

OUT OF SCHOOL READING

Unit 1 *Character Clues in Action!*

Purpose: As early as first or second grade, some of your students may have decided that “reading is not for me.” They may have experienced difficulties in learning to read. They may have been turned off by assigned readings that were of little or no interest to them or were beyond their reading level. Once students make that decision, it can be challenging to change their minds, but it is imperative to do so, particularly for disadvantaged students. *There is no other activity besides large quantities of outside reading that has been shown to be associated with low-privileged students who outscore high-privileged students on national skills assessments.* Through outside reading, students build vocabulary, learn knowledge, and increase their reading speed and comprehension abilities. And quantity matters. In one well-known study, fourth through sixth graders who read a lot significantly outscored non-avid readers (with the same decoding ability) on these four separate tests: word knowledge, verbal fluency, vocabulary, and general information. The two groups scored the same on tests of non-verbal intelligence, decoding, and spelling, which strongly suggests they had the same basic abilities to read – it was the amount of reading they did that mattered. As the researchers put it, “Reading makes you smarter.” Our A4L units can be initial steps in changing students’ minds about reading and showing them that they can experience deep, personal connections to written material. It is critical, however, that students don’t stop with the texts in the unit, but instead use them as a springboard to a rich life of reading outside the classroom.

How to Support throughout the Unit: There are two powerful motivators for outside reading that you can use throughout the unit: Curiosity and Personal Connections. Prior to the unit, confer with your school librarian about the reading levels in your class and the personal interests that your students have. Collect from the school library or your own classroom library as many books as possible that are good fits with those reading levels and interests and that feature strong characters. Create a spot in your classroom that can serve as the “Treasure Pile” for all of these books. After an initial discussion, send students whenever possible to the Treasure Pile. Your goal is to make students curious about these books and to convince them that certain books can hold great personal interest. You can achieve this goal by knowing your students well and by dropping hints such as, “You know, Mary, that sounds like a book you in particular would love since the girl is a singer like you,” or “Emilio, you might really like this one: the boy loves to invent things, just like you do.” Be sure to have a system for students to check out these books and bring them home. Research shows that giving students access to books is vitally important, particularly in low-income areas.

Resources for Matching Texts to Student Interests: You may find it helpful to learn more about your students’ interests by giving them interest surveys to fill out. Templates for these surveys, as well as many other tips for increasing pleasure reading among elementary students, are available in Steven Layne’s book, *Igniting a Passion for Reading* (2009, Stenhouse Publishers). Another great resource is Donna Lyn Miller’s *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* (2009, John Wiley & Sons). Donna Lyn is a sixth grade teacher who writes passionately about her incoming sixth graders who have been turned off of reading in elementary school. She also describes how she uses students’ personal interests to change their minds about reading and turn them into book lovers who also succeed on standardized tests. Consider discussing with your colleagues how elementary schools might change some of their practices to decrease the need for these turn-arounds, and how A4L can be used as part of this change.

Book Lists: Your best resources for character-rich books for outside reading with this unit are 1) your knowledge of your students' reading levels and interests and 2) your school librarian or media director's knowledge of the school's book collections. Try to find include books that provide unusual or multiple character perspectives. To get you started, here are some popular titles.

To give you an indication of reading level, we provide for each book the level and points assigned to it by the Accelerated Reader formula and the Lexile formula. Accelerated Reader levels are given in grades and months, and the length of the book is reflected in the point value; the more points awarded, the longer the book. Lexile levels correspond to grade-level ranges in the table below, which has been updated to fit Common Core State Standards. Please keep in mind that these leveling systems do not include calculations based on the important roles that background knowledge and personal interest in a topic can play in enabling children to understand and enjoy a particular book, so these numbers are presented here as initial guidelines only.

Lexiles and Grade-Level Ranges

Grade Level	Previous Lexile Range	New Lexile Range for Common Core State Standards
2 - 3	450 - 725	450 - 790
4 - 5	645 - 845	770 - 980

Picture Books:

The Chicken Thief, Beatrice Rodriguez, 2010, New York: Enchanted Lion Books.

This wordless picture book is full of surprises about a fox character who is not what he seems.
(Leveling information not applicable.)

Chester, Melanie Watt, 2007, Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press.

An egotistical cat tries to take over the story when an author tries to write about a mouse.
AR Level: 1.8
AR Points: 0.5
Lexile: 350

Chicken Big, Keith Graves, 2010, San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books

In this twist on the traditional Chicken Little tale, a giant baby chick is the only one in the farmyard with any sense.
AR Level: 2.7
AR Points: 0.5
Lexile: (Not available)

Dear Mrs. LaRue, Letters from Obedience School, Mark Teague, 2002, New York: Scholastic

A badly behaved dog is sent away to dog school and writes letters home trying to explain his side of the story.
AR Level: 3.6
AR Points: 0.5
Lexile: (Not available)

Cyrus the Unsinkable Sea Serpent, Bill Peet, 1982, New York: Houghton Mifflin.

A good-hearted but horrible-looking sea serpent wishes for some excitement and ends up becoming a hero.

AR Level: 4.6

AR Points: 0.5

Lexile: 760

Mirror, Mirror, A Book of Reversible Verse, Marilyn Singer, 2010, New York: Dutton.

These poems about fairy tales can be read forward and backward, each time showing a different character perspective.

AR Level: (Not available)

AR Points: (Not available)

Lexile: (Not available)

Chapter Books:

- *The Buddy Files Series* (Includes *The Case of the Lost Boy*, *The Case of the Mixed-Up Mutts*, *The Case of the Missing Family*, *The Case of the Fire Alarm*, *The Case of the Library Monster*, *The Case of the School Ghost*), Dori Hillestad Butler, 2010-2012, New York: Albert Whitman & Co.

Told from the perspective of a golden retriever, these delightful books offer suspense and mystery for developing readers.

AR Level: 2.9 – 3.2

AR Points: 1 - 2

Lexile: 450 - 500

- *Rotten Ralph Series* (Includes *Three Strikes for Rotten Ralph*, *Best in Show for Rotten Ralph*, *Rotten Ralph Feels Rotten*, *Practice Makes Perfect for Rotten Ralph*, *Rotten Ralph Helps Out*), Jack Gantos, 2001-2011, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

Ralph is a red cat who still manages to win people over despite his rotten behavior.

AR Level: 3.0 – 3.2

AR Points: 0.5

Lexile: 430 – 520

Graphic Novels*:

Babymouse Series (Starts with *Babymouse*, *Queen of the World*), Jennifer Holm, Matthew Holm, 2005 – 2010, New York: Random House.

A young mouse with attitude longs for adventure and excitement.

* Text leveling systems were not designed to rate the brief-text style of graphic stories, so leveling information is not provided.

Novels:

The Whipping Boy, Sid Fleischman, 1987, Troll Communications.

A young prince and an orphan are kidnapped and secretly exchange places.

AR Level: 3.9

AR Points: 2

Lexile: 570

The Lemonade War, Jacqueline Davies, 2009 (Reprint), Sandpiper.

A brother and sister with very different traits compete over who can make the most money during the last week of summer.

AR Level: 4.1

AR Points: 4

Lexile: 630

A Dog's Way Home, Bobbie Pyron, 2011, New York: HarperCollins.

A girl and her beloved dog are separated far from home during a car accident. Chapters are told from their alternating perspectives as the dog makes a heroic journey back to the girl.

AR Level: 4.5

AR Points: 9

Lexile: (Not available)

The Kane Chronicles Series (Includes so far *The Red Pyramid*, *The Throne of Fire*, *The Serpent's Shadow*), 2010-2012, Rick Riordan, New York: Hyperion.

A brother and sister attempt to save the world from dangers based in Egyptian mythology, and their adventures are narrated by their alternating perspectives.

AR Level: 4.5 – 4.8

AR Points: 15 - 18

Lexile: 650 – 710 (The Serpents Shadow is not yet rated)

The Underneath, Kathi Appelt, 2008, New York: Atheneum.

This story of an abandoned cat and a chained hound dog features multiple perspectives, some scary characters, and lovely description.

AR Level: 5.2

AR Points: 9

Lexile: 830

The Hundred Dresses, Eleanor Estes, 1944/2004, Sandpiper Books.

A young girl is mocked by her classmates because she comes from Poland and seems different.

AR Level: 5.4

AR Points: 1

Lexile: 870

Research References on the Benefits of Outside Reading:

Cunningham, C., & Stanovich, K. (2003). Reading can make you smarter. *Principal*, 34-39. Retrieved from:

<http://gse.berkeley.edu/faculty/aecunningham/aecunningham.html>

Guthrie, J. T., Schafer, W. D., & Huang, C. (2001) Benefits of opportunity to read and balanced instruction on the NAEP. *Journal of Educational Research*, 94(3), 145-162.

Stanovich, K. E., & Cunningham, A. E. (1992). Studying the consequences of literacy within a literate society: The cognitive consequences of print exposure. *Memory & Cognition*, 20 (1), 51-68.