EDUCATION WEEK
2018

SPOTLIGHT

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LITERACY INSTRUCTION

EDITOR'S NOTE

From improving grammar and writing competencies to measuring online reading abilities, literacy skills are critical to educational development. This Spotlight explores the effects of the Common Core on reading and writing instruction, the impact of rising automation on literacy skills, and how to empower students to love writing.

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Commentary

Published June 19, 2018 in Education Week's Curriculum Matters Blog

The State of Common-Core Reading and Writing in 5 Charts

By Stephen Sawchuk

Eight years later, have the Common Core State Standards led to a revolution in how reading and writing are taught?

Not exactly. Teachers have shifted practices dramatically on vocabulary and assigning nonfiction, but they've struggled with some of the other shifts in those standards—most notably the tenet of having students of all reading abilities to grapple with grade-level texts.

That's according to a new, nationally representative survey of some 1,200 teachers published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The teachers fall into in three categories: those teaching grades 4-6, 6-8, and 9-10. The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The usual survey caveats apply, of course: These are self-reported practices, not observed practices, which means that we can't know for sure how teachers interpreted the questions. And it can be hard to capture detailed information about really nuanced aspects of teaching in a survey.

Let's dig in!

Vocabulary Is Now Largely Taught in Context

Most teachers now teach new words in the context of reading and conversation. This is encouraging, Fordham analysts write, since most ELA scholars agree that learning words in the context of rich texts is superior to memorizing a list each week and taking a quiz on it.

Of note, 53 percent of teachers reported teaching domain-specific vocabulary essential to each discipline (sometimes called by practitioners "Tier III" words); fewer taught general academic vocabulary (or "Tier II" words).

Literacy experts greeted this finding with open arms.

"The news on vocabulary is heartening, moving away from list-based and program-based approaches," said Carol Jago, a former president of the National Council of Teachers of English and now a consultant, who was not involved in the survey. "I think all of that was eating up too much classroom time."

Teachers Continue to Choose Reading-Level, Not Grade-Level Texts

Here's an instance in which there's evidence of some backsliding. Compared to Fordham's last big survey on common-core reading, in 2012, the proportion of teachers reporting using "grade level" texts rather than texts based on students' reading levels has fallen among secondary teachers.

This wades right into one of the common core's biggest controversies. The standards prioritized giving even struggling readers opportunities to learn grade-level texts. It challenged what had long been an orthodoxy in reading instruction, especially for lower-level readers: choosing "just right" texts for each student that won't cause frustration. The problem with that, the thinking goes, is that some kids are never challenged enough to reach the difficulty or complexity of grade-level reading materials, and thus fall further behind.

Fordham found that far fewer secondary teachers are assigning grade-level reading materials, and among teachers overall, fewer than half are assigning those texts.

Timothy Shanahan, an emeritus professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, pulled no punches in interpreting the results: "It means holding kids back and not learning texts that are hard enough," he said.

(Shanahan provided feedback on an early draft of the survey report, and also helped to write portions of the common core.)

One explanation for this finding may also be that teachers haven't been given enough training on how to "scaffold" more complex readings for students who are furthest behind.

"Asking teachers to teach kids who are well below grade level these texts is an extremely big ask, even for experienced and skilled teachers," said David Griffith, a senior research and policy associate at Fordham who co-wrote the report accompanying the survey findings. "When I look at this, as a former teacher who is now interested in policy, that's the one where I think, 'Wow, teachers really have to have their act together and be supported to do this well.' I see it as a basic capacity issue."

Evidence-Based Reading Is Common, But Writing Lags

Most readers know that the common core highlighted the importance of reading and writing based on texts, not just on

FIGURE 9: Which best describes your approach to teaching vocabulary last school year?

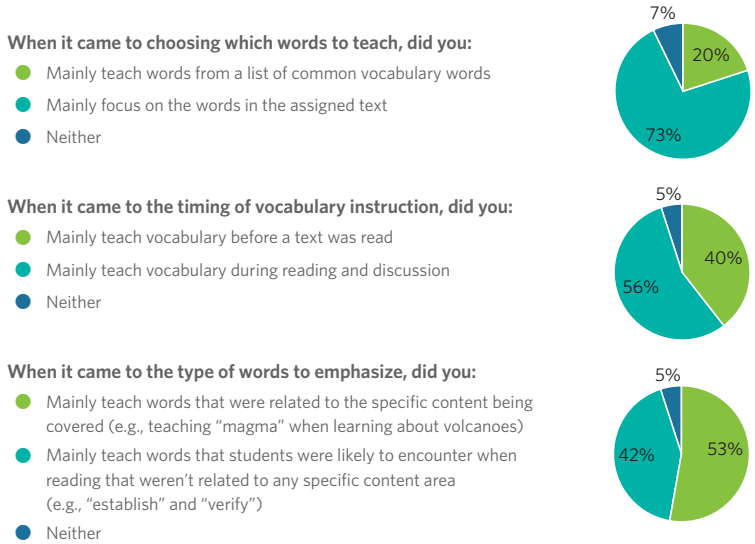

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FIGURE 4: When it comes to choosing reading materials, are you more likely to choose texts:

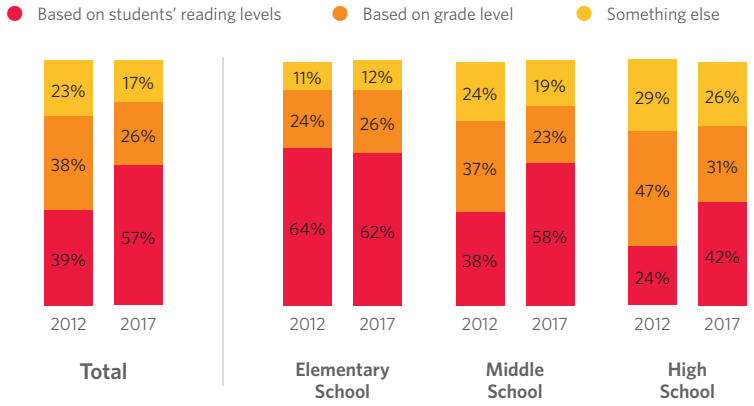


FIGURE 12: Which of the following would you say are must-haves in a high-quality "close reading" lesson? (Check all that apply.)

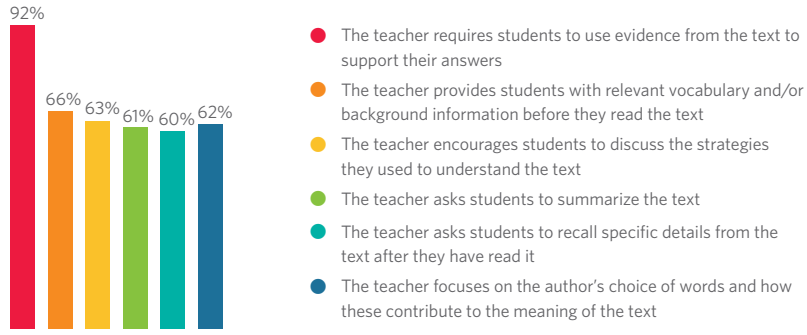
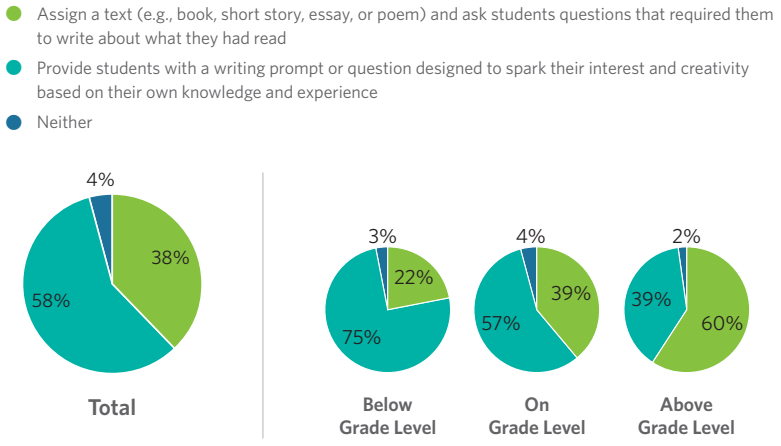


FIGURE 17: When giving writing assignments last school year, were you more likely to:



personal experience or creative writing—by far the most dominant kind in U.S. schools through the 2000s.

On the reading front, teachers are overwhelmingly asking students to cite evidence from texts when they teach "close reading," which basically means assisting students as they grapple with a text's craft, structure, and meaning. More than 90 percent of respondents said they did that.

No other techniques used as part of close reading scored as high, which Jago said probably reflects that some other best practices weren't offered as drop-down choices on the survey.

"The idea of evidence-based questions, text-based questions is an easy idea to get your head around. Other techniques are harder to improve in instructional materials, and I do think there are a whole lot of things that high-quality close reading would have that aren't described here," she said. For example, teachers must make sure students feel safe offering up opposing points of view, that they are intrepid in their interpretations, and that all students have a chance to speak up, she noted.

On the other hand, writing still tends to be based on personal experience or creating a narrative, rather than based on texts. This was yet another flash point in the common-core wars, since personal experience was long a component of "workshop" -type writing classrooms.

What's potentially most problematic here, literacy experts said, is that teachers reported giving below grade-level kids tasks based on knowledge or experience, not asking them to grapple with a text, as they did for more skilled students. In other words, students who are presumably more academically advantaged are getting what appears to be more challenging work.

Fiction Is on the Decline

Arguably, the single most divisive issue in the English section of the common core was its emphasis on giving students access to challenging nonfiction text as part of the effort to build their background knowledge and their academic vocabularies.

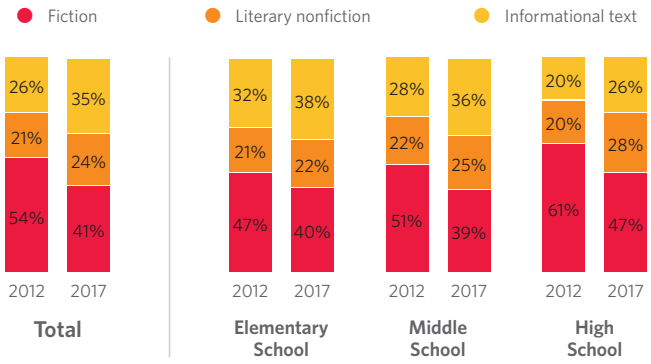
(There was quite a lot of confusion about what the standards actually required on this front. In brief, the standards called for this to gradually shift in favor of nonfiction until, in high school, about 70 percent of what they read is nonfiction. But this was supposed to be their reading diet across all the content areas; in English, they were still expected to engage in literature.)

The survey found that, indeed, nonfiction is on the rise among all grade levels, making up more than a third of the materials the teachers reported teaching.

Here again, interpreting what these findings mean is a little difficult. On the one hand, teachers are clearly responding to what the common core demands.

On the other hand, Fordham sounds like it's having some misgivings about this ap-

FIGURE 20: Think about the different types of reading materials that you taught last school year. What percentage of time would you say went to fiction, literary nonfiction, and informational text?



proach. The nonprofit notes that 40 percent of teachers reported assigning fewer "classical texts or teaching the literary canon," and if those are being replaced by a random, rather than a coherent, collection of texts, it won't benefit students, Griffith said.

Expect this finding to pique the interest of the Pioneer Institute, a Massachusetts-based group that has been one of the foremost opponents of the standards, and has repeatedly cited the loss of "classic literature" in its push against the standards.

Final Thoughts

Overall, the survey paints a mixed picture about the effect of the common core on instruction. The standards are still in use (sometimes under other names) in dozens of states, but whether they've really penetrated classrooms is a different question.

Shanahan, for one, is concerned.

"Overall, I think this is not good," he said. "I think maybe the political brouhaha around the common core scared people away from implementation."

States may have kept the standards in place, but the fear of raising opponents' hackles might have prevented them from sharing resources with each other or providing teachers with sustained help on some of the most challenging practices, he surmised.

The data, though, are somewhat challenging to interpret, because of the survey-based issues noted above. For more perspectives on the implementation of standards in the classroom, check out the work products from the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning, a research collaborative with several continuing studies.

Fordham also offers recommendations for ELA teachers. The most interesting one is to organize lessons around "text sets," or groups of texts on a theme or topic that are scaffolded in difficulty for students and help build background knowledge. Text collections are part of the work that Louisiana has assembled in its homegrown efforts to design curriculum for the common core. It's also the approach taken by several new ELA content providers such as Newsela, which focuses on nonfiction. ■

Published September 27, 2017 in Education Week's Special Report: Schools & The Future of Work

Are Our Jobs Making Us Less Literate?

Some experts blame automation for a decline in literacy skills

By Sarah D. Sparks

Employers increasingly demand complex literacy skills from students, but new studies in the United States and Canada suggest that many young people entering the workforce may lose those skills before they can use them.

From 2003 to 2011, the average literacy score for Americans ages 26 to 35 dropped 14 points, equal to more than a half year of schooling, according to a series of recent studies in the United States and Canada. That was the largest drop of all age groups, but American and Canadian men and women of every age lost ground during that time, even though both countries now have among the highest levels of educational attainment in the world.

T. Scott Murray, the international study director of the International Adult Literacy Survey, or IALS, and the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey, ALL, and the senior adviser of the Organization for Economic Co- operation and Development for adult skill assessment, led the newer studies. He believes that even in jobs where workers have not been replaced by machines, the use of automation may be "dumbing down" jobs in ways that separate the most highly skilled workers from all others.

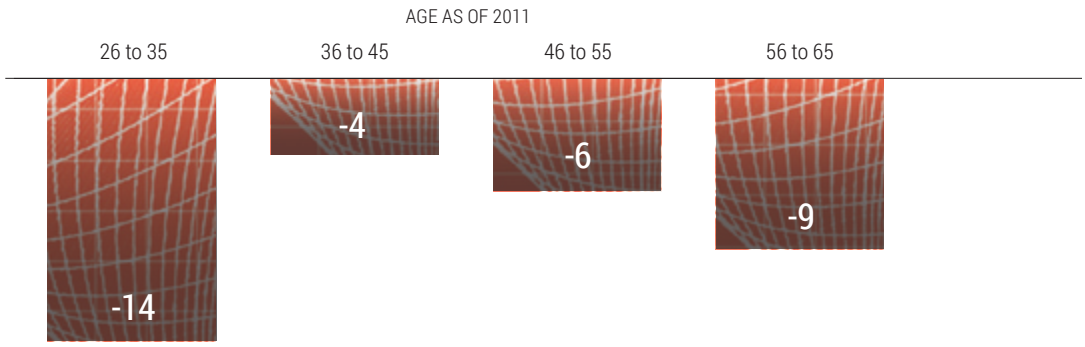
Murray and other education and workforce researchers argue that schools should be working to both make students' higher skills more visible to employers—so they know students are capable of more complex work—and help students learn to continue reinforcing their skills after graduation.

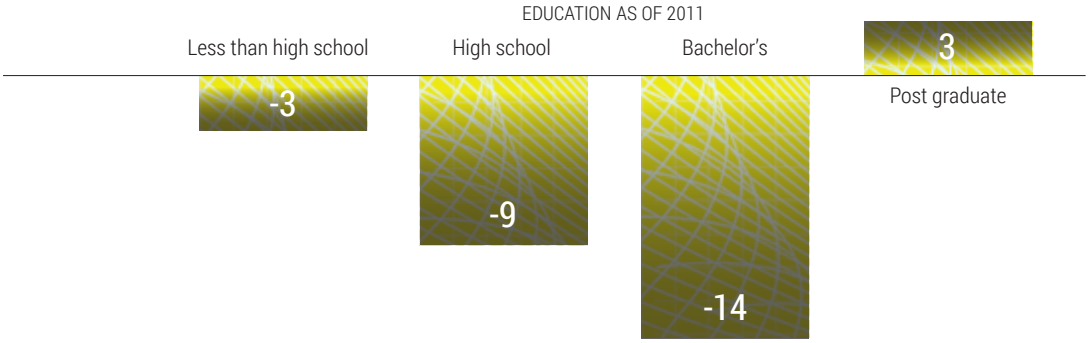
"Bottom line, in both Canada and the United States, we have put all our eggs in the college basket. If we get participation rates up high enough, … that's a good start, but we ignore the market efficiency with what skills are developed," he said. "The skills students have are mostly invisible to employers; they are still using credentials that don't say much about what a student can do. If employers do not create jobs that are skill-intensive, then workers' literacy skills will degrade through lack of use."

Murray and colleagues at the Canadian research firm DataAngel compared

LITERACY SCORE DIFFERENCES BY AGE

Change in average literacy score between the 2003 Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey and the 2011 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies





LITERACY SCORE DIFFERENCES BY EDUCATION

Change in average literacy score between the 2003 ALL and the 2011 PIAAC for adults with differing levels of education

the literacy skills of matched comparison groups of test-takers in 2003 and 2011, based on age, gender, education level, and other background characteristics. They used two aligned international literacy tests: the 2003 ALLS and the 2011 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), administered by the OECD. Each test is given to nationally representative samples of adults in each country who are ages 16 to 65 to gauge their literacy levels across a wide range of activities, including analyzing news articles and maps, understanding administrative forms or tables, and comparing the terms on different mortgage offers. Both tests use the same 500-point scale and have been linked through common items.

They found, as did prior research, that the more education people had, the higher their initial literacy gains after college; those who earned a college degree were more likely to see literacy gains than those with only a high school diploma. But the studies also found that adults who had earned a postgraduate degree—"people judged to be central to participation in the emerging knowledge economy," according to the studies—were the only ones who continued to improve their literacy skills, by about 3 points on average, over the 2003-2011 study period.

By contrast, the greatest skill loss seemed to be among young professionals who had earned associate or bachelor's degrees, Murray said.

> "As I look cross-nationally in education systems, one of the things that strikes me about the U.S. is how little public lifelong-learning policy we have."
>
> **STEPHEN REDER**
> PROFESSOR OF ADULT AND DIGITAL LITERACY, PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY, OREGON

Murray's studies do not follow a single cohort over time, but Stephen Reder, a professor of adult and digital literacy at Portland State University in Oregon, said the results are similar to his own previous longitudinal studies of adults.

"As I look cross-nationally in education systems, one of the things that strikes me about the U.S. is how little public lifelong-learning policy we have. It's very piecemeal, left up to the private sector," Reder said. "K-12 is very, very important, but once people leave K-12 or K-16, they are in the workplace for 40 or 50 years, and we don't have systematic policies and programs to support lifelong learning."

Prior research has shown technology boosts the average skill level of a worker doing a job, because it automates any task that is repeatable, leaving people responsible for the tasks that require higher skills, according to Anthony Carnevale, a research professor and the director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, who was not associated with the studies.

"Maybe what you've got here is ... there's a section of the labor force that has been relegated to lower-skilled jobs," Carnevale said. "The machinist who lost the machinist job is now probably not working in the same place and may be in a job where the skill level is not growing."

For example, Murray pointed to manufacturing workers in West Virginia. In the past 15 years, the average worker has seen his wages increase only $394 during that time, in part because of rising automation of lower- and medium-skilled jobs. But those at the highest skill level have had their wages increase by $8,825. "Those people at the top, because of automation, are supposed to be way more productive, because they have higher skills—but they are also in very short supply," Murray said.

Murray is working with schools in Ontario, Canada, to encourage

teaching students more critical thinking and problem-solving skills in reading, while Reder has been helping a coalition of 63 communities in California, Louisiana, Minnesota, New York, and Texas that are building a database of free, self-paced, online courses to improve digital and higher literacy skills for homeless, immigrant, and other vulnerable adults.

"The change on the job is much faster than it was before, much more fluid," Carnevale said. "The learning requirements increase and don't ever stop. If they do stop, you are in the wrong occupation and are going to be in trouble."

The gap between the number of highly skilled workers and the numbers of jobs requiring them has kept wages high, he said, but it also makes it more likely that employers will continue pushing to automate or simplify any part of a job that can be, creating even less opportunity for workers to build skills over time.

Murray and his colleagues found that workers' skill loss or gain was associated with how often they planned their own activities, influenced people, engaged in complex, nonroutine problem-solving, and performed other mentally demanding tasks. Mentally demanding jobs generally required literacy skills at the highest or second highest levels measured by PIAAC, including the ability to apply reading skills, think critically, and solve complex problems.

"Some firms are [adding training], mostly out of desperation because they are afraid they will go out of business due to competition," Murray said. "But most are still chugging along merrily; they didn't have to think about training much before, and now that the game has changed, most of them don't even have a way of thinking about it."

In the United States alone, Carnevale estimates that adult workers and their employers now spend $300 billion on informal training, but K-12 education, even career education, is generally not aligned to it.

"We talk about career pathways a lot in K-12, but they are generally thought of as single paths, single careers, and that doesn't meet the needs of a lot of workers now," said Reder, who was not part of Murray's study. "When people go to college, they don't necessarily know where they are going to be working five years after college, much less 25 years after they get out." ■

Published April 25, 2018 in Education Week

U.S. Students Surprise on New Exam of Online Reading

International results leave some 'elated'

By Benjamin Herold

NEW YORK

U.S. 4th graders performed surprisingly well on a new international test of online reading ability, outperforming their peers in 10 of the 15 other educational systems that participated.

"We were actually elated," said Peggy G. Carr, the associate commissioner for assessment at the National Center for Education Statistics, during a discussion of the results at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, held here this month.

"I think it's very clear that our students are more savvy than many of us have given them credit for," Carr said.

The findings come from the first administration of ePIRLS, a new version of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. The new assessment of online reading ability was taken in 2016 by 85,000 4th graders around the world, including 4,100 students in 153 U.S. public and private schools.

The ePIRLS exam asks students to navigate a "simulated internet environment"—including web pages, tabs, and hyperlinks directing them to a mix of text, photos, charts, and interactive animations—in order to find and understand relevant information.

The new assessment comes amid much hand-wringing about students' ability to effectively read on the internet, where concerns about everything from digital distractions to "fake news" are prevalent.

Outside experts expressed cautious optimism about the results.

But they also emphasized the exam's limitations, as well as disparities in achievements among different groups of students.

"ePIRLS provides an important early attempt to evaluate online reading of informational text for learning," said Donald Leu, an education professor and the director of the New Literacies Research Lab at the University of Connecticut.

"It does not fully represent online reading, however."

A Familiar Achievement Gap

The ePIRLS is a new supplement to a broader international assessment of 4th graders' reading literacy.

The PIRLS assessment aims to gauge how students are making the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." The exam has been administered every five years since 2001.

Overall, the results of that exam suggest that the general reading ability of U.S. 4th graders has declined slightly, even as other countries have improved.

The new ePIRLS exam is not intended to use computers to measure the same reading skills as the traditional assessment. Instead, it reflects the belief among literacy experts that reading online requires its own unique set of skills.

Rather than identify the theme of a literary passage, for example, the ePIRLS asks students to integrate information from across a mix of web pages and interactive online elements.

Problems on the test are structured as class projects. Students interact with an avatar who guides them through a series of tasks—for example, searching curated web pages for information about Mars, then answering questions about NASA's Rover explorer by navigating an interactive animation.

Overall, the average score for U.S. 4th graders on the exam was 557 out of 1,000. About 18 percent of those students scored "advanced" (625 or better) on the exam, and 38 percent scored "high."

Familiar achievement gaps also showed up in the U.S. ePIRLS results.

On average, girls scored higher than boys. Asian and white students scored

higher than their black and Hispanic peers. And students in lower-poverty schools scored better than students in higher-poverty schools.

The top performing international school systems on the ePIRLS exam were Singapore, Ireland, and Norway.

Test has Limitations

Researchers also found that 4th graders seemed to enjoy taking the new test.

"Students seem to be more engaged interacting with the [ePIRLS] assessment" than with traditional paper-and-pencil exams, said Carr of NCES.

But while there was some cause for enthusiasm, outside experts remained skeptical.

Leu of the University of Connecticut said the performance of U.S. students likely does not demonstrate "a level of performance adequate to be fully successful in learning during online inquiry."

Among the limitations of the ePIRLS exam is that the online texts students are asked to read are pre-selected for them and presented at an age-appropriate reading level, effectively filtering out much of the messiness and complexity of the actual internet.

In addition, Leu said, students are not asked to use a search engine to locate useful online information, nor are they asked to evaluate the reliability of material that is available on the open internet.

He described such skills as essential to real-life online reading.

Leu also noted that previous studies have shown that students of all ages struggle with important skills not measured by ePIRLS, including evaluating the reliability and credibility of online information—a growing concern in the age of misinformation, "fake news," and internet hoaxes and conspiracy theories.

Jill Castek, an associate professor of teaching, learning, and sociocultural studies at the University of Arizona, said the achievement gaps in ePIRLS results are a cause for concern, too.

Of particular note, Castek said, is that students who reported the greatest access to digital devices in their homes scored significantly higher on the exam than those with lesser access.

The ways students reported using computers in school also seems to matter: Using devices to prepare reports was associated with higher achievement, while using devices to read information on the internet was not.

"I worry that looking only at [the high-level] results makes it seem like we're doing more in school to support good online reading than we really are," Castek said.

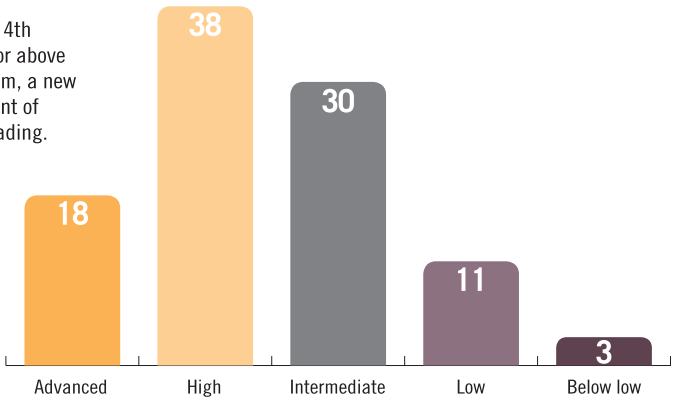
"And those things we are doing well, we're not doing well with all students."

Both PIRLS and ePIRLS are conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, based in the Netherlands. The next administration is scheduled for 2021.

Beginning in 2019, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, commonly referred to as the "nation's report card," will begin incorporating some ePIRLS-style tasks intended to measure students' online-reading skills. ■

U.S. RESULTS

Fifty-six percent of U.S. 4th graders scored "high" or above on the 2016 ePIRLS exam, a new international assessment of online informational reading.



INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS

Three education systems significantly outperformed the U.S. on the 2016 ePIRLS exam of online informational reading.

SOURCE: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), 2016

EDUCATION SYSTEM	ONLINE AVERAGE SCALE SCORE
ePIRLS scale centerpoint	**500**
Singapore	588
Norway	568
Ireland	567
Sweden	559
Denmark	558
United States	**557**
Chinese Taipei-CHN	546
Canada	543
Israel	536
Italy	532
Slovenia	525
Portugal	522
Georgia	477
United Arab Emirates	468

Published January 9, 2018 in Education Week's Curriculum Matters Blog

What Are the Top Grammar and Writing Errors of 2017?

By Brenda Iasevoli

Lay or lie? It's a verb choice that many adults get wrong in their own speech and writing. And so do U.S. students nationwide, according to a recent report of the top grammar and writing errors. Mixing up lay and lie was the top usage error of 2017.

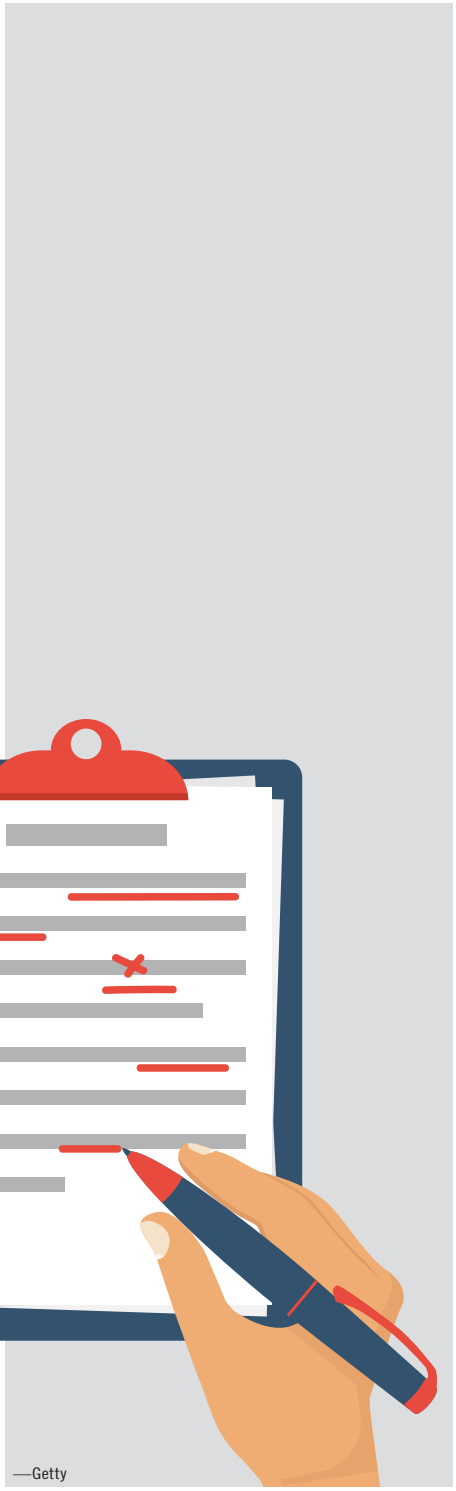
That conclusion is based on the responses of 3 million U.S. students in grades 5 through 12, to more than 1 billion practice questions aimed at improving their grammar and writing. The report was released by NoRedInk, a website that uses adaptive exercises to improve such skills.

Also among the top 10 usage errors: choosing when to use "farther vs. further," "among vs. between," and "fewer vs. less."

One in two school districts uses the free version of the platform to enhance its writing curriculum, according to NoRedInk founder and CEO Jeff Scheur. The free version focuses more on sentence-level practice, while the more sophisticated paid version allows students to apply what they learned in the exercises to their own writing and then receive peer feedback.

Scheur created the platform when he was a high school teacher in Chicago to give his students practice with grammar rules that eluded them. He steered clear of multiple-choice questions, instead allowing students to manipulate sentences by dragging and dropping words and punctuation or by actually typing in their own sentence rewrites whenever possible.

"One way that traditional exercises have failed is that the exercises themselves aren't authentic," Scheur said in an interview. "Multiple-choice exercises are easier because they allow students to compare solutions. It's one thing to identify that a sentence is lacking in one particular area; it's another to be able to revise it in a way that conveys the author's point effectively."



—Getty

Scheur argues that allowing students to take an active role in editing sentences ultimately helps them to internalize the lessons, which results in better writing all around. If, for instance, students are to learn the difference between the active and passive voice, they will practice rearranging the sentence three ways to emphasize different parts of the sentence.

"The ability not only to select one answer that is correct versus incorrect, but actually manipulate each part of the sentence and change the tense of specific verbs, throw out words that are unnecessary, eliminate prepositional phrases, add words back in," Scheur said, "that level of freedom in the exercises is what helps students to apply what they learn in the program to their own writing."

Scheur also thought it important that the subject matter of the practice passages grab young people's attention. To that end, practice passages can be tailored to students' interests, whether their tastes run toward sports, Harry Potter, or Justin Bieber. The idea is that students might be inclined to pay a little more attention to the construction of a sentence if it contained a reference to, say, Ryan Gosling.

In the "writing and critical thinking" arena, students had the most trouble eliminating wordiness, according to the report. They also found it difficult to distinguish claims, evidence and reasoning in a piece of writing.

The state with the lowest error rate, 32.7 percent, is North Dakota, followed by Alabama (34.9 percent), New Jersey (35.7 percent), North Carolina and Nebraska (both 36 percent). NoRedInk listed these states' "superpowers" as progressive tenses (N.D.), apostrophes (Ala.), correcting vague pronouns (N.J.), transition words (N.C.), and distinguishing among the words two, to, and too (Neb.).

Here are a few more findings:

- Only 30 percent of students can identify the subject of a sentence.
- North Dakota students are the best in the nation at using correctly the words "their," "they're," and "there," just edging out Delaware.
- Only 1 in 3 students can detect wordy or redundant language.
- Using commas to connect clauses with transition words like "however" and "therefore" is one of the most difficult comma rules for students to master. Only 36 percent can do this correctly. ■

HOW TO MOTIVATE

Struggling Adolescent Readers

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By the time struggling readers reach middle and high school, they are profoundly discouraged about their abilities to catch up to their peers. Many have a history of failure and frustration and don't believe they are "smart" enough to change their situation. Struggling readers experience emotional consequences of their inability to decipher grade-appropriate texts. These range from poor grades to feelings of shame, embarrassment, and anger that can lead to helplessness and passivity as well as anxiety and depression.

Why is closing the reading gap so difficult?

Even with improved reading instruction in the early grades, many students are not developing the complex reading skills they require to be successful in intermediate grades, middle school, and high school. In making the transition from learning to read to reading to learn, students must learn to recognize several thousand new words by sight and know their meanings. They must learn to navigate increasingly complex texts and develop deeper knowledge of topics they're reading about.

At the same time, these discouraged readers have a history of failure and frustration. Many have already given up on their schools and teachers and feel a sense of hopelessness and lack of belief in their own abilities to be successful.

Shifting the environment

More than anything, struggling students need teachers who believe they can learn—teachers who understand that they aspire to be seen as more than just "behind" in their skill development. These students need teachers who want to help them realize their potential and to believe in their futures.

To do this, teachers require a comprehensive English language curriculum specifically designed for struggling readers and writers that leverages the best of teacher-led, direct instruction and digital instruction in a blended learning environment supported by ongoing assessment, data analytics and comprehensive literacy guidance for teachers.

Keys to success

The optimal adolescent reading intervention program meets students where they are and focuses on foundational skills and the skills required for grade-level work. To achieve reading success, adolescent readers need:

- A personalized learning environment
- Age-appropriate, motivating content
- Motivational success benchmarks
- Technology-enhanced practice opportunities
- Positive peer interaction
- A sense of ownership in their learning

Reading programs with these components leverage the power of the teacher to guide students in the close reading of challenging, age-appropriate text, focusing on details essential to comprehension, critical thinking, and connecting reading and writing. Online digital Text Training provides additional instruction of these critical skills in a private environment as student practice and learn new skills.

Students need to feel motivated to be successful. Many of them have developed bad habits such as guessing answers or avoiding interactions. They need immediate, positive feedback to reward them for new learning. Just like all students, struggling readers need opportunities to collaborate with other students as schools transition to more student-focused and project-based learning.

Finally, struggling readers will benefit from choice and agency. Giving them choice in their material for independent reading, choice of the activities as they practice new skills, and the ability to determine how they move forward as their competency improves. As their vocabulary skills increase, students will learn grammar and syntax to understand more challenging texts but also to improve their writing. As students improve their reading skills, they produce increasingly sophisticated writing as well.

LANGUAGE!® Live

About *LANGUAGE!® Live*

LANGUAGE! Live is a comprehensive blended learning solution for struggling adolescents that inspires a new level of confidence and drive to help students become proficient readers. ***LANGUAGE! Live*** merges leading-edge research and data-driven assessment in a unique, motivational, classroom-tested approach. It's effective because it fosters foundational and advanced learning. Multiple entry points allow for students to receive instruction with the most impact on their learning.

LANGUAGE! Live meets students where they are and gets them where they need to be with a blended instruction model.

The combination of powerful teacher-directed and online instruction, ***LANGUAGE! Live*** fills gaps students missed in earlier grades. It addresses foundational skills including phonics, spelling, sentence structure, and fluency. Mastering these skills lets students advance with more confidence and ease.

With consistent, interactive online lessons tailored to their individual needs, students can practice privately and independently. Teacher-led instruction helps them advance with better vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and, unlike other programs, extensive writing practice.

Students feel more confident because they move in time from simple, direct language to more varied language and more complex text. Age-appropriate materials help build beginning learning skills used by their peers, like critical thinking, connecting reading and writing, and close reading of challenging, grade-level texts.

In ***LANGUAGE! Live***, there is no childish oversimplification or dated content. It's today's best technology delivered with teacher-led instruction, age-appropriate programming, and engaging features designed to captivate adolescent learners. ■

FIVE ESSENTIALS OF AN ADOLESCENT ELA PROGRAM

READING COMPREHENSION

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- High-interest, relevant, and age-appropriate text
- Teacher-led support to build content knowledge and to make meaning from complex text
- Collaboration and discussion for critical thinking and language development

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Students must learn how to derive meaning and use information to think critically and discuss big ideas with their peers.

VOCABULARY

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Academic vocabulary
- Pre-teach and re-contextualize words
- All four depth of knowledge levels

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Strong, integrated vocabulary instruction is crucial to language development and helps make meaning to be able to think critically about text.

Does your reading intervention program address all aspects of language systematically and explicitly?

An effective program for struggling adolescents should do so, while also keeping students engaged and motivated.

READING FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Logical, systematic scope and sequence
- Modern digital platform that captivates
- Intrinsic motivation through ownership of learning and improvement

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

The ability for students to grow as readers and learners depends on a strong foundation and closing gaps in these skills.

GRAMMAR

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Sentence structure
- Reinforced in writing
- Recursive practice

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Grammar is the foundation for effective communication. It is essential to understanding others and expressing yourself.

WRITING

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Writing in response to close reading
- Sentence development and paragraph formation
- Writing projects, multimedia presentations, and research skills

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Writing is not only a gateway to academic and professional success, it is a way for students to express who they are, what they believe, and connect with others.

LANGUAGE!® Live

Learn more about *LANGUAGE! Live*, the ELA intervention program proven to help struggling readers in grades 5–12 gain nearly TWO YEARS' growth in a single year.

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COMMENTARY

Published August 1, 2018 in Education Week Teacher

Want Young Students to Love Writing? Let Them Play With It

By Emily Galle-From

—Getty

This summer I attended a literacy conference near my school district. The agenda was jam-packed with strategies and insights, inspiring teachers to develop literacy-rich practices for the upcoming year. The conference brought in "big name" educators and consultants: Harvey "Smokey" Daniels, Kate Roberts, and Ralph Fletcher. Each speaker was engaging and informative. Yet my biggest takeaway did not come from these professionals—it came from talking and reflecting with other educators.

Early in his keynote, children's book author Ralph Fletcher invited members of the audience to turn and share, using a 1 to 10 scale, how comfortable they feel teaching writing. I was shocked to hear people mumble and laugh at their low numbers: 1s, 2s, perhaps a 4. A woman behind me bemoaned that teaching writing was the worst part of her day—a time when kids melted down, cried, and threw tantrums.

When asked to explain more, she said that her 1st graders hated the "assignments." All year long she'd had them writing thesis statements backed up by three points and concluded with a wrap-up sentence. Over and over and over again. *First graders*. Honestly, I'd cry, too.

I quickly realized that I was the anomaly in the room: an elementary school teacher whose *favorite* subject to teach is writing. The more I listened to others, the more clear it became that we, as educators, need to rethink our writing practices.

Finding Joy Within the Standards

Writing grounds us in our humanity. We hear so much—and for good reason—about the importance of reading in elementary schools. But I'd argue that writing is just as important as reading for fostering a sense of identity and creativity.

Think about the Thai boys who were trapped in a cave. The first mode of communication to their families was delivered through letters. Or consider the recently released letters Nelson Mandela wrote to his wife and children over the years he spent in prison. In both instances, writing was a means to process and communicate with those they loved.

Yes, educators must teach to certain writing standards. But reaching standards and finding joy, creativity, and a sense of identity through writing are not mutually exclusive. Rather, I feel more confident that my students are reaching the standards when they find joy in what they write.

Where I teach, in Minnesota, one of the 1st grade writing standards declares that students should "write narratives and other creative texts in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure." Note that the word "creative" is right there in the standard! The standard is also quite broad and allows room for children to write in various forms and styles. When teachers dictate what or how students write during a school year, it limits their potential.

Creating 'Max' and Dragons

Fletcher said in his keynote at the conference that "you want writers to play." Ideally, they should have fun, take risks, and find enjoyment while writing. Kids *love* playing, and so this seems like an easy and natural idea to bring into a writer's workshop. Truth be told, a teacher doesn't need to put a lot of work in behind this: Kids will play any chance they get. I can think of countless times this has paid off in my classroom.

This spring, for example, my 1st grade students were working on writing narratives. One student created a character named Max. The student wrote story after story about Max, each one building upon, and getting more ridiculous than, the last.

Fast forward to the end of June—weeks after the school year ended. Before boarding the bus after a day of summer school, Max's creator came rushing up to me with a picture of a robot he painted during art that day. My initial reaction was, "Cool robot!" But when I looked closer I saw the name MAX scrawled across the robot's chest.

"Hey, it says 'Max.' Is this the same Max from your series?" I asked him.

"Yes! In my new story, Max is a robot!" He beamed.

It's important to note that I was not his teacher for summer school. I was not in the art room with him. It was not even writing time. Yet this student continues to play with Max any chance he gets. He feels a sense of ownership with this new

character and engages with him even after the last day of school. This young 1st grader won't soon forget Max.

Other 1st graders enjoy playing with their writing form and style, too. I think about a different student who engineered a dragon whose tail moves on the page, thanks to some strips of paper and a bit of tape. Had I insisted that he write the words of his story first or put strict guidelines on the assignment, he never would have created that dragon.

Another 1st grader realized that she is truly in charge of her characters by placing me into her stories. She had me doing all sorts of quirky things, like eating my own hair and jumping over buildings. She giggled while writing, finding pleasure in placing her teacher in strange scenarios.

Playing with writing is crucial to finding one's voice and enjoying the creative process. It's nearly impossible to dislike something once you've played around with it.

Early in the school year, students in my class saw writing as an enjoyable part of the day. I certainly knew something was going well with our writing workshop when many began to choose to write instead of participate in our "brain break" time. I often overheard a couple of students planning their work: "You write and I'll illustrate." And one day another student—my most reluctant writer—asked if he could keep writing instead of dance to get his wiggles out.

A Safe Space to Process Emotions

Ironically, when students play with their writing, they are also more likely to take it seriously. During our poetry unit, I modeled how poets think of things that are important to them and then reflect upon why those items are important. I decided to write about a quilt my grandmother made me before she passed away. While I was writing, a student raised his hand and began sharing—for the first time—about his father who died unexpectedly earlier in the school year.

He asked questions about my grandmother's funeral and compared it with his dad's. The other 1st graders in the room sat silently, listening to the student process. Later, the student wrote about when he saw his dad in the coffin: "His skin didn't seem real / he had a different smell." I doubt this student would have written such powerful lines had he not felt comfortable taking risks with his words.

I had no intention of having a conversation about death when I chose to model writing about my grandmother's quilt. Yet writing provided this child a safe space to grapple with his father's death and an opportunity for others in the room to support him through his pain.

Teachers: As the days of summer start to slip away, consider when in your day you will build time for students to write next year. When will they have time to play with language and form? When will they collaborate with others? Where will emotion seep onto the page? With intentionality, the standards will be taught. But it is the joy, playfulness, and humanity of writing that students will remember. ■

Emily Galle-From graduated from Luther College in 2011 with a degree in elementary education and a specialty in literacy, and from Penn State World Campus in 2017 with her master's of education in curriculum and instruction, with an emphasis in children's literature. She has taught at Richardson Elementary School in North St. Paul, Minn., for seven years, first as a literacy specialist and currently as a 1st grade teacher. Galle-From is also on her school's leadership team and co-chairs the districtwide language arts committee. You can follow her on Twitter at @EmilySkeie.

COMMENTARY

Published June 20, 2018 in Education Week Teacher

How Telling Students My Most Difficult Story Made Me a Better Writing Teacher

By David Rockower


—Getty

While preparing to teach my annual unit on memoir writing, I thought about the predictable papers I'd soon be reading again. Every year, most of my middle school students' memoirs just scratch the surface of tales of family vacations and personal injuries. They blandly recount a day's events without delving into the heart of the experience.

Students so often view these papers as tasks that need to be completed; they ask, "How long does it have to be? How many paragraphs?" Essentially, they are asking: "What do I need to do to get an A?" Instead, I want them to share their in-the-moment thinking—the sensory details that will resonate with readers. But try as I might, I've had trouble getting them to take risks.

When we take risks as writers, we stumble into territories we might not have otherwise explored. We share our thinking about relatable personal experiences and communicate emotions that are universal—frustration, joy, pain. Memoir allows students to connect with their readers on a different level than much of the other writing they do in class.

In years past, I had tried to convince myself that it was simply their age, that

they weren't ready for that kind of vulnerability. What I'd soon learn, however, was that it was me who was holding back. In order for my students to move from task completion to engagement, I would need to demonstrate risk-taking.

Teachers' Stories Are Meaningful for Students

Highlighting a quote from Robert Frost to guide my students' writing—"No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader"—was not enough. Neither was sharing exemplars from previous years.

I believe in using mentor texts—models of good writing—but I'd been using them in a limited way. All of the examples I had shown had been written by strangers. Maybe my students needed to hear a memoir written by someone from our immediate school community.

So, I wrote about the one thing that makes me tear up every time I think, speak, or write about it: the premature birth of my son.

I'd considered sharing this memoir in past years, but resisted. I told myself the topic was too serious, and I worried that I might touch a nerve with a student whose family may have experienced a similar event—one that didn't turn out as well as mine. I told myself that they were only 13, and that my perspective would be too far removed from the world of a teenager. These, I now realize, were excuses. The real reason I resisted was because I was scared to be vulnerable in front of my class. I didn't know if I could share the story without crying.

But I realized that I had to show my students I was willing to do what I was asking of them. I decided to dive in.

I wrote about my first-born entering the world two months ahead of schedule. I shared the fact that I drove—paralyzed with fear—for two hours behind an ambulance that carried my wife to a better hospital than the one in our hometown. I painted the image of nurses and doctors surrounding my four-pound son, scooping him up and racing out of the birthing room, my wife and I watching them go, not knowing what to expect. And I wrote about being able to breathe again, when we were told he would be okay, that he just needed time.

I wrote about bringing him home, holding his foot against the palm of my hand, his toes not reaching the base of my fingers. Then I flashed ahead to when he was 6 years old, racing across the soccer field, confidently dribbling the ball around much bigger children. I tried to convey that impossible-to-describe love that a parent has for their child, the kind that makes us feel as though our heart is walking around outside our bodies.

I read my essay to the class. My voice cracked, and I had to pause often. When I finished, they were silent. Some of them clapped, others just stared. They asked questions, and many wanted to share personal stories of their own in that moment. I had them share a teaser, asking them to save the entire story for their memoir project."

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We revisited my essay, and I asked for specific lines that stood out, that provoked an emotional reaction. I asked them to share the types of emotion they experienced throughout the essay, and they came up with fear, anxiety, and joy. They learned that a memoir can span the range of emotions, and that something that might, at first, seem like a "sad story" could turn out to include just as much "happy" as "sad."

After our lengthy discussion, one girl asked, "Can we please write now?"

Students Are Capable of Powerful Writing

My story not only served as an example for my students, it did something far more powerful: It showed that good stories, the kind people want to read, make us feel something. They might make us laugh or look over our shoulder in fear. They might make us wipe our eyes or phone a long-forgotten friend. This kind of writing requires honesty and vulnerability. Not easy things for any of us, but especially tough for middle schoolers. However, I learned that students that age are capable of profound writing.

The papers produced during the memoir unit that year were far superior to any I'd read before. They were more personal, vivid, and engaging. Surprisingly, students were also willing to share their stories with classmates. One of my students wrote about the loss of her father. Another wrote about how difficult it was to see his older brother go off to college. My students connected to the emotions in their classmates' stories. They were genuinely surprised at the power of their own words.

My takeaway from this experience was profound: I had not been teaching to my potential. My unwillingness to share, to write from the heart, to be vulnerable was ultimately holding my students back. And when I finally took the leap, they followed. ■

David Rockower is a teacher and freelance writer. He has published articles in The Washington Post, Education Week, and is a regular columnist in State College magazine. With a sports-obsessed 13-year-old son, a spirited 12-year-old daughter and a goldendoodle who looks like a muppet, he has a lot to write about.

COMMENTARY

Published March 7, 2018 in Education Week Teacher

Want to Enrich Students' Reading Lives? Don't Dismiss Audiobooks

By Kyle Redford

—Getty

I often hear teachers, parents, and students make implicit or explicit comments that reflect a bias against audiobooks. Some even argue that listening to books should not be confused with reading at all.

"I'm fine having Sam listen to audiobooks in the car, but I want him reading real books the rest of the time," a parent might say. Similarly, Sam might believe that he can't include audiobooks on his independent reading record for his teacher because he didn't actually read them.

These devaluations and qualifications give me pause. Casually dismissing a reading platform that can build a student's knowledge bank, appreciation of story, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and verbal fluency seems unwise.

There is, in fact, a strong correlation between academic achievement and the amount of independent reading done outside of school. Listening to an audiobook is essentially the same as reading in print. The only difference is that reading text requires decoding and listening to an audiobook does not.

Though the research doesn't establish whether higher achievement is tied to the act of decoding, I would argue that increased exposure to words, information, and ideas, regardless of format, plays a big role in helping students improve academically.

For those who are still skeptical of audio, it begs the question: What is reading anyway? Is it the act of decoding words, or is it making meaning out of those words? Does decoding add value to the reading experience, or is it merely a delivery system?

I would argue that reading is simply the processing of language into story and information, and it has value for readers whether it's on paper or through sound.

A Boon to Struggling Readers

Some opponents of audiobooks claim that the time spent listening to them precludes decoding practice for struggling and dyslexic readers. But pitting reading instruction against audiobooks sets up a false choice. The two are not mutually exclusive. We should be encouraging students who are receiving decoding instruction to also read audiobooks that correspond with their interests, comprehension, and intellectual abilities to engage them.

It's also important to mention that teachers deliver negligible amounts of effective decoding instruction in the upper elementary grades and beyond. If older students are still not reading at their intellectual or grade level, are we to restrict them to limited ideas, knowledge, and vocabulary? Given what we know about the value of reading, readers cannot afford to put their learning on hold while they learn to decode.

Audiobooks can enhance comprehension for readers who need more supports, because they communicate additional information through vocal changes in pacing, rhythm, and pitch.

Technology Combines Text and Audio

For those educators who still argue that listening to books takes time away from reading text and building the decoding muscle, there's new technology that brings text and audio together.

Innovative synced ear-and-eye reading systems allow our students to read highlighted text and listen simultaneously. These systems offer audio support so struggling readers can read text at their intellectual or grade level rather than their lower reading level.

Bookshare, a free service, and Learning Ally, a subscription service, are organizations that provide audiobooks to students who have a diagnosed reading difficulty. These synced audio programs enhance students' fluency and comprehension and improve concentration. Bookshare's audiobooks can pair with reading tools like Voice Dream Reader, which delivers highlighted text with synthesized voices, while Learning Ally uses human voices to deliver its content.

Audiobooks in Action

This fall, I facilitated a learning panel for my school's 5th graders. I invited successful former students with unconventional learning profiles (those with dyslexia, ADHD, and other learning differences), to speak about the tools and strategies that they use to help them thrive in the upper grades.

During the panel, something happened that nearly knocked me off my stool. All four of the student panelists claimed that synced reading systems had notably improved their ability to read text. I had always suspected that the platforms would help them decode by pairing letters and sounds and mod-

eling fluency, but these unsolicited observations stunned me.

One student even said that she no longer depends on audiobooks. This was the same student who had confessed minutes earlier that prior to switching to Learning Ally in 5th grade, she had never finished an entire book. As her teacher, I remember watching in awe as the new system transformed her into a bookworm.

Hopefully, we can all agree that *how* students gather words and ideas is less important than *how many* words and ideas they gather. Ultimately, if we want to build rich reading lives for students, we need to find ways to encourage and validate all kinds of reading for all learners, whether they experience the text with their eyes or with their ears. ■

Kyle Redford is a 5th grade teacher at Marin Country Day School, a K-8 school in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is also the education editor for the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity.

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