Reading is the skill. Teaching students to unlock the full meaning of the texts they read is the single most powerful outcome a teacher can foster. If your students can read well, they can essentially do anything. I’ve included this chapter on reading in the book to help all teachers, not just in certain classes but across the school in every room, use the methods of champion reading teachers to structure reading in their classrooms and ensure that students do lots and lots of it, and in ways that maximize productivity. If you teach, no matter the subject, you have the opportunity and the obligation to ensure that your students read more (and better). This opportunity will result in their being both more informed regarding the topic of your instruction and more effective assimilators and analyzers of information—better readers—in the future. It’s a double investment paying both short- and long-term results.

I have a friend whose father continually stressed the power of reading to him when he was growing up. To prove it, he pulled my friend out of school for several months, bought a series of books on building, even though he had previously been only moderately handy, and proceeded, with my friend alongside, to build a house from foundation to shingles. My friend recalls sitting on beams in the twilight, he and his father reading aloud with great intensity on plumbing or framing or wiring, sometimes working through the complex passages three and four times.
Schools, however, have increasingly come to teach reading in a more specific and more limited sense, as a mere noun: a specific subject area for intentional study. We train our English and literacy teachers to teach a subject called Reading. Certainly there’s a great deal of value in thinking of reading as primarily a subject, particularly at the elementary level where phonics has (or should have) revolutionized the efficacy of early literacy instruction and where specialized instruction is a key lever in creating lasting reading gains among students. But the value of reading arguably lies just as much in its status as a verb, that is, students reading frequently and broadly as a key goal of schooling. Not only do the reading programs and English classes in many schools fail to include much actual reading (in the verb sense), but untapped opportunities to read more effectively occur throughout every corner of the building. Still, schools are far less likely to maximize these opportunities, and even less likely to train teachers how to take advantage of them. Nevertheless, the overall value of the additional high-quality reading you could do in a typical school day could equal or possibly exceed the value of what happens in designated reading classes. When you stop to consider how much high-quality reading students might do outside reading class, the untapped potential is massive, but for now most students simply don’t read much.

Consider four of the most enduring intellects to have worked and written in the English language: Abraham Lincoln, Fredrick Douglass, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens. They were all educated similarly, but perhaps not how you’d think. Each received little or no formal schooling. Essentially self-educated in an era when self-education meant reading, they rose to eminence by virtue of the skills and knowledge their private reading taught them.

I am not suggesting that their educations provide a model of what education should be. Still, they remind us of the almost unlimited capacity of diligent reading to teach. For all four of these exceptional people and many others, “mere” reading was sufficient to foster and develop rare genius. And as for the rest of us, we are all self-educated, to some degree or another, by virtue of the reading we have done.

Leafing back in my mind through the ideas gleaned from my private reading, I know that they have shaped me as much as my schooling has. We are what we have read and how we read it, and no other single activity has the capacity to yield so much educational value. And yet students in many schools spend precious little time actually reading. Likely, they read for less than an hour a day. Even in their reading or literature classes, they are as likely to talk about
reading or respond to what they may (or may not) have read as they are to actually read. For her dissertation, a colleague followed students through their day at New York City public schools and found that they read for an average of ten minutes per day. Worse, 40 percent of them did no reading at all.

Making “mere reading” highly productive and effective in your classroom is a critical skill no matter what subject or grade level you teach, and this chapter explains how you can do that, both practically (how you can ensure that classmates are reading along with a student who’s reading aloud) and pedagogically (how and when you should ask what kinds of questions). It also contains guidance especially useful to English and language arts teachers whose goal is to use techniques like “strategies” to make students “readers” over and above their mastery of any specific text.

Although I’ve tried to provide guidance for both teachers generally and specialists, I underscore two key assumptions in this chapter: everybody in a school must be a reading teacher and the generalist techniques may be the most productive for study by specialists. In many cases, they are highly trained in the subtle arts of interpretation and textual analysis but leave value on the table due to a lack of proficiency. In other words, they may fall into the trap that many other specialists—heart surgeons or data analysts, for example—face: losing sight of the basics. The point of this chapter is to bring those basics back into focus. As one excellent teacher said to me, “I’m a certified English teacher and a pretty good one at teaching kids to interpret what we read, but I don’t know the first thing about what to do when a kid can’t read a word.”

The chapters in Part Two offer approaches for helping all students improve their reading. They cover a set of skills that is obvious to some practitioners but where the approach taken by top teachers provides guidance that is critically important for all:

- Decoding—the process of deciphering written text to identify the spoken words it represents
Fluency—consists of automaticity, the ability to read at a rapid rate, plus expression, the ability to group words together into phrases to reflect meaning and tone.

Vocabulary—a student’s base of word knowledge: how many words she knows and how well she knows them.

Comprehension—how much of what’s written a student understands.

Comprehension sits in a strange position within this list as it requires both a set of techniques of its own and also the mastery of the other three: you teach fluency, decoding, and vocabulary in order to ensure robust comprehension. However, when comprehension doesn’t work, it may be that students weren’t able to make certain inferences or distinguish trivial from critical details, but it’s just as likely that the problem was that they couldn’t read the passage with sufficient fluidity and automaticity to allow them to use their processing capacity to understand its subtleties. They may be using so much of their mental capacity bandwidth merely processing the words that they can’t remember the beginning of the paragraph (or the sentence) by the time they get to the end. And it’s important to remember that all students face this challenge. In the first year of my graduate studies in English literature, most of us were so busy trying to unpack the jargon of the field and the impenetrable syntax of academic writing that our comprehension sagged woefully—not because we couldn’t grasp the ideas but because the presentation posed barriers to fluency, decoding, and vocabulary. And presentation can pose such barriers to every reader, no matter who, and often deliberately so (the novels of William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Márquez are good examples).

The information in Part Two focuses broadly on making reading more effective and rigorous in any classroom and for any purpose—whether you’re reading “The Three Little Bears,” Plato, Chapter Seven of Cell: The Building Blocks of Life, the directions to a math problem, or a description of the Gettysburg Address. The guidance here is equally applicable to teachers of reading as a specific subject. However, since the art of teaching reading comprehension as a fungible skill that students learn to master and apply in any future situation is also the challenging and nuanced provenance of specialists—reading teachers—Part Two also contains specific guidance for those teachers. The last chapter on comprehension also contains a discussion of aspects of reading that are more specifically (but not exclusively) relevant to language arts or reading classrooms. In particular, I discuss in this section the reading strategies so many reading teachers currently use.
MAKING READING INSTRUCTION PRODUCTIVE
AND ACCOUNTABLE: CONTROL THE GAME

So how do busy teachers integrate reading instruction into their classrooms in a way that will be productive and keep students accountable? This challenge involves a set of skills that are often overlooked but are critically important. I call these skills Control the Game.

Imagine, for a moment, a hypothetical school. This school values reading above all other endeavors—to an exaggerated degree. In its reading classes, it provides direct, intentional instruction on reading: phonics and comprehension at the lower grade levels, intentional focus on key terms and concepts like characterization and theme at the middle school level, introduction to college prep literature at the high school level, and vocabulary at all grade levels. It has recently decided to ensure that its students spend almost all their time in school reading. In science classes, they read chapters from articles and textbooks. In history class, they read primary and secondary source materials, often for the entire class period. They do write, but usually summaries and analyses of what they’ve read. In math, they supplement their problem sets with reading, and new concepts are often introduced in short descriptive texts. Imagine also that teachers in the school are able to consistently ensure that students, when asked to read, actually do read and read effectively and with attentiveness. As a result, students in the school read for six or seven hours a day, plus homework.

I offer this prospect as a hypothetical model, not a proposal for actual educational programs. My goal is not to say I think it would make for a viable school model but to cause you to reflect on what the results of such a school would be. Might reading for six or seven hours a day, 190 days a year, if you could ensure the reading was of reasonable quality, achieve better outcomes than many schools today foster? Obviously there’s no way to answer this question. The fact is that the answer could plausibly be yes and that the question (“If we could ensure that students read well would it be better to read?”) should be on our minds as teachers. If a teacher can ensure that her students can be relied on to read well, she can always, at any time and for any duration, ensure that a high-value activity, the single most important skill of the educated citizen, will take place in her classroom. If she
can do that, she can consistently invest her time at a reliable rate of return. She need never oversee a low-value activity again. She has a hurdle rate: a rate of return she must exceed on an investment of her time to make it worthwhile.

The term hurdle rate comes from finance. If you know you can predictably earn 10 percent on every dollar you invest in a certain bond, for example, and you know that bond is always available to you, you would naturally avoid any investment that returned you less than 10 percent since you could always do better with your bond. The question you'd ask in assessing any potential investment is not, "Will it make me money?" but, "Will it beat my hurdle rate?" That is, you'd ask whether any investment would yield a stronger return than the best alternative investment you know you could make. Businesses ask this kind of question all the time. A technology firm's owners wouldn't ask, "Would building a new factory to manufacture cell phones make us money?" if its resources are limited. If its owners invest millions in building the cell phone factory, they must choose not to do something else with that money—say, invest it in expanding their existing computer factory. Faced with the possibility of profits in cell phones, they would ask whether investing in a cell phone plant would exceed their hurdle rate. In this case, "Would building a factory to manufacture cell phones earn us more than would investing the money in expanding our current computer factories?" The decision is a choice between the return you know you can get (from your existing computer operations) and the potential of any new project (the cell phones). If you could make an 8 percent return on the cell phone factory, it would still not make sense to do it if your rate of return was 10 percent for expanding computer operations. Just because you can make money manufacturing cell phones doesn't mean you should do it.

Although we also manage finite resources as teachers—in this case, time—we rarely think this way. We ask whether our actions will result in learning, but this is the wrong question. The right question is whether our actions yield a return that exceeds our hurdle rate—that is, yield more learning per minute invested than does the best reliable alternative use of class time. And we rarely spend time thinking about developing the strongest and most reliable hurdle rate. In the classrooms of many teachers whose teaching informed this book, meaningful reading (a term I'll define in a minute) provides an exceptionally strong and reliable hurdle rate. It's a high-quality activity (when done efficiently) that can be carried out in any classroom, at any time, and with limited additional preparation or expense required. You can always invest any stretch of time, short or long, in meaningful reading and reap a strong and predictable return. Furthermore, if you know you could always be doing meaningful reading—in any class, at
any time—you can examine your other investments of time critically: Do they exceed the value of meaningful reading? Are they potentially higher return but riskier and therefore should be balanced with something more reliable? As you ask these questions, you may well find that reading crowds out some of the other ways you invest your time. Surely not all of them, but probably some of them do not exceed your hurdle rate (that is, they are not reliably more productive than meaningful reading). It would be smarter to have them read meaningfully instead.

It makes sense to pause here and define the term meaningful reading more specifically because it is critical to this discussion. For the purposes of this book, I define meaningful reading as reading that is accountable, moderately expressive, and highly leveraged. By accountable, I mean that teachers are able to reliably assess whether students are actually reading (rather than, say, sitting looking at pictures or out the window daydreaming when they are supposed to be reading) and reading effectively (decoding and reading words correctly and diligently, for example, rather than reinscribing errors such as ignoring suffixes or skipping over the difficult parts of the text). Much of the reading students do in schools fails to meet this criterion. In one commonly used program, Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), for example, students are given quiet time in which they sit with books and are expected to read. It’s a lovely idea, but if you observe students during this program, you will invariably see some of them sitting with books open but eyes drifting across the room or out the window. Some flip idly through pages, gazing at pictures, while others read lazily or poorly, practicing and reinscribing weak habits as they go. Unfortunately, the students reading least are often the ones who need to read the most. This fails the accountability test. As a result, the rate of return on this activity may be low. Learning to invest reading with a strong dose of accountability is a key focus of this chapter.

By moderately expressive, I mean that students demonstrate the capacity to embed meaning in words as they read, to show in their inflection that they are processing the words at a level beyond the most basic level. We’re not talking about Sir John Gielgud here—just the basics: nonrobotic reading with demonstrated recognition of punctuation and periodic recognition (by emphasis) of key words. Although expressive reading is insufficient to the final task of a full and rich understanding of a text, it is highly efficient as an indicator of basic understanding. Expressing the meaning and register of the words in the manner you are reading them demonstrates comprehension, the end goal of reading instruction.

Many teachers scorn the idea of allowing a single student to read aloud during class time. “What are the other kids doing?” they ask. In meaningful reading, the
answer is that they are also reading—to themselves, in step with the student reading aloud. I call the degree to which other students are reading “leverage,” and it’s the third critical element of meaningful reading. If one student is reading aloud and her classmates are listening passively, there’s a leverage factor of 1, signifying a highly inefficient activity. However, if one student is reading aloud and twenty-five students are silently but accountably reading along with her at their desks, you have a leverage factor of twenty-six. Twenty-six people reading makes for a highly efficient and worthwhile activity. If twenty-six people are reading, your hurdle rate is much, much higher so the question becomes very quickly, How do you get that leverage? The Control the Game skills explain how to get and sustain consistently high rates of leverage. When they are reading, everyone reads, and reads accountably, with the result being an especially high hurdle rate and, over time, consistently higher-value activities in the classroom because the hurdle rate raises the investment criteria for their time.

Skeptics about the efficacy of having a single student reading out loud might ask how the text could be appropriately leveled for the whole class or whether it was injurious to students’ self-esteem if they struggled publicly. Without engaging in an extended philosophical debate, I would argue that there is nothing inherently injurious to self-esteem about getting something wrong, especially if students learn to do it successfully over time. In that case, the opposite is probably the outcome. Regardless, as Roy Baumeister has demonstrated in his excellent article on the topic, “Rethinking Self-Esteem: Why Nonprofits Should Stop Pushing Self-Esteem and Start Endorsing Self-Control” (Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2005), there’s little to support the idea that enhancing self-esteem is a worthy goal in schools. The best you can say is that it correlates to (rather than causes) achievement. That is, when students achieve, they believe in themselves, not the other way around. As for leveled texts, many to most of the top-performing urban charter schools of which I’m aware buck the otherwise orthodox belief in heterogeneous classroom grouping and solve this problem by homogeneously grouping classes. That said, even if you do or cannot homogeneously group, a bit of prescreening can help you target sections of the text to appropriate readers or even to prepare struggling readers by introducing phrases and words in advance for them.
Once you’ve mastered Control the Game and can reliably achieve a fully leveraged and meaningful read, you too can use that skill to set your hurdle rate and rigorously assess whether your classroom activities exceed it in value. I am confident that you will find many such things. You will do a lot more than just read. But you should always seek to consider your hurdle rate and subject every other activity to a comparison. Furthermore, I acknowledge that as students gain in maturity and proficiency, the definition of meaningful reading may change: silent individual reading that doesn’t test as explicitly for accountability may become more frequent, for example. But the skills described in this chapter are critical because they get students to the point in their academic careers where high-value independent reading is possible, and they increase the value of those sessions if invested in systematically. Also, most urban public schools probably fail to get the majority of their students to the point where their independent reading is fully meaningful and productive. In those schools, reading falls victim to the logistical problems of poor accountability and low leverage. I fervently hope your classroom reaches the point where Control the Game is unnecessary and less productive than mere silent reading. It will be a joyous day when more classrooms do not need to manage reading in this way. I would merely caution you against assuming you have that classroom without further evidence from and training of your students, possibly over multiple years.

CONTROL THE GAME SKILLS

**Keep Durations Unpredictable**

When you ask a student to read aloud during class, that student is the primary reader. As the designation suggests, this student is not the only reader. While the practice the primary reader gets is critical, the actions and focus of all other students are also critical: they must become secondary readers. So when you identify your primary reader, don’t specify how long you want him to read before he actually begins. “Start reading for me please, James,” or “Pick up please, James,” is far better than is, “Read the next paragraph for me, James.” This ensures that other students in the class don’t know when a new reader will be asked to pick up and therefore provides them with a strong incentive to follow along carefully. This makes them more likely to be secondary readers.

In addition, keeping duration unpredictable allows you to address an over-matched primary reader in a noninvasive manner. A primary reader who struggles mightily with a long paragraph risks losing the engagement and concentration of his or her peers, who may lose track of the narrative thread. This reduces
leverage. When you've committed to a full paragraph, you lose your ability to cut a primary reader's session short and have him or her try again with a better passage without it becoming obvious. If you don't specify the length of the read, you can shorten or lengthen as you need to in the interest of both the primary reader and the rest of the class.

**Keep the Identity of the Next Reader Unpredictable**

If you move quickly from one primary reader to another, students focus more closely on following along. This is doubly true if they don't know who the next primary reader will be. A teacher who announces that she'll go around the room in a predictable fashion gives away this part of her leverage. Students can tune out until their turn is near. Holding on to your ability to choose the next reader also allows you to match students to passages more effectively. Retaining unpredictability makes for better leverage and better reading.

**Keep Durations Short**

Reading for short segments maximizes the concentration of the primary reader. It allows students to invest expressive energy in reading and focus intently on and sustain fluent and even dramatic reading. This yields higher-quality oral reading and makes the lesson more engaging. Moving quickly among primary readers also keeps the pacing lively. The lesson feels quick and energetic as a result rather than tedious and slow. Knowing that segments tend to be short and may end at any time because they aren't predictable also reinforces for secondary readers that they will likely soon get a chance themselves to read, and this keeps them from tuning out. Keeping durations short allows you to take better advantage of a crucial form of data: every time you switch readers, you gather data about your leverage. When you say, "Pick up please, Charles," and Charles jumps in with the next sentence without missing a beat, you know Charles was reading alongside the previous reader on his own. Ideally, you want this sort of seamless transition every time you switch readers, and switching frequently allows you to gather and manage this more frequently and broadly. The more data you have, the more information and tools you will have to help you ensure leverage.

**Reduce Transaction Costs**

A transaction cost is the amount of resources needed to execute an exchange; it can be economic, verbal, or something else. If it takes you three days of driving to different stores to find the best price on a TV, your transaction cost is high
(three days of your time)—possibly higher in dollar value than the potential savings you’d get from buying the less expensive TV. When you manage finite resources like time and attention, as teachers do, transaction costs are both critically important and easy to miss. A shopper spending three days searching for a twenty-dollar savings on a TV might think he’s gotten a steal, but if he spent one of those days working and then bought the more expensive TV, he’d have both more than ten dollars and two days left over.

A transaction cost is implicit in every transition in the classroom, especially in transitions you make frequently, like moving from one reader to the next. Still, many teachers fail to recognize their significance. A transaction that takes more than a few seconds steals reading time and risks interrupting the continuity of what students are reading, thus affecting how well students follow and comprehend the text.

Make it your goal to transition from one primary reader to another quickly and with a minimum of words—and ideally in a consistent way. “Susan, pick up,” is a much more efficient transition than, “Thank you, Stephen. Nicely read. Susan will you begin reading, please?” Since it’s more than three times as quick, the first transaction reduces threefold the amount of time students are not reading. It also keeps the narrative thread vibrant and alive in students’ minds since it’s subject to less interruption. Because it’s quick, it also allows you to step in and use it at almost any natural pause in the text, which gives you more control over when to choose a new primary reader.

Use Bridging to Maintain Continuity

In bridging, a teacher reads a short segment of text—a bridge—between primary student readers. In a typical sequence of bridging, a teacher might allow Stewart to read for three sentences and then read one sentence herself. Then she might allow Mary to read four sentences and read two sentences herself before asking John to read for six sentences and reading one herself and then passing off to Jane. The benefit of this method is that it moves the story along quickly and keeps the narrative thread alive, while interspersing teacher-quality expressive reading, which maximizes comprehension. I am arguing
for discretionary bridging when it's important to keep the narrative thread alive and create more opportunities to model. Generally the harder the text, the more you might consider bridging. But you needn't necessarily always bridge.

**Oral Cloze**
I learned the oral cloze technique from watching Roberto de Leon teach reading to third-grade boys at Excellence Charter School for Boys in Bedford Stuyvesant. In one example, de Leon kicked off his reading of *Phantom of the Opera* by leaving a word out at the end of his first sentence: "Carlotta had the . . .," he read, snapping quietly on the word *the* to alert his students that they should fill in the blank. On the day in question, only a handful of his boys chimed in "leading role" exactly on cue. So Rob started over, "Ooh, some boys weren't quite with us. Let's try that again. 'Carlotta had the . . .'," and all his boys chimed in with "leading role" demonstrating that they were now following along. This quick device, which de Leon uses throughout his lessons, allows him to quickly and simply assess leverage.

**Rely on a Placeholder**
As the best reading teachers move between reading and questioning their students about what they read, they use quick and reliable prompts to ensure that their students recognize the transition and react promptly. I call this prompt a *placeholder*, because it is used to ensure that students retain their place in the text so they can quickly and immediately transition *back* to reading after discussion. "Hold your place. Track me," announces Patrick Pastore, modeling for his sixth graders how to point to the spot where they left off reading *Esperanza Rising*, close their books partway, and engage his eyes to show they are ready to discuss. After a brief discussion of why Esperanza and Miguel react differently to a train ride, he instructs, "Pick up reading please, Melanie." In less than two seconds, she and her classmates are back into the book at almost no transaction cost.

"Finger in your book; close your book," intones de Leon as he prepares his students to discuss *Phantom of the Opera* and also prepares them to end that discussion and return to the book efficiently. Leadership Prep's Hannah Lofthus uses a similar expression ("finger freeze"), with her third graders, modeling for them how to keep their place when the reading is interrupted.
SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 22

CONTROL THE GAME

In clip 22 on the DVD, Hilary Lewis of Leadership Prep Bedford Stuyvesant demonstrates Control the Game. As she bounces quickly and unpredictably from reader to reader, all six students she calls on (using just their names to signal the change, which results in an ultra-low transaction cost) are able to pick up reading right away. The data tell us that Lewis's leverage is high: students are reading along with the primary reader. In addition to exemplary modeling of the elements of Control the Game, you'll also see Hilary Lewis marking the spot on occasional decoding errors (for example, "Try that again please").

Want to read more? Check out the interview with Hilary Lewis in the Appendix of this book.