

Independent Reading: Making Every Minute Count

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Independent reading provides practice in reading. It gives students the opportunity to put what they have learned into practice, enables them to interact with other related texts, helps to develop their fluency and endurance, exposes them to new vocabulary and ideas, and eventually allows them to take on more responsibility for their own reading.

However, just because an opportunity exists does not mean that it will lead to desired outcomes.

Although time is set aside for independent reading, it does not mean students will have applied what they have learned or that all of them will benefit equally from those minutes.

That distinction matters.

The question should not simply be: *Are my students reading during this time?*

The more important question should be: *Did the time provide enough practice to help each reader achieve a greater degree of independence?*



More Time Doesn't Automatically Mean More Growth

It has long been known that better readers tend to read more; however, this relationship does not mean that giving students more independent reading time will necessarily make them stronger readers.

In its 2000 report, the National Reading Panel reviewed research on independent silent reading and concluded that there was not enough evidence to show that programs involving a large amount of minimally guided independent reading reliably led to better reading achievement.

Over twenty years later, Erbeli and Rice (2022) reviewed the research again and came to similar conclusions. The evidence currently available still fails to strongly support the idea that simply increasing independent silent reading, on its own, consistently leads to better reading outcomes.

That does not mean independent reading is worthless. Instead, it shows that reading independently may not be sufficient, especially for our most striving readers.

Instead of asking: *How long should students spend reading?*

We need to ask: *How exactly are those minutes creating stronger readers?*

It is particularly important to consider that question for students who are not yet able to use their independent reading time as effectively as their peers.

Equal Time Doesn't Always Mean Equal Opportunity

In the weeks preceding this one, we examined in detail what teachers can learn by observing students as they read independently and by having purposeful reading conferences with them.

They can show a great deal.

But they can also raise an important question: *If all students are given the same amount of independent reading time, does that mean they all have the same opportunity for growth?*

Think about two students. Each one gets 30 minutes to read on their own.

The first student can read the text accurately, keep the meaning, notice when their understanding fails, and use various strategies whenever difficulties arise. For this student, thirty minutes offer a chance to successfully apply skills already taught while also developing stamina and independence.



Now consider the second student whose ability to read words critically is still developing. Reading requires much more effort. This student may encounter unfamiliar words. It becomes difficult to keep the meaning clear. The strategies taught may not be secure enough for this student to use without some assistance.

Both students have been given the same thing: **30 minutes to read.**

Have we really given them the same chance to practice successfully?

It might seem fair to give each student the same number of independent reading minutes. However, the instructional value of those minutes will differ greatly if one student uses them successfully while another spends a lot of time correcting mistakes, becomes frustrated, or tries to do work beyond what they can currently handle on their own.

Then the question is not whether striving readers should take part in independent reading. They should. The more important question is: *What kind of conditions does this student need if independent reading is to become a successful practice?*

Support Is Part of the Path to Independence

The Institute of Education Sciences (Foorman et al., 2016) provides research-based advice that supports the view that students should have frequent opportunities to read connected text, and that such reading is most effective when it includes modeling, scaffolding, and feedback.

For striving readers, this distinction is particularly important. They need chances to read, chances to put what they have learned into practice, and also need opportunities to feel that they are successful readers.

Independence does not mean that there is no support. There is a significant difference between letting a student work on his own and leaving a student to struggle all by himself.

We want to give students sufficient support so they can have successful experiences in practice, then slowly take away that support as they become more capable of carrying out the work on their own.

The path to independence sometimes needs even more scaffolded support rather than simply more time on one's own.

Independent Reading Doesn't Necessarily Mean Reading Alone

The word *independent* might lead us to think each student has to work by himself for the whole reading block. But if independence is the goal, it does not have to cover every step students take to reach it.



A reader who is making an effort might spend some time reading on their own and, at another time, get support. That support might include:

- reading a text with a carefully selected partner;
- rereading familiar text;
- participating in paired or echo reading;
- listening to a portion of text and following along;
- briefly working with the teacher;
- previewing challenging words before reading;
- practicing a targeted skill identified through observation or conferencing;
- Reading by yourself in a series of shorter and more effective periods.

The activities should not be included merely to occupy the reading period; each one should be linked to the student's needs as a reader. The question becomes: *What kind of things does this reader need to be able to carry out successful reading practice today?*

For a single student, it could involve 10 minutes of successful independent reading, followed by some supported practice. In another instance, it involves starting under the teacher's guidance, then carrying out the work with a partner, and finally trying the same task on one's own. Another student could work through the whole block by himself.

The appearance of the pathway may vary since the people reading it are different.

From Conference to Classroom

Previously, we looked at how reading conferences help teachers figure out what each individual reader needs and spot patterns throughout the class. That is only the first step in noticing a need.

How we find out about our readers should shape the opportunities and support we give them when they read independently.

A student who keeps on guessing at multisyllable words will probably need to receive direct instruction and should be given a chance to put that learning into practice in some easy reading material. A student who can read accurately but has difficulty understanding meaning may need extra guidance with comprehending before being allowed to continue independent practice. A student who keeps abandoning books might need help choosing suitable texts or setting a shorter, more manageable reading goal.



We receive information during individual conferences with students. *How we use that information gives it instructional value.* At times, the information shows that the student is not yet ready to continue at the same level of independent reading as another person.

What if a student isn't ready for thirty minutes?

When the class has a 30-minute independent reading period, what happens if a student can maintain productive reading for only 10 or 15 minutes? The solution should not be to ask the student to stay with a book for the rest of the time just because everyone else is still reading. The answer isn't busy work either.

Reading development could still be supported by the remaining minutes. For example, one student's 30-minute block might temporarily include:

5 minutes — Prepare

Show students the more difficult words, review a skill already taught, set a reading aim, or read a short section with some support.

10 minutes — Read independently

Read an accessible text and make sure that the desired skill is successfully applied.

10 minutes — Supported practice

Read some text that you are familiar with, read it together with a partner, practice fluent reading, or take part in another type of reading activity which is linked to a specific need.

5 minutes — Check in

Briefly check whether the student was able to use the skill or strategy.

This is not a set of instructions for all readers trying to improve. Instead, this is an example of the block becoming responsive instead of remaining rigid. The balance shifts as stamina, skill, and independence grow. Ten minutes of successful independent reading increases to fifteen. Fifteen becomes twenty. Finally, the student could reach a stage where they could use the whole block successfully.

The greater the independence, the less support is needed.

What if half of my class is having difficulties?

This is where the actual classroom situation comes into play. The idea of giving individual instruction to two or three students might seem manageable.

What if half the class requires a great deal of support? It is not possible to have twelve separate reading plans and twelve individual conferences with students each day. If the



same difficulty is observed in several students, it can no longer be considered an individual problem in independent reading. It could be an instructional pattern.

This relates directly to the point we discussed earlier: while individual conferences help us understand individual readers, overall patterns start to appear when we consider many conferences.

Students who are having difficulty decoding multisyllabic words might benefit from additional small-group instruction. If many students can read accurately yet still have difficulty understanding the meaning, more extensive revisions to comprehension instruction may be necessary. Maybe the class isn't ready for a 30-minute uninterrupted independent reading session, since many students still can't maintain productive reading for 30 minutes.

Instead of asking: *What can I do to support each struggling reader individually?*

We can ask: *What patterns do I notice, and what is the most efficient way to respond?*

A useful way to think about it is: If a student shows a need, consider providing individual support. If several students show the same need, address it using targeted small-group instruction. If many students show the same need, reconsider whole-class instruction.

The idea that responsive teaching requires preparing a separate lesson for each student is a misconception.

The Block Can Change Based on What Students Need

The fact that a large part of the class requires extra assistance doesn't necessarily mean that independent reading time has to be a strictly protected 30-minute session with everyone working by themselves.

The block could appear different for a short time. For instance, the students could start off by reading on their own for 10 to 15 minutes, after which the teacher would work with a particular group while the other students carried on with reading, reread some text that they are familiar with, took part in some purposeful paired reading, or carried out another literacy activity that had been taught before. Students could then move on to independent work.

On a different day, another group gets support. Paired reading may also form part of that response—but only if the pairs have a purpose. They might reread a familiar passage together for fluency, alternate reading manageable sections of a text, practice a previously taught strategy, or briefly discuss meaning after reading.



A more skilled reader might, at times, read alongside a striving reader, but we must be careful not to make one child take on the role of teaching another. We must also be careful not to pair the most striving reader with the most successful reader. This will frustrate both. The teacher is still accountable for the instruction.

Providing Accountability Without Turning Reading into Another Assignment

When we consider whether independent reading is productive, accountability naturally enters the discussion. Accountability doesn't need to involve proving that reading takes place with a worksheet, a reading log, or a daily written response.

Instead, we might ask: *What kind of evidence would let me know that this student is becoming a stronger, more independent reader?*

We can get that evidence through observation, a short conference, listening to a student read, hearing the student discuss their thinking, or watching a previously taught skill used without prompting. The most convincing evidence is realizing that a student who used to need our assistance no longer does. *This is significant evidence of growth.*

Another part of independent reading also deserves attention: What happens when the reading time ends?

When the timer goes off, do students close their books? Do they carry out a task to show that they have read? Or might those last moments offer another chance for the students to think over what happened during their reading?

That question merits a separate conversation. **We'll look at it next week.**

Look Beyond the Minutes

The idea that we should make the most of each minute does not mean that every student must spend every minute engaged in the same activity. For certain students, it could involve continuous independent reading. For others, it may include explicit instruction, supported practice, paired reading, rereading, shorter stretches of independent work, or teacher support. The kind of support needed should vary by reader.

The question isn't simply: *Did this student read for thirty minutes?*

Instead, we can ask:

- Was the student able to carry out the practice?
- Did the student put into practice what had been taught?



- Was support provided when it was needed?
- Did the practice carried out today help the students get a little closer to being independent?

Independent reading doesn't have to be the same for all students, and each one can develop their independence in their own way. Differentiated independent reading doesn't mean setting lower expectations for hard-working readers. It provides them with the assistance they need to attain it.

That doesn't mean that independent reading has to become yet another complicated series of instructions. Instead, we need to stay attentive to the readers in front of us. We teach when needed. We provide the opportunity to practice as appropriate. We notice. We respond. We make sure to provide assistance whenever it is required. Then, we gradually retreat, removing scaffolds when they are no longer necessary.

The destination remains the same: For readers to need us a bit less tomorrow than they do today. Independent reading creates the opportunity. Intentional teaching helps turn that opportunity into growth.

References

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