

Choosing a Just-Right Book

Model how you ask questions to choose a text that is a good fit for you.

Book choice matters, more than just about anything when it comes to helping kids make gains in reading. Teaching strivers how to choose books independently sews fertile ground for reading growth and enjoyment.

Preparation. Before the lesson, choose a book you are currently reading that is a great fit for you, meaning you are interested in it, it provides just the right amount of challenge, and it gives you something to talk and think about. Also, choose another book that you are considering reading. Prepare a blank chart titled “How to Choose a Just-Right Book.” Kids will need sticky notes, clipboards, and access to many books from which to choose.

1 Connect and Engage. Gather the kids in front of you. Share that you have brought two books: one that you are reading right now and just can’t put down and one that you haven’t read, but think you might like to. Ask kids to turn and talk about whether they are currently reading a book that is a good fit for them and, if so, what makes it a good fit. Also ask if they have any idea of a book they might read next. After they have discussed, invite them to jot on a sticky note one thing that makes a book a good fit for them. Then have several students share out their thoughts.

2 Model. *I am currently reading a book about education called *The Teacher You Want to Be* (Keene & Glover, 2015). It is a perfect book for me, because I’m an educator so I’m always eager to learn more about teaching and learning.*

You know the story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” right? How Goldilocks always liked baby bear’s stuff because it was just right for her, mama’s soup was too hot, papa’s bed was too hard, but baby’s soup and bed were just right? When it comes to books, that’s what I try to do: pick ones that are just right for me. To do that, I have to be interested in the book, be able to read and understand most of it, and be sure it gives me something to think and talk about.

*I have also brought a book that my husband is reading. He is an economist and really into this book called *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty, 2015), which is about the inequality of wealth in the United States, and how a few rich people have most of the money in the world and why that’s a problem. I would like to learn more about this, too, because I agree that it is a big problem.*

One important reason to choose a book is interest—and I am interested in both of these books. When I’m choosing a book, the first question that comes to mind is, “Does this book interest me?” I’ll jot that question on the anchor chart.

Explain that while interest is the most important consideration when choosing a book, so is its difficulty level. If you don’t understand many of the ideas and aren’t familiar with a number of the words, the book probably isn’t the best choice yet.

As I flip through Capital in the Twenty-First Century, I realize I don't comprehend quite a few of the ideas and, even though I'm an adult reader, there are words I have never seen and don't understand. So even though I am interested in the topic, I do not have enough background knowledge about it to really understand the book. It probably is not the best fit yet. I'll add this question to the chart: "Can I read and understand most of the words and ideas?" But I'll keep in mind that, down the line, I may read this book when I know and understand more about the topic, assuming I am still interested in it.

3 Guide. Engage the kids in the process by having them jot on sticky notes reasons they might choose a book. When they're finished, invite volunteers to place their sticky notes on the anchor chart. Then have kids turn and engage in spirited conversation about the books they're currently reading and what those books make them think about.

From there ask, *Who would like to share what you talked about?* Some kids may share out. Others may not. Note who doesn't share as it may be an indication that his or her book is not the right fit. *Listening to you all speak makes me realize that there's something else we know about a just-right book: It give us something to talk and think about. So I'm going to add this question to our chart: Does the book give me something to think and talk about?*

4 Practice. Display the chart so all can see the three questions. *Am I interested in the book? Can I read most of the words and understand most of the ideas? Does it give me something to think and talk about?* Send kids off to read as you confer with individuals about book choice.

5 Share. Invite kids back to share about the book they are reading and whether it's a just-right book or not. Guide a discussion about how, as readers, we need to remember to ask ourselves all three of these questions when we are choosing books independently. Remind kids about your own experience choosing a book that might have been too hard.

So choosing a book that interests you is very important. But if you can't understand the ideas and words well, as I couldn't in that economics book, you probably need to hold off on that book for a bit. And a book is probably not worth choosing if it doesn't give you something to think about and talk about with someone else. So keep those points in mind when you are choosing books. And remember, above all, just because we can't read something yet, doesn't mean that we won't be able to read it soon. That's what's cool about reading, the more we read, the better we read. So keep on reading and you will all grow as readers! (Adapted from Reading With Meaning by Debbie Miller)

**TIP**

Consider using a different metaphor with older students. For example, you may prefer to talk about certain items of clothing such as jeans that have a "just-right" fit.