Creating an independent reading program

Teacher guide to independent reading

Teachers everywhere strive to instill a love of learning. In California, this is not just an ambition but part of the job description. The California ELA/ELD Framework tells us that apart from helping students develop the foundational knowledge they'll need to succeed academically, teachers must also impart "a positive disposition towards learning." It is a tall order, but one that is critical to an even taller order: making students broadly literate. To graduate, students must engage with books, plays, spoken word, journalism, mixed media and more, across a range of genres, time periods, and perspectives. This requirement becomes a pleasure when students are engaged with reading.

The Amplify independent reading program is focused on three fundamental criteria designed to make reading:

1. **More independent.** You provide the choices. You set up and guide the selection. Your students decide what to read.

2. **More social.** Putting the choice of reading in students' hands gives purpose to their discussions. Every student is on the lookout for what to read next—and they are each other's best source of information. Book sharing sessions are a great chance for real communication between students, and conversations may well continue after the bell at the end of class.

3. **More about the book, less about the essay.** Students are held accountable for their reading, but assignments are secondary to the reading itself. They are lighter than the ones that surround core texts, not graded, and students have a choice about which to do when.

The Amplify Library: Purposefully built for independent reading

Independent reading is your opportunity to turn students loose to explore. What you need is open, inviting, content-rich territory in which to safely let them go, and the Amplify Library gives you just that. The curated, digital collection includes more than 600 classic and contemporary texts; fiction and nonfiction. A full range of genres, topics, and perspectives facilitates the broad literacy and the personal joy in reading that are your twin, top goals for independent reading. A range of Lexile levels can provide a ladder of text complexity for every reader. The Amplify digital library provides numerous advantages to building a strong independent reading program. Advantageous features include, but are not limited to, embedded highlighting and annotating tools for texts, the embedded game world Lexica that can motivate students to read outside of school, the embedded collection of Research Archives, and whole-class access to texts outside of the curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to read more about the Amplify Library and its supports in the preceding sections of this guide as they envision the independent reading program described below.

Choosing books: To guide or not to guide?

The success of an independent reading program is sometimes talked about as a balance. On one hand, we want to guide the process, or at least set parameters to ensure students take away what's important. On the other hand, we need to give students more than token freedom for the program to accomplish its purpose.

The first area in which you will have to strike that balance is in helping students choose their books. The imperative that students become broadly literate means a student probably should not spend every hour of independent reading (through all three years of middle school) reading *only* books about seafaring in the 20th-century Pacific Northwest, for example. The Reading Tracker that accompanies this guide and is found in the Appendix helps encourage students to read broadly. Students can use the Reading Tracker to record information about the types of texts and authors they are reading. The question is how prescriptive to be with these measures. You want students to read broadly over the course of their K-12 education, but if a student reads an author he likes, is it okay to choose another book by that author for his next independent reading?

Tools like the Reading Tracker can be used to follow your students year to year, and on through high school. This tool can help provide a complete picture of students' reading choices over time, so that future teachers can see the gaps in students' reading experience, what kinds of texts they still need to read in order to round out their exposure by graduation.

The importance of text diversity is related to the importance of text complexity. Research shows a troubling downward trend in recent decades in student reading capacities particularly when it comes to informational text. Without developing the skills of concentration and stamina for complex reading, as the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy warn, students may turn away from reading and instead "turn to text-free or text-light sources, such as video, podcasts, and tweets." Schools can push students towards challenging reading across diverse measures of complexity, both quantitative and qualitative. A strong independent reading program can utilize these measures and other tools, such as self-assessments and conferences, to guide student choice.

The Amplify curriculum and Amplify Library encourage the personalization and perseverance that is so important to reading. Where direct instruction can help develop critical literacy skills, an independent reading program can be uniquely personalized and help students feel more deeply invested in their time and efforts. Independent reading provides students with more chances to engage in reading that means something to them, even if the text is a challenge. Ultimately, an ELA teacher serves his or her students best by helping them reach higher levels of reading proficiency.

Choosing books: Where do I start?

When faced with the choice of hundreds of titles in the Amplify Library, each student will likely ask "where do I begin?" Students need ways to help them dive into the collection and make informed choices. In the interest of maximizing opportunities for students to read independently and foster a love for reading and learning from a broad range of texts, the below resources have been created to support student choice: 1. Starter lists, 2. Independent Reader's Guides, 3. Books encountered in Lexica, and 4. Peer recommendations. Please see the full guides in the Appendix of this Teacher Program Guide.

1.   Starter lists

The first are a set of starter lists by topic. Each list names 15 to 20 texts—not necessarily all the titles the library has on the topic, but a place to start browsing. Please see the Appendix for a copy of these starter lists to be used in your classroom.

- Adventure
- Arts and music
- Dogs and other animals
- Fantasy
- Growing up
- Hispanic culture and Spanish language
- Multicultural perspectives
- History and historical fiction
- Humor
- Mystery
- Scary, spooky, horror and suspense
- Science fiction
- Science and technology
- Sports
- Amplify Library's most accessible

2. **Independent Reader's Guides**

    A second set of lists takes each core curriculum reading as a starting point and suggests books that are related. These are collections of reading ideas based on each unit curated by the Amplify librarian. The list for *Frankenstein*, for example, in which the core text is read in graphic novel form, starts with the original novel by Mary Shelley. From there, the librarian's suggestions include: a) three more graphic novel versions of *Frankenstein*; b) four of the best graphic novels that do not relate to *Frankenstein*; c) four *Frankenstein* spin-offs, such as *Bride of Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Frankenstein's Daughters*; d) eight stories about mad scientists run amok, including a real-life example from Time magazine; and e) four Frankenstein movies, including Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie,* about a bereft scientist who brings his run-over dog back to life. For the collection of Independent Reader's Guides for each unit, please refer to the Appendix.

    - Independent Reader's Guide: Dahl & Narrative
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Tom & Sherlock
    - Independent Reader's Guide: The Greeks
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Reading the Novel
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Red Scarf Girl & Narrative
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Character & Conflict
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Brain Science
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Poetry & Poe
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet
    - Independent Reader's Guide: World War II & Narrative
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Biography & Literature
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Liberty & Equality
    - Independent Reader's Guide: Science & Science Fiction

3. **Books encountered on Lexica**

    The Amplify digital library can also be accessed through the fantasy library in which the Amplify ELA game world, Lexica, is set. The seamless integration of the game and students' reading goes to the heart of building a successful independent reading program that helps students find and sustain the joy in reading. In the game, which includes character dialogue and instructions in Spanish as well as in English, characters and objects from the books emerge and engage players to journey deeper into the texts while providing reading supports and discussion prompts about the reading. Students' reading choices and progress through texts shape their experience in the game world and the rewards they receive, making the game a way for students to discover texts of all types and broaden their choices for independent reading.

4. **Peer reading recommendations**

    Perhaps the best ideas students get about what to read will come from their peers. In the Amplify ELA classroom, students will hear about classmates' books through partner and small-group sharing. They will get ideas from book talks given by classmates, by their teacher, by the librarian, and others. Additional ideas to foster lively discussions and sharing around independent reading choices are described in the activities described below.

Additional strategies for supporting independent reading

The Amplify ELA curriculum pacing is designed to create time for independent reading. With the Amplify Library, teachers can assign highlighting and annotating strategies, and the nature of independent reading allows you to do so in differentiated ways. In its personalization, students can read at their own pace and get the supports they need to feel successful. The student's Reading Tracker can help establish the appropriate page-reading targets for each week. Readers with persistent comprehension gaps can engage in multiple forms of note-taking (summaries, predictions, questions) to induce more active meaning-making.

For ELA classrooms that can schedule in-class days for independent reading (ideally, multiple days in a month), teachers can confer with students regarding reading selections, goal-setting, and progress. During individual conferences, the rest of the class can carry out additional activities that create a strong independent reading community, including social and writing activities that support their reading. Staple routines include the following:

- **Book talks.** Students make five minute presentations on their books—sometimes to partners, sometimes to small groups, and sometimes to the whole class. Every student is looking for the next book that will make his or her independent reading life enjoyable. The question "Is this a book I would like?" drives the occasion and makes for an exciting exchange. Book talks should cover the points suggested below.

  - **Overview:** For stories: setting, characters, and plot. For non-narrative works: subject and approach or organization.
  - **An evaluative component:** The book-talker can recommend or not recommend the text, or take another perspective. He or she can discuss a strength or weakness of the work, the effects on the reader, or questions or connections it brought up. Most important is that the presenter show this with examples, referenced by page number so that listeners can call it up on their screens.
  - **A passage of at least five sentences read aloud:** The read-aloud passage is an important opportunity for students to engage in reading with fluency and a sense of meaning, and important for the class to sample an author's voice for a book they might choose to read next. The expectation for book talks should be clear: passages read aloud should show evidence of preparation.
  - **Q & A:** Questions with a genuine purpose can make this a lively and substantive part of the talk.

- **Teacher modeling via think-alouds.** Showing students what it sounds like inside the head of an engaged, active reader has great value. It is something you can demonstrate any time you work with text, but a natural opportunity arises during book talks. When the presenter reads an extended passage, it is possible that the majority of the room is confronting the text for the first time. This is when your spontaneous observations, questions, and connections can make the deepest impressions. Once students have seen you think aloud on two or three occasions, the next time you can pause mid-think and solicit a thought or two from students. Each time, do less thinking aloud and ask students to do more. Seat students in pairs and when the passage is read aloud, pause the presenter, and have students turn to their partners and think aloud. Next, move the thinking to writing on a device or paper.

- **Book sharing.** Book sharing is like giving a book talk, but can take place before students have finished their books. Partners or groups share their understanding so far, their impressions and confusions. Often, just bringing these personal thoughts into the conversation results in a new perspective.

- **Partner reading.** In this activity, students use class time to read but do so aloud, with a partner who listens, follows along, and asks questions every few paragraphs to push the reader to look more closely in order to answer.

- **Vocabulary in context, collaboration style.** Highlighting unfamiliar vocabulary is a good reading strategy. The activity can be taken to another level by having every student come to class with at least one word the student was unable to work out on his or her own. One at a time, in pairs, or, ideally, in small groups, students share their words. Group members call up the text in question on their screens and together see if they can work out a meaning. Whatever the success rate, making the process social (and cooperative or competitive)—stimulates strategic thinking. If done regularly, the higher level of strategic thinking becomes part of the students' internalized meaning-making capacity.

- **Writing.** Independent reading is not the place for formal essay work, but writing can be easily integrated. Students can write to annotate their texts, plan their book talks, and post responses to books and to other responders on the class' online book web.

- **Online book pages.** A class- or school-level book forum patterned after sites like Amazon or Goodreads provides another creative outlet for sharing. Using search terms such as "create my own social media site" or "create my own online book club" will generate dozens of pages of instructions and hosting services, some free. Start with pages for books that you and the librarian would like to recommend. Have your students show their other teachers the Amplify Library and get them to recommend a favorite book or two, possibly from their youth. Include school administrators, coaches, and others. Most importantly, as your students complete readings, they can flesh out pages and the site can become interactive. A variety of literacy muscles can be engaged, most notably the collaborative meaning-making that takes place around the books. Postings can include:

  - Reviews or book talk highlights.
  - Favorite passages with annotation.
  - Audio of students reading passages aloud.
  - Comments on other contributors' reviews.

Progress and accountability

With independent reading, you can see your students' writing on shared documents, on their digital reader and, if you choose, online posts. You can hear their book-sharing conversations in class. You monitor progress continuously, but your best vehicle for probing and guiding in greater depth is the one-on-one conference. All students should have at least one conference in the latter half of each semester designated for assessment, reflection, and to update goals. Students' Reading Trackers can serve as a touchstone for conferencing. Conferences will be more productive if you have students prepare by reflecting in their Reading Trackers on the three suggested subjects you can cover: their challenges, their ideas, and what to read next.

- **Assess challenge and progress.** This part of the conversation is about habits and strategies. Use the Reading Tracker to go over students' weekly reading targets and their "actual pages read." Review the reflection question on challenges and strategies. Open the text to one of the referenced pages and decide together whether current strategies should be revised.

- **Engage their ideas.** In their pre-conference reflections, your students will have written about a piece of their reading that prompted a particular feeling, observation, question or connection. In the conference, ask them to say more. Open the text to a student's referenced example. Read over the passage together and with a question as boilerplate as, "What did you notice when you read it this time?" you will push them to go a half-step further, reinforcing the value of their observations and showing them how to dig deeper.

- **What next?** Here is where the earlier discussion "Choosing books: To guide or not to guide?" comes into play. Consider the level of challenge to date. Consider Tables 1 and 2 in the Reading Tracker, where a student records the genre, setting, and identity of characters and authors of the readings so far. Consider the possible material the student might read next. Generally, students need to push themselves towards greater text complexity and text diversity. But these principles should not be applied as rigid parameters at every turn. Reading abilities do not develop on a linear trajectory, as the CA CCSS acknowledge, since "students need opportunities to stretch their reading abilities but also to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading within them, both of which the Standards allow for."

Establishing routines and expectations for independent reading

One-on-one conferences fit the personalized nature of independent reading. It is hard to imagine a more individualized arrangement than one in which every student is reading a different book, at a different pace, using different strategies, with different vocabulary words, and even choosing which activities to complete with each reading. Nevertheless, like the routines around other parts of your curriculum, independent reading follows a pattern and has a structure. Every student should be clear about the expectations for these structural elements.

- In terms of selecting texts, all students can be expected on the whole to challenge themselves in text complexity and text type, as discussed, and to make their choices in consultation with you, their teacher.

- All students can be expected to maintain their written Reading Trackers so they function as points of reference, particularly in preparation for one-on-one conferences.

- Whatever their pace in terms of pages, all students can be expected to log the same amount of time on texts in a given week. Some weeks, the reading load for core texts will preclude significant independent reading. Other weeks, students will have more time for independent reading.

- In terms of pages, all students can be expected to set page-number targets in their Reading Trackers at the start of each week, and record actual page-number progress at the end of each week.

- In terms of other activities discussed in this guide—book talks, online postings, annotation work in the library app and other exercises—teachers can assign and give credit for them according to scheduling needs and the general approach of the class. This part, however, encourages a spirit of choice and independence in students. Teachers may decide to set a blanket expectation and let students choose what to do and when. Require, for instance, that students give at least one book talk per semester, post at least two reviews, leave comments on at least three other student posts, and so forth. You and your students can designate a place in the Reading Tracker to record these tasks as they are completed.

The measure of choice and control you give to students in independent reading can mean a lot. Some may come alive in ways (some subtle) that you had not noticed before. Encourage that. Help them bring a new part of themselves into the classroom. At the same time, remember that your guidance and feedback are as important as ever. You know the difference that the right book can make to the right student, at the right time. If you think you know a book that is right for a student, don't let them miss it. They will thank you for it some day.

Tracking tools

Student Reading Tracker:
Use the student copy of the Reading Tracker in the Appendix for your classroom independent reading program.

Name: _____   Text: _____   Date began reading: _____

School year and Teacher: _____

Reading Tracker

Use this tracker to help you make smart choices about the books you read, set goals for your reading, and share your progress and ideas about what you're reading.

1. Consider my options.

List three texts and then circle the one you choose:

Title and author	What about this text appeals to you?

2. Logging my progress

Record your reading *goal* for the coming week, and *actual* pages read the previous week.

Dates of the week	Goal	Actual
Monday,_____ to Sunday,_____	From page , _____ to page, _____	From page , _____ to page, _____
Monday,_____ to Sunday,_____	From page , _____ to page, _____	From page , _____ to page, _____
Monday,_____ to Sunday,_____	From page , _____ to page, _____	From page , _____ to page, _____
Monday,_____ to Sunday,_____	From page , _____ to page, _____	From page , _____ to page, _____

3. Reflecting on my reading

Respond to the prompts below when you are about halfway through your text.
Write your responses before your teacher conference, no matter where you are in your book. Make sure to number your answers!

Challenge

1. On a scale of 1–10, how challenging would you say your text has been?
2. What about this text makes it challenging or not?
3. Show me. Highlight and annotate an example, explaining the difficulty or lack of challenge. Copy your note and cite the chapter, paragraph, and sentence numbers (or line numbers if it is a poem).

Paraphrase

4. Copy at least three sentences from the text that you find interesting. Cite the chapter, paragraph, and sentence numbers (or line numbers if it is a poem).
5. Leave a space, and then paraphrase those sentences, sentence by sentence or line by line, coming as close as you can to the author's meaning but using your own words.

Notice

6. Describe one thing you notice in your reading, about the world that is described, about a character, or about the way your writer writes. Use evidence from the text to show what you mean and cite the chapter, paragraph, and sentence numbers (or line numbers if it is a poem).

Name: _____   School year and Teacher: _____

Tracking my reading path

You have choice in what you read!

With so many titles to choose from, you can read your favorite types of books and explore new genres and authors.

For each text you read, record an "X" in each of the sections to record information about 1) genre, 2) setting (historical period and location) and 3) identity about the author or character(s).

Genre: Fiction	
Story	
Adventure story	
Historical fiction	
Mystery	
Myth	
Science fiction	
Realistic fiction	
Allegory	
Parody	
Satire	
Graphic novel	
Short story collection	
Drama	
Poetry	
Other:	

Genre: Non-fiction	
Exposition/argument/ functional	
Biography	
Memoir (includes diaries)	
Historical or political account	
Scientific or technical account	
In the arts	
Sports or entertainment	
Primary source historical documents	
Psychology and self-improvement	
Philosophy (ideas about truth, knowledge, the meaning of life)	
Collected journalism/interviews or letters	
Other:	

Identity	
Male	
Female	
Other:	

Setting	
Contemporary	
20th century	
18th or 19th century	
Ancient civilizations	
Other:	

Location	
American south	
American west	
American northeast	
American midwest	
Great Britain	
Other parts of western Europe	
Eastern Europe	
Middle east	
Africa	
Asia	
Latin America	
Other:	