read a lot, enjoy it, or feel confident tackling tough texts. However, teaching students to be readers can feel like a bigger roadblock when we don't feel like reading superstars.

From my experience working with English teachers in middle and high schools, having a lack of confidence as a reader, or in knowing how to show what good readers do, is normal. With busy lives, many of us no longer feel like robust readers.

Teaching, as you well know, is not a lightweight profession. It's physically and emotionally demanding; it requires us to work well beyond the last-period bell, and our energy is sapped by spending hours with exhilarating, diverse, funny, challenging teens. For many of us, going home to a good book simply isn't in the cards. Maybe we were passionate "literature people" at one point, but our lives became swamped with family or chores or just keeping up with the never-ending pile of papers to grade.

The same temptations that pull our students away from reading can keep us from good reading habits; think Netflix, Facebook, and a desire for more sleep. Books can become something to cram into summer vacations, not an intellectual daily activity. If any of those are true for you, then sharing your reading self with students can feel less like a lesson in what to do and more like an exercise in what not to do.

YOUR READING IDENTITY IS STILL VALUABLE

Whether you're a devoted reader who feels twitchy when you don't have a great book in hand, or whether you'd like to expand your reading skills, it's okay. What we need to be able to do is tune into ourselves as readers and share what we notice, question, and do as we read. Who we are as English teachers and readers will be as diverse as the students in our classes. Some of us will be passionate voracious readers; others will be analytical readers who tune in easily to this metacognitive process; and others might be described as "when we can" readers. Any of those personalities can be represented as we show what readers do. And, if we can model our own paths from "when it fits in my schedule" readers to regular, thoughtful readers, it will serve as an excellent example for our students.

Getting Started

If this is your first time trying out this planning work, take forty-five minutes to an hour to do the following activity. This exercise helps us to transition into teaching the reader instead of the book, even though we don't need to do it every time we plan a unit. And while you can do this activity on your own, the results will be better (if slightly more time-consuming) if you do it with a colleague. In fact, you'll notice I refer to pairs or groups of teachers throughout, as I do this work collectively to draw on everyone's expertise.



STEP I: SPY ON YOURSELF AS A READER

We're going to spy on ourselves as we read the first chapter in *The Scarlet Letter*. In doing this, we'll generate a list:

1. What we pay attention to
2. What we question
3. What we think about as we read

It's important that we try this as readers at least once, rather than just generate a list straight away of what we want our students to be able to do. Otherwise, it's easy to slip back into our old habits of teaching the novel or adopting the language of what we feel pressured to teach. Without looking at what we do as readers, we tend to list terms like *synthesize* and *make inferences*. While we hope to get to those very skills, the terms can lead us right back to the issue that what good readers do, such as *synthesize*, often feels elusive.

Try this process at least once, but remember you can rely heavily on your existing units, too. If you've taught the class novel for years, much of your new focus

lessons might lie right in those old lesson plans! You likely outlined all of what you notice and think about as a good reader already—don't let that expertise go to waste.

If I tell students to synthesize, they'll nod and go do *something*, because they like me or they don't want to get a bad grade. Or, they might check out and get out their phone because *synthesize* makes no sense to them. But if I show what synthesizing actually *looks* like—if I put it into the language of what I'm paying attention to, what I'm rereading, what I'm putting together—that becomes something students can try. So, that's what we're going to do: remind ourselves what we do and notice as we read.

Let's get started with the first chapter!

Although here I'll walk you through the process with *The Scarlet Letter*, you'll start your planning by reading the first chapter of your chosen novel. You can use a short story, too, even though you're preparing to teach a novel. Remember, it isn't the text that is critical; it's what we do with any work of fiction. What we notice and think about in our chosen classic needs to transfer to our students' novels, and we can do that same work noticing and thinking in a short story. The advantage of trying it with a short story is that you will feel comfortable listing out what you think about across an entire text, from beginning to end. It's the process I care about for this exercise, not the text, so choose what works best for you.

It can also be helpful *not* to use your class novel to remind yourself you're teaching what good readers do in any work of fiction. With that in mind, here is a list of short stories I've used with teachers before planning a fiction unit:

Bambara, Toni Cade: "Raymond's Run"

Cisneros, Sandra: "Eleven"

Dahl, Roald: "The Landlady"

Howe, James (Ed.): Any story from *13: Thirteen Stories That Capture the Agony and Ecstasy of Being Thirteen*

Olsen, Tillie: "I Stand Here Ironing"

Poe, Edgar Allan: "The Black Cat"

Salinas, Marta: "The Scholarship Jacket"

Soto, Gary: "Mother and Daughter"

Tan, Amy: "Rules of the Game"

Tolstoy, Leo: "The Two Brothers"

Go to this Oklahoma school's website to find PDFs of many popular short (and long) works of literature: www.woodland.k12.ok.us/217497_3.

Everyone needs a stack of stickies or a blank piece of paper for notes, along with a copy of the text. Pens are in hand. Take time to silently read and mark up everything you notice. Again, don't feel like your job is to "make inferences"; instead it is to write honestly about what you're thinking about, noticing, and questioning. You might jot things like "Huh, that surprised me" or "I had to reread that part three times!" Of course, go for the more "literary" things, too, like noticing repetition, themes, and more. Just make your jots genuine.

We'll use sentence starters with students, too. As you read, try using these sentence starters to help you track your thinking:

I'm thinking . . .

I'm noticing . . .

I'm surprised . . .

I wonder . . .

STEP 2: SHARE OUT WHAT YOU NOTICED

Okay, now that we've marked up the text, it's time to share out what we noticed. Here's what a list looked like after tenth-grade teachers read the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*:

I found myself wondering who the narrator really is.

I wondered why he's so critical of the custom house.

Tons of detailed description of the custom house and Salem.

I was tempted to skim this part but made myself slow down.

There's already a conflict set up between the narrator and his Puritan ancestors.

I'm thinking about the purpose of the introduction, and why the story doesn't start right away with the story, so to speak.

How much of the narrator is Hawthorne? And can we even assume that they overlap?

It's already clear your reading of this book will be limited if you don't know about Puritans and their history.

The language is jarring at first. Hawthorne uses very high-level vocabulary that might scare off a lot of my students. Also, the sentences and paragraphs here are extremely dense and long. I know how to break down these sentences so they make sense, but my students might not.

The romance genre is stated in the introduction, but we know it's not necessarily the kind of romance that our students are familiar with.

The story is twice removed. We are learning about Hester Prynne's story through Jonathan Pue and then the narrator.

Now, if our group of tenth-grade teachers used this list of what they noticed as skilled readers to plan their unit, they'd be right back to teaching the book. We want to help our students master what readers can do in *any* novel. Now it's time to generalize these observations so our students see what to do in their books.

For example, if we notice how Hawthorne uses setting to set a mood and hint at bigger ideas in the novel, we can ask readers to pay attention to setting in their novels, and why the author set scenes as he or she did. We might tell readers, "Authors don't just randomly choose settings for scenes and novels; they do so for a purpose. Today we're going to pay attention to this in our books." This way, we're using what we do as readers to allow our students to be mindful of the same things as they read.

STEP 3: EXPAND WHAT YOU NOTICED IN YOUR CLASS NOVEL TO WHAT A READER CAN DO IN ANY NOVEL

Now we will rewrite our notes so they're not specific to our book but general so any reader can share in the same thinking.

Here are some questions to guide you:

- What thinking did you do that *any* reader can do?
- What was the bigger-picture idea that you noticed here?
- What overall reading move did you do?

Here are some *Scarlet Letter* examples using the list above:

Tons of detailed description of the custom house and Salem.

We can ask ourselves, “What thinking did you do that *any* reader can do?”

We can also say, “Setting is important. Pay attention to how the setting is described and make note of it.”

That’s how we’ll help students transfer this bigger idea to their own book!

I was tempted to skim this part but made myself slow down.

We can ask ourselves, “What overall reading move did you do?” We slowed down to help ourselves understand. That is a reading move we can ask all of our students to do.

Here’s what we can teach that readers can transfer to their own books: “We might be tempted to skim long stretches of description and narration that don’t have lots of exciting action or quick-moving dialogue. Let’s work today at slowing down and paying attention to the slow parts, too.”

It’s already clear your reading of this book will be limited if you don’t know about Puritans and their history.

We can ask ourselves, “What thinking did you do that any reader can do?” We know historical context is essential to a meaningful understanding of the novel. Here was the focus lesson we generated as a result: “When we read about unfamiliar settings, especially historical ones, it’s important to do supplemental research so we can read with understanding.”

Now we noticed that a bunch of our notes all had to do with the narrator. We grouped those together and asked ourselves what kinds of things we were paying attention to.

I found myself wondering who the narrator really is.

I wondered why he’s so critical of the custom house.

There's already a conflict set up between the narrator and his Puritan ancestors.

I'm thinking about the purpose of the introduction, and why the story doesn't start right away with the story, so to speak.

How much of the narrator is Hawthorne? And can we even assume that they overlap?

The story is twice removed. We are learning about Hester Prynne's story through Jonathan Pue and then the narrator.

Here are some possible focus lessons we created as a result that will help our readers pay attention to similar things in their own novels:

- Readers analyze the author's choice of narrator, considering the purpose and impact of that perspective.
- Readers are aware that a fictional narrator is distinct from the author but that the narrator may be a vehicle to express the author's beliefs.
- Readers know that there is a tremendous amount to pay attention to in the beginning of novels and that the point of view of the narrator is one of those essential components.

STEP 4: NARROW IT DOWN TO A UNIT'S WORTH OF LESSONS

We already came up with six focus lessons, and we haven't even finished covering all the possible lessons that could come out of the first chapter of your chosen novel. You've seen the process, however, and what it means to take our thinking as readers from a classic novel that we love, and use it to help our students transfer that thinking to books they love. These steps are so important. We read, jot, share out, and make decisions all around how to help our students to be skilled readers in any novel.

Now it's time to streamline this process so we have a unit's worth of focus lessons and we expose our readers to parts of the novel from start to finish. When I work with teachers, a unit's worth of focus lessons is usually about sixteen to twenty total. That's about four weeks of teaching, considering the typical field trips, assemblies, holidays, and other events that shorten our weeks from five complete days of instruction.

Sixteen to twenty days of using our novel means we won't get to everything we love in it, and that's okay. It's okay because we aren't teaching students the novel; we're teaching them how to be skilled readers.

The classic is a vehicle to get there.

Besides, when we do close readings of excerpts without dissecting every chapter of the class novel, there's a decent chance some will want to pick up that book, all on their own!

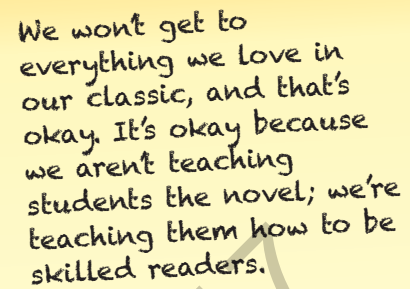
Even though you'll easily have hundreds of margin notes you could share, we'll whittle them down. We'll also streamline them to four to five weeks to speed up our units. The old model of six to eight weeks on a novel means too little volume of reading and, frankly, a less engaging pace. We will get to volume by pushing it in students' independent books, but by tightening the pace to four to five weeks on our classic novel, too, we'll get invigorating movement.

Remember, we're not teaching them everything that's important to know in *The Scarlet Letter*; we're teaching them how to read well. We'll teach them how to read fiction well over and over again throughout the year, while they're building their reading muscles in novel after novel after novel, getting ready for the marathon-like stamina they'll need in college. This isn't our one and only chance to teach students how to read fiction well. We can save other lesson ideas for later units. The nice thing is, since we're building four- to five-week units, we'll return to this genre again at least once if not more! It isn't a matter of getting everything we know into students' minds all at once.

We don't have time to linger. Besides, when we do go slowly, the temptation to go back to the outdated model of teaching the book, not the reader, is greater.

Tips for Narrowing It Down

- Take your most important thinking that happens across the novel. Look at your margin notes from across the book—make sure you have fairly equal notes from the beginning, middle, and end—and decide which of them are nearest and dearest to your heart. Remember:
 - We need to choose from across the whole text so students have a sense of closure, and also because what we do as readers varies greatly across a text.



We won't get to everything we love in our classic, and that's okay. It's okay because we aren't teaching students the novel; we're teaching them how to be skilled readers.

- At the beginning, a lot of groundwork is laid out in terms of character, plot, and setting that we need to teach.
- Across the book, we need to look at the ways characters evolve, how theme develops, and what changes. If we only focus on one part of the novel, we'll miss teaching what readers do that is specific to other sections. For instance, it's hard to trace character change if we only look at the first half of the book.
- Use only the thinking that you modeled using the classic that most of your students can do in their own novels, especially in your first units of the year.
 - For example, I was working with a group of eighth-grade teachers using *The Outsiders* to create a fiction unit. They loved how S. E. Hinton used literary references and allusions throughout. But, we also knew most of our students' choice novels were unlikely to have literary references to outside texts. Therefore, we shelved it (for now). Likewise, any focus lessons specific only to the class novel you'll want to eliminate. Too little bang for the buck.
 - ❖ An exception to the rule is if your heart is tied to something in your classic text! Just because something won't translate to most of your students' choice books doesn't mean you have to abandon it. Sometimes our classic text showcases something so beautifully complex and rich and important that we show it to students anyway. It's admittedly hard to not teach Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, even though our students' books are unlikely to be formatted as such. Know you're showing them something important, or you can find ways to help them see it in a bigger, more transferable context. For example, "Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter gives his text a flow, and the structure has purpose. In what ways did your author make the language flow?" or "In what ways did your author structure his or her text purposefully?"

For an example of a four- or five-week fiction unit for tenth graders, refer to **Resource 5**. It shows the focus lessons and text excerpts to model that thinking using *The Scarlet Letter*.

Now we've tried out looking at our chosen novels in a whole new way, as a way to teach transferable reading skills. It's time to craft a unit that will be fun to

teach, empower all our students, and get them truly reading, not skimming from SparkNotes.

How to Make Your Unit Pop and Avoid Potential Pitfalls

You've done important work already, getting to the essential reading work that will help your students be empowered readers of fiction. This is the groundwork that will help transform your classroom to a place where all students are engaged in meaningful reading. But we all know we learn how to make things even better through trial and error.

Consider this next section to be like the reviews on an Amazon product or the added notes on AllRecipes.com from those who have tried a recipe and tinkered with it, and want to share their learning curve to help you the first time. Here are some things that teachers and I have discovered to take these units to the next level, save you time and energy, and help eliminate little hiccups as well as full-on challenges.

WEAVE IN LESSONS THAT TEACH READERS GOOD HABITS IN ANY GENRE

When I worked with middle schools in Garfield, New Jersey, to map out a unit on *The Outsiders*, we saved every fifth lesson to support students as readers in general, not necessarily addressing fiction or the class novel. We were working with students who came to reading reluctantly, for the most part, and they needed support in strengthening their habits as readers of any genre.

Do this to avoid the problems we faced. At first, we found ourselves constantly battling nonreaders and not getting to teach the smart lessons we had crafted. Teachers would show students a wonderful example of character analysis and send them off to try it with their own books. Instead of reading, however, students sharpened pencils, asked to go to the bathroom, had to go to their lockers to get their books, and did a host of other things to avoid reading.

Even those who were reading, kind of, were easily distracted. They struggled to find books they wanted to read. Some chose the first book they spotted that had eye-catching graphics on the cover, or they grabbed the shortest books (*Night* by Elie Wiesel, for example) only to discover those short books weren't necessarily easy to read.

We realized something had to change, and that something was teaching students how to be readers, period.

We thought about everything students needed to be able to do in order to read consistently in and outside of class. We knew students needed to find books that interested them and that they could read, to stay focused as they read, to know when to abandon a book that isn't a good fit, and to remember to bring their book home and back to school each day.

Then, we folded in those lessons throughout the unit. Sometimes teachers found themselves repeating lessons, replacing lessons on theme and setting with ones they had already taught on finding a book that's a good fit, and rereading to understand confusing parts. We found lessons that taught students the habits of good readers were more important, anyway. Until readers could go off and read, there was little point in asking them to do analysis.

Likewise, work with your colleagues to brainstorm a list of all the potential hiccups or challenges that your students might face as readers. After you show them what to do in a novel and ask them to read quietly and transfer those skills for up to thirty minutes, what are all the things students might struggle with? Remember, even though we feel middle and high school students should have mastered these fundamental habits, many haven't. It's worth addressing these so we set up everyone for success.

Here's a sample list of what I've found we need to do to support many middle and high school students so they're ready to read every day and transfer skills to their independent reading. You can borrow from here or generate your own list based on what you frequently remind your students to do or feel frustrated that they don't do.

1. **We need to reread to help us understand our books.** Whenever we're confused, we can go back to the part we last understood and reread from there. We can also reread little bits and pieces to remind ourselves about certain characters or settings or to answer questions as we go.
2. **We need to find books we love.** We can do this by listening to book buzzes in class; asking friends, teachers, and librarians; going on Goodreads.com, checking out lists on NerdyBookClub.com; and more. (This can be a list that you add to throughout the year to help readers find books they want to read. See Chapter 2, pages 41 and 61, for samples.)

3. **We need to set goals for our reading.** We can aim high in terms of page numbers, chapters, or minutes of reading. We can also set goals for when we'll stop in our book to jot down our thinking and what we'll pay attention to as we read (Serravallo, 2015).
4. **We need to change course, if necessary.** Reading a book that's right for us should usually feel like we can keep going and going. If the book feels like hard work because the topic isn't interesting or it's just really tough to read, we can find a better choice.
5. **We need to read everywhere.** It can feel hard to find time to read when school ends, but we need to take our book home and bring it back to school every day. Here are some ways we can help ourselves find time to read outside of school:
 - Put our book in a gallon-size Ziploc bag to help us know where it is and keep it handy
 - Use the "Remind" app on our phones
 - Put a sticky note in a spot that we know we'll see it, like our bathroom mirror or our pencil case
6. **We need to revise our thinking as we get new information in a book.** This can look like adding to our double-entry notes in a third column, putting in asterisks, or using sentence starters like "I used to think . . . , but now I think . . ."
7. **We need to stretch out of our comfort zones with our reading choices.** That might mean trying a new genre if we've been only reading manga, sci-fi, or contemporary fiction for a while, or we might read several books by one author if we always skip around.
8. **We need to use every minute of in-class reading time.** For this commonly needed reminder, teachers and I have generated an if-then list with students, listing all the things that interrupt reading time and what readers can do to reduce interruptions or distractions. For example, if your Chromebook battery dies or your pencil breaks, then sign out a new Chromebook or use a new pencil from a designated spot instead of using the electric sharpener. Once you're finished with your book, fill out your bookmark (see page 65 in Chapter 2 and **Resource 4**) and quietly find a new one, or have a backup book ready.
9. **We need to read a lot.** Volume counts. We can strengthen our reading muscles to read more and more by tracking how much we read and increasing that number all the time.

Teach these general reading habits by modeling how you do it, then asking students to try the same.

Save time and lessons to help readers transfer these essential reading habits and skills, just as we teach them reading for theme or any other literary awareness. If I want my students to be aware of *how* to reread, I'm going to put my own book on the document camera and read aloud a confusing part, showing them where I stop and reread. Likewise, teach these general reading habits by modeling how you do it, then asking students to try the same.

USE A PREASSESSMENT TO SAVE TIME AND TO CRAFT UNITS THAT MATCH YOUR STUDENTS

Usually listing out what to teach is easy to generate—it comes from our old units, our class novel margin notes, and our new notes. Focus lessons also come from what we inwardly groan about on a regular basis that our readers are not doing, or what we see a few high flyers getting to and now want the rest of the class to get to, too. If these “need to knows” aren't readily apparent, or even if they are, it's a great idea to do a preassessment to see what your readers already know how to do within a genre and what they're ready for next.

Do a preassessment to see what your readers already know how to do within a genre and what they're ready for next.

Preassessments aren't graded; they're used to help us see what students are and aren't able to do. They're typically an easy, short common read with a few questions that address the type of thinking required for the upcoming unit. The text and questions are administered before the unit begins, when we still have time to adjust our teaching after seeing the results. Students' answers are a goldmine of information that lets us know what they know and what they need to learn.

An example of a simple preassessment before planning a fiction unit would be giving students a short story that is easy for them to understand. We don't want students struggling to comprehend the text, or they'll never get to show us their thinking about things like theme. We would ask students to read the story carefully and answer the following questions:

What did you notice and think about in terms of character? Setting? Theme?

Use examples from the story to back up your ideas.

We can make these questions more specific, but even these general questions elicit important information for us to use when we plan.

If many students already notice that characters are complex, for example, we don't need to teach that concept. If, however, most students rely on superficial observations such as physical characteristics to create ideas about characters, then we know to teach our class how to use what characters say and do to build their theories, and how to pay attention to minor characters as well.

The point is that doing a quick preassessment saves us time in the long run. We see what students do and don't know, and then we can plan and fine-tune our units accordingly. This isn't just a time saver, either. Preassessments let us meet the needs of our students.

USE RESOURCES TO HELP YOU PLAN

In addition to what we collect from preassessments and spying on our reading selves, there are plenty of other resources to help guide our planning.

Professional Books That Offer Excellent Suggestions for What to Teach Fiction Readers

There are many smart writers out there publishing books about what we do as readers of fiction. Their books are chock full of the thinking that we need to do and make transparent for our students. We can use them to get right to middle and high school-level reading strategies. Here are some of the books teachers and I have relied on and loved:

Beers, K., & Probst, R. (2013). *Notice and note: Strategies for close reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2015). *Text-dependent questions: Pathways to close and critical reading, grades 6–12*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Serravallo, J. (2015). *The reading strategies book*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Our Margin Notes in Class Novels

Find your dog-eared copy of *The Scarlet Letter*, filled with years' worth of scribbles and jots in the margins. Those notes are planning gold! Use your notes in your copies of class novels and pull out what you know is important to understand, think about, and pay attention to. Just remember that you'll likely have

to whittle these down from hundreds of notes to include only the must-knows, what your students need most, and what aligns with the standards.

The Common Core State Standards or State-Designed Equivalent as a Guide

Often a quick look at the standards will get us jump-started if we're stuck on what to teach. After looking at the grade-level standards for reading literature at CoreStandards.org, we'll say, "Oh right, let's make sure we work on getting to theme" or "That's it—they need to cite text evidence." And then we can use the standards' language to ensure we do grade-level work on theme and citing evidence.

Aligning Our Units to the Standards. Unless you teach in a mythical land that exists apart from standards-aligned curriculums, you'll need to be explicit in your unit plans how these focus lessons meet grade-level standards.

You can ensure that alignment by having the standards in mind while you comb through old margin notes in the class novel or read for text excerpts, zeroing in on thinking or sections of text that will help show ways of getting to the skills in the standards. In planning with teachers, however, I've found that we are able to first generate our lists of focus lessons and then find the standards that match up with ease.

One of the beautiful things about planning this way is that we're teaching reading skills and strategies, not the content of a novel. The language of our lesson's objective often mirrors what's right there in the standards for reading literature. Looking at the standards helps us, however, narrow down and group our lessons and adjust our language to make sure we're addressing what students need to know.

If we go back to the sample list of focus lessons from the first activity that helped us articulate what we do as readers, this is how that list would match the standards:

- *Readers pay attention to and can cite what characters do and say across a text to develop theories, and they can also compare theories about various characters to look at their similarities and differences.*
- *Readers notice how characters impact one another and if characters change as a result of others' influences.*
- *Readers use evidence from the text to show how characters are complex and may have contradictory traits.*

These line right up with two of the literature standards:

RL.9–10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.9–10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

- *Readers pay attention to what might happen later on in the book and how authors might build our expectations about or create suspense with certain clues.*

This aligns with *RL.9–10.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.*

Usually, a few focus lessons on our lists will line up with one standard. That's good—we want about three to four standards at most across a unit. There are ten anchor standards for reading literature for a reason. These are big-ticket items to teach, break down, and revisit, not one-and-done chores to tick off. If we break down those big reading concepts across several days, our students stand a good chance of really “getting it.”

Now we can also do this same work of lining up our focus lessons to the standards for our non-genre-specific list of what good readers do. Those lessons may not count toward the three to four standards; they're what our kids need to do to be successful readers. We can often find matches to these focus lessons in an earlier grade's reading standards or in the writing, language, or speaking and listening standards. Even if we don't find an easy match, it's worth keeping them. Not everything worth teaching is in a grade-level standard. And because I've never worked in a classroom with 100 percent at-grade-level students, what readers *need* to be able to do is not always going to be in a generic list of what they *should* be doing.

Remember, these essential need-to-knows are something you'll never get from ready-made curriculums. Teaching isn't a fast-food restaurant where we can give every hungry customer a prepackaged meal. We're better off personalizing our instruction to individual tastes or, rather, what students didn't get and still need to become high-level thinkers and readers. Starting from what you want them to know and do will result in a genuine unit that impacts your students much more than anything you can find on TeachersPayTeachers.com or Pinterest.

LAY OUT THE UNIT, DAY BY DAY

Just like in the model unit using *The Scarlet Letter*, we'll want to lay out our lessons across days and weeks. It may help to use a template like the one in **Resource 6**.

A few pointers as you go: Typically, mapping out the unit works best when we look at one standard across four or so lessons, or one week. Each week or so of lessons will concentrate on about one standard, fleshed out in three or four ways. These will come right from your list, grouped by standards. For instance, if we want students to really be experts at characterization, it will happen across at least several days, showing students multiple ways to become better at this concept. Take a look at the sample units in **Resources 5, 7, and 8** as examples of what this looks like.

Before moving on to Week 2 and to a new standard, make sure to address that essential list of what readers need that isn't specific to fiction. Some teachers keep these as Friday lessons, pulling students back to what it means to be a good reader before unstructured reading time over the weekend. Regardless, aim for one non-genre-specific focus lesson a week, for as long as needed, or until students are habitual and engaged readers. These lessons help our students grow in skills like focus and stamina and any other skill or habit that good readers use. At the end of **Resource 7**, a sample unit on *The Outsiders*, there are optional lessons outlined to support reading habits apart from a specific genre or reading standard. These lessons anticipate likely issues for the eighth-grade readers, but teachers can incorporate them (or others) as needed.

It also helps to think about which concepts readers can focus on right away in Week 1, and which are built up to in Weeks 2 and 3. For instance, theme isn't something we can teach on the first day, but characters and setting are logical places to start. (In the introduction to Serravallo's 2015 *Reading Strategies Book* there is an extremely useful chart showing the hierarchy of possible goals for readers, outlining what areas to focus on first, next, and so on.) First, readers need to understand what's happening in the book—it's the first standard in the Common Core for good reason. Then readers can do additional thinking and analysis of that baseline understanding. Our lessons will flow accordingly.

CHOOSE TEXT EXCERPTS FROM YOUR CLASS NOVEL

To find great excerpts, we can go back to where we marked the text in the first place as a "spy on ourselves" text or where we marked up the margins in previous years' teaching. Or, we can comb through it anew. The great thing is that we'll

typically find many examples for each focus lesson. If you're working with more than one teacher, you can divide this up to save time, each finding excerpts for different lessons.

What to Keep in Mind as You Choose Passages From the Novel

1. **Go for a page or less of text when possible.** More than a page can muddy the focus of what we're looking for or run the risk of losing our listeners. When we want to show a reading move that happens over a larger section of text, such as character change, we can pull several short excerpts.
2. **Go for parts of the text that provide action, dialogue, and moments of tension** when possible, as opposed to long descriptions, inner thinking, or setting. Remember, every time we read an excerpt, we're essentially giving a little book buzz and selling this book. By choosing passages of rich writing and plot turns, we entice our students to want to see more.
3. **Go for easy-to-understand passages when read out of context.** Remember, we won't be reading the entire book, so it helps if this part of the text makes sense on its own. For instance, go for scenes with main characters as opposed to a peripheral character who only shows up once.

CREATE RESOURCES TO HELP SUMMARIZE THE NOVEL BETWEEN EXCERPTS

Keep in mind that when we teach these lessons, our readers are getting isolated glimpses of the novel. Any time we sense these excerpts may confuse our students, we need to give them a quick summary of what's happened since the last time we looked at the book. One teacher I work with pulls up the SparkNotes whenever his readers need them. Instead of students secretly using these to get away with fake reading, the class uses them together to understand the plot of the book or refresh their knowledge of who's who. Then the teacher goes right into modeling what he pays attention to and thinks about as a reader, and students go to their choice reading to do the same.

We can also create resources to help students see these excerpts in context and prevent confusion when referring to our class novel. We can crib right from

SparkNotes if needed, but if we've taught the novel, we'll have this at the tip of our tongues.

Here are two examples of visuals to keep the class in on the major plot turns and character developments of the class novel:

The Scarlet Letter: Key Events

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Where? When?</u>	<u>Who?</u>	<u>What?</u>
Intro	Custom House, 100 years after Scarlet Letter	Nameless narrator	Discovers docs. in scarlet "A"; begins to write "romance"
Ch. 1	Outside prison door. 17th century Boston	Crowd of on-lookers	symbolic rose growing in dreariness
Ch. 2	same as Ch. 1	Hester holding baby Pearl	Crowd is taunting Hester. Hester is in disbelief.
Ch. 3	still outside prison at scaffold	Chillingworth, foundling Fathers	C. doesn't admit to being Hester's husband

The Scarlet Letter: Key Players

Hester Prynne

Protagonist. Wears "A."
Married to Chillingworth.
Affair with Dimmesdale.
Passionate, strong, alienated.

Pearl

Hester & Dimmesdale's
illegitimate daughter.
Moody, mischievous.
Wise beyond her years.

Chillingworth

Hester's much older husband.
He sent H. ahead to America
and he was captured briefly
by Native Americans. Now
disguised as doctor.
Vengeful. Bad guy.

Reverend Dimmesdale

Secret father to Pearl.
Former lover of Hester.
Tormented by guilt.
Deeply conflicted.

These are examples of charts used about halfway through *The Scarlet Letter*. We created similar charts for what students needed to know in following chapters. It's worth noting that teachers created these charts, not students. The information on them isn't something students spend time copying down. The notes are there as a resource so students understand the excerpts easily, and they can put their energy into thinking about their own books.

Every time we use an excerpt that assumes knowledge of a significant plot turn or change in character or introduces a new character, we add that needed information to our charts. Then, before getting to that day's excerpt, we take a minute to refer to the chart and sum up any key events or character changes. This doesn't take more than a minute or two at most, even when students ask clarifying questions. And typically, they don't have questions.

Remember, we know and love this book. That's why we chose it. And while it's a bit heartbreaking for us, our students aren't usually desperate to know why Ponyboy keeps slipping out of consciousness, or whether Chillingworth is the father or not. On the plus side, it's a good thing students are ready for us to stop talking about our book—so they can get to the books they care about!

PAT YOURSELF ON THE BACK

Congratulations. We have thought through a novel together so you can duplicate the process using your own class novels. When we do this again with nonfiction in the next chapter, the process will feel even more comfortable.

Once independent reading is happening and these plans are in place, we start seeing results in the form of authentic reading and growth. Students are immersed in books, and now we are able to teach what truly moves them as skilled and eager readers.

Now it's time to treat yourself and bask in the glow of your smart unit that gets to the highest level of teaching: transfer. What will that pampering reward look like? A bowl of M&Ms? A nap? I have a hunch it will be an uninterrupted hour with a great book.

Enjoy.