

What Should Students Take Away When Independent Reading Comes to an End?

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We have been reconsidering independent reading for several weeks, not because we believe independent reading has no value, but because allocating time for students to read does not, by itself, ensure that the time is instructive.

We have looked at the activities students carry out when reading independently, at those of the teachers, examined how we can tell if students are actually engaged with the text, determined how to support striving readers, and also considered how a few small changes can make this usual classroom procedure more meaningful. But there is another part of independent reading that deserves our attention:

What should students do when they finish independent reading?

For many students, the answer is simple: they shut their books and go on to the next topic. In some classes, students might keep a reading log, write a summary, record how many pages they have read, or respond to a series of questions.

Maybe we could ask a better question. Rather than asking, *"How can I get students to show that they have read?"* we could ask: *"What might I find out about my readers when the act of reading has finished?"* This slight change alters how we approach the work.

From Accountability to Information

It is understandable for teachers to want some accountability during independent reading. We want to know whether the students are actually reading rather than simply flipping through the pages, staring at the book, or waiting for the timer to run out.

Accountability doesn't imply an assignment. A reading log can show that a student has recorded twenty minutes of reading. A worksheet can indicate that a student has done a worksheet. That doesn't necessarily tell us much about the reader. Instead, the end of independent reading can become a chance to gather useful information that helps teachers decide what their students need next.

A simple structure can help: **Reflect. Share. Plan.**

REFLECT: What Happened While You Were Reading?

Reflection doesn't have to take the form of a long-written assignment. In fact, it probably shouldn't. Students can become aware of their own reading habits if they take a moment to think about them.

Students might consider:

- What helped you to understand the reading today?
- At what point did the text become difficult?
- What were your actions when you became confused?
- What impression did you get regarding a character, an idea, or a topic?
- Did anything make you want to keep reading?
- Is this book still suitable for you?

These questions go beyond asking "What page are you on?" They ask the students to consider themselves as readers. Over time, such reflection can help students realize an important point—that reading is not simply something that happens to them. Instead, readers make decisions.

- They reread.
- They slow down.
- They make connections.
- They notice when the meaning fails.
- They decide if a text is effective for them.
- These are the first steps towards independence.

SHARE: Make Reading Visible

Independent reading does not have to mean isolated reading. The short opportunity to talk about reading not only gives teachers useful information, but it also helps students see reading as worth discussing.

Students might turn to a partner and share:

- something interesting they learned,
- a surprising moment,
- a confusing part,
- a new word,
- a connection,
- or if they would recommend the book.

This doesn't need to turn into a formal discussion. Two minutes might be sufficient. What we want to achieve is not just to find out if the students have read. Instead, we want to give them a chance to put what they have read into practice.

Teachers can listen to...

- Who can explain what one is reading?
- Who gives only ambiguous responses?
- Who seems authentically engaged?
- Who consistently struggles to talk about the text?
- Who may be reading a book that is too difficult?
- Who may need help choosing something different?

Now comes the moment when independent reading ends, giving rise to information that can affect tomorrow's teaching.

PLAN: What Comes Next?

The last step may be the most important. What is the student's next move? For one student, the answer may be: *Keep reading*. For another: *Find a different book*. A different student might have to go over a confusing section. Another person might need help with vocabulary, background knowledge, fluency, or dealing with a more complex text.

A student might set a goal:

- When I get confused, I will slow down tomorrow.
- I'm going to read the opening of this chapter again.
- I want some help in choosing a book.
- I'm going to finish this chapter and let my partner know my idea of what will happen next.

The plan doesn't need much detail. It needs to provide the following reading experience with more guidance.

The Goal Is Not More Work

That is a significant distinction. We might unintentionally turn reading into yet another compliance task if each independent reading period is followed by a paragraph, a worksheet, a response page, a reading log, and a teacher's grade. That isn't the goal.

What we want to achieve is not more work, but more thinking.

- A short talk can be enough.
- A single sticky note is sufficient.
- A single sentence is all that is needed.
- A single teacher observation is sufficient.
- The point is whether the information enables us to understand the student as a reader.

Ending Independent Reading With Purpose

I have always maintained in this series that independent reading should not be regarded as a sacred period during which teachers merely withdraw, and students then read quietly.

- Teachers can observe.
- Teachers can confer.
- Teachers can listen.
- Teachers can prompt.
- Teachers can observe patterns.

Once the reading is over, we still have one more chance to learn something about our students by using **Reflect. Share. Plan.**



These three small moves can turn the end of independent reading into the beginning of better instructional decisions because the goal was never thirty quiet minutes. **The goal was stronger readers.**