

# Ten Evidence-based Strategies to Support Independent Reading

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Elementary school librarians frequently see teachers, parents, and even other librarians encourage gifted readers to read traditional, challenging, classic literature but provide little direction on helping the students find literature that interests them. The assumption is that because the students are proficient in their reading ability, then they are self-sufficient enough to find books on their own—ones that meet these adult-approved criteria. It can be a struggle though for even experienced educators to find materials for gifted students that will push their reading and cognitive abilities, but not the boundaries of their maturity levels. Fortunately, classroom teachers and teacher librarians can collaborate to help achieve this goal.

Teacher librarians can provide gifted students and classroom teachers:

- resources for learning at advanced levels
- independent reading material
- literacy instruction
- research sources
- welcoming spaces
- technology instruction for both faculty and students
- and the training to navigate it all

Meanwhile, classroom teachers can provide teacher librarians with their curriculum plans and instructional goals, ask for assistance with specific projects and individual students, and obtain overall curriculum support.

When looking at the *American Association of School Librarians Standards Framework for Learners* and the *Gifted Programming Standards*, it is clear that the missions of both align. Both sets of standards focus on learning as an individual process, personal growth, the evaluation of learning, information, and choices. They also encourage the use of multiple gifts, talents, and skills in creative ways and urge students to participate in the world socially and ethically. Recreational reading fits well with the goals of both sets of standards. The amount of research that demonstrates the importance of reading both frequently and recreationally is staggering. The research makes it clear this aspect of reading needs to remain a priority for students of all ability levels. Yet, too often, adults assume that gifted students will find enjoyable, challenging materials without outside assistance.

With this in mind, here are ten evidence-based strategies for educators to ensure they are meeting the needs of gifted readers and helping to grow an all-important, lifelong love of reading.

## 1 Facilitate Peer Groups

It is well documented that students rely heavily on the influence of peers for book selection (e.g., Allington, 2002; Gambrell et al., 1996). It is important to give students time to talk with each other about books, explore the library together, and have creative ways (like interactive bulletin boards) to share reading interests.

Teacher librarians can help facilitate these peer conversations. Teachers can host a lunchtime book club and rotate as a moderator with their librarian. Teachers can ask librarians for books titles that promote discussion among students. Other ways to connect students of all abilities through reading include hosting book clubs, creating book trailers, and passing reading notebooks back and forth.

## 2 Conference with Students

Reading conferences are a highly effective way to touch base with students about reading and writing. Students often don't know where to find things in the library, or even that the library has certain materials they like. But students who have direct contact with librarians indicate that they read more often for pleasure and more frequently enjoy the materials they obtain from the library. Talking with students about reading is imperative. While the demands on a teacher's time are many, reading conferences do need to include all students—not just struggling ones. Librarians can assist with this as well. Partner students of any ability level who are struggling to find a book with the librarian who is an expert in reader's advisory.

## 3 Stock Up on Fantasy/Sci Fi

Halstead (2009) found that fantasy and science fiction are pop-

ular with intermediate aged students. “They discover it at just the age when they are entering their own personal quests for identity and beginning to consciously establish their personal values” (p. 218). Students cite the imagination in these types of books and the ability to make them feel like they are somewhere else as appealing factors. There is ample research over the last two decades to reinforce that these two genres are popular choices among gifted students. Classroom and gifted educators should strive to have an extensive selection of fantasy and science fiction on hand. If there isn’t enough room in the classroom for a sizeable section of these genres, know where to find them—or at least the most popular titles—in the library. If these genres are not familiar to you, use librarians and even other students to assist in recommending these titles.

#### **4 Expand Genres**

Another popular genre for gifted students is non-narrative nonfiction. While narrative nonfiction gives facts and information in a familiar story-like format, non-narrative nonfiction delivers these pieces of information in brief bursts, with several key ideas per page. Titles are often formatted in an engaging and visual way. Examples of this genre include National Geographic’s *Weird but True*, Guinness Book of World Records, and almanacs for kids. It can also be helpful to expand reading options and allow students to read nontraditional texts like blogs and websites, handbooks, and manuals. Nontraditional pieces can appeal to interests, encourage exploration, engage different skill sets, foster multimodal literacy, provide levels of complexity, and expand the amount of reading choices.

#### **5 Become Familiar with Books**

For students to view the teacher as a reliable reference regarding literature, teachers need to familiarize themselves with current books for the age range. To accomplish this, teachers can read professional magazines that have book summaries, follow publishers, authors, and other book-focused educators on social media, and explore children’s book honors such as

their state’s children’s choice awards and national awards like the Newberry and the Coretta Scott King. Teachers should talk to the students often about books. Students know best what will likely be popular selections for their age. It is also important to talk to the librarian, as they are informed about what’s new and upcoming in children’s literature.

#### **6 Encourage Home Reading**

Free reading time in schools has been decreasing (Scholastic, 2015). Most often, students read for enjoyment at home, so teachers should take advantage of that. Encourage and support home reading, consider tracking it in a general way, but don’t make tracking the focus of reading. Some examples of simple home reading programs include bingo cards with genres and tasks on them, reading badges (digital or physical), and Donnalyn Miller’s “Forty Book Challenge”. Whatever system is used, keep in mind the Reader’s Bill of Rights (Pennac, 2008) which emphasizes flexibility and personal choice.

#### **7 Provide Free Reading in School**

Stephen Krashen is one of the preeminent sources on voluntary reading. Krashen (2011) says that free reading is the most powerful literacy activity we can perform. Frequent and deep voluntary reading affects an array of skills and future outcomes. In light of the decrease in classroom time devoted to this all-important skill, educators need to make it a priority to carve out free reading time in every school day.

#### **8 Level with Flexibility**

There is much controversy among about tracking and incentivized reading programs. The effectiveness of these programs is so heavily reliant on how individual teachers implement them, that consistent best practice is hard to find. Many educators and researchers reiterate that such programs do more harm than good when it comes to fostering a love of independent reading. In reality, most gifted students don’t mind using levels as a general guideline to help them find books. Some even feel that a book needs to

be appropriately challenging to be fun. However, almost all of them don’t want to be limited to only “books in their level”. Educators may find it helpful to provide some guidance on levels—be it from a source like Common Sense Media, a retailer like Barnes and Noble, or a program like Accelerated Reader. However, it is critically important to let students read across a variety of levels and have personal choice in their selections. Classroom teachers and gifted educators can also work to encourage other teachers in their schools to be flexible if the school has a designated reading program.

#### **9 Pay Extra Attention to the Reading Habits of Males**

One common research finding is that males struggle to stay engaged in reading more than females. This is true for gifted males as well. To reach male readers in the classroom, especially the gifted ones who may not be working to their potential, teachers should target them with conferences more often. Find out what materials the male readers in the classroom are interested in and obtain them for the classroom if possible. Make interesting materials readily available in the classroom, so that the students can grab them easily. Non-traditional reading can be motivating for gifted boys. Capitalize on that fact and encourage boys to read what is appealing regardless of format. Finally, make sure to continually provide a challenge. Gifted boys often have considerably lower reading goals than girls, despite their achievement scores being closely matched.

#### **10 Librarians**

Lastly, harness the power of the school librarian. “Many classroom teachers do not have the resources or knowledge to provide a variety of appropriately challenging reading material to students” (Reis et al., 2004). Remember that students who talk with the librarian directly check out more books, read more books, and enjoy more books than those who have no contact with the librarian. Classroom teachers and gifted educators do not need to be experts in children’s literature. They can rely on librarians to help them out.

Educators need to take the time to get to know gifted readers and assist them just as they assist struggling readers. As Albus Dumbledore said, “It is our choices Harry that show who we truly are, rather than our abilities” (Rowling, 1999, p. 333). Regardless of the level of achievement, personal choice in independent reading leads to success. Classroom/gifted teachers can work with the school librarian, as well as parents and teachers of gifted students, to use this as leverage to boost student success in reading. Teachers, gifted educators, and librarians can work together to provide materials, programming support, and creative ideas that foster the all-important love of reading that even gifted students need support to develop. This disposition is so critical, it simply cannot be left to chance. **THP**

### 10 Evidence-Based Tips to Support Independent Reading in Gifted Students

- 1 Facilitate peer groups (use the librarian to help).
- 2 Perform teacher conferences (use the librarian to help).
- 3 Fantasy and Sci-Fi are popular, so provide a large selection of those genres...
- 4 ...but also broaden the genres available and include non-narrative nonfiction.
- 5 Become familiar with multiple titles (use the librarian to help).
- 6 Take advantage of home reading without narrowing choice or being stringent.
- 7 Level within reason. In other words, be flexible with “programs”.
- 8 Give time for free reading in school.
- 9 Pay extra attention to the reading habits of gifted males.
- 10 Harness the power of a librarian.

The image shows a screenshot of the NAGC Career Center website. At the top, there are two tabs: "Job Seeker" (selected) and "Employer". Below the tabs is a navigation menu with "Home", "Jobs", "Your Profile", and "Resources". On the right side, there are "Help" and "Sign In" links. The main banner features a collage of diverse people and the NAGC logo. The text on the banner reads: "NAGC Career Center" and "Let NAGC help you find your next Professional Opportunity or your next Star Employee!". Below the banner is a search bar with a "Keywords" input field and a search icon. At the bottom of the banner, there is a call to action: "Prepare Yourself for your Next Professional Opportunity! Whether you are looking for a new job or ready to take the next step in your career, the NAGC Career Center will help you find the right opportunity. Visit [bit.ly/NAGCTHP](https://bit.ly/NAGCTHP) and start your search today!"

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