

Routines: The Foundation of a Successful Workshop



During the first two or three weeks of school, I establish reading workshop routines with my eighth-grade classes. At the same time, I prepare students for our first instructional unit on biography. During these early weeks, students learn how to choose independent reading materials and spend time each day reading books they've selected. Class opens with a two- to three-minute warm-up exercise, a review of the day's schedule, and my read-aloud of a picture book biography to review the genre's text structure. Each day during the first few weeks, I set aside part of workshop to familiarize students with routines we'll be using all year.

- *Using the class library:* Review how to check out and return books and other reading materials. We tour the library, focusing on its organization, which is by genre: suspense, mystery, graphic novels, realist fiction, and so on. Signs taped to bookshelves announce each genre.
- *Responding to a cue to lower noise levels:* If noise levels escalate, making concentrating on the work at hand difficult, develop a signal that immediately catches students' attention. In my classes, I flick the lights for everyone to stop talking and listen. This beats shouting over the noise and maintains a positive atmosphere.
- *Choosing independent reading books:* Model how you test whether a book will be easy to read and enjoyable.
- *Using monthly independent reading contracts and book logs:* Have students complete their first independent reading contract. Set aside time during each week for students to enter completed books or other reading materials into their logs. Remind students during independent workshop times to update their book logs.
- *Handing out response journals:* Help students organize their response journals and have them practice three or four responses with your guidance before asking them to work on their own. Use your read-aloud to model journal responses, then move students to responding to their independent and/or instructional reading books.
- *Participating in student-led discussions:* Near the end of the second week, pull together a group of four or five students who are reading the same genre. Invite the rest of the class to stand around you and the group to observe the discussion. Take on the role of student leader and demonstrate how you use open-ended genre questions to discuss five different titles.
- *Following homework guidelines:* Make sure students are acquainted with your guidelines. In my classes, these include where each section's homework will be posted and my policy on missing or incomplete assignments. For my students, homework is

independent reading, and sometimes I will ask them to complete a journal entry on separate paper. Students receive one “forgiveness pass” each marking period for missing and/or incomplete homework. No questions asked—just complete the work by the next day. The second time, students complete the work with me during lunch. Sometimes it’s necessary to bring parents in to discuss students’ homework issues. The majority of times, I try to work with a student; after all, they are young adults and can develop a sense of responsibility. If we are patient and empathetic, we can support students and transform negative patterns into positive ones.

- *Working independently:* Start by discussing guidelines for independent reading. Discussing reading is social, but help students understand that sustained silent reading does not include 20 to 30 minutes of chatting. One sixth grader explained that *silence* meant she could talk quietly. I deferred to the dictionary and shared Webster’s definition with her. Explain that one of the purposes of silent reading is to develop students’ stamina—the ability to focus and concentrate on reading. Sharing a funny or suspenseful passage is fine; continual talking during choice time won’t work.
- *Accessing help when the teacher is working with a group or individual:* Display guidelines (see box, below) on a bulletin board and review them with students before independent work times.

Each time you finish working with a student or group, check the chalkboard for students’ names. Support them, then move on to a conference or a new reading group.

In addition to establishing some teaching routines during these early weeks of school, I take time to gather data to help me adjust instruction and support those students who need it. I have students fill out reading interest surveys and complete writing samples. I estimate each student’s instructional reading level and organize strategic reading groups.

During the third week, after I’ve introduced essential routines and students are adept at following them, I invite students to work with me to develop behavior guidelines for independent work times and for teacher-led or student-led book discussion groups. This is the ideal time to think about these guidelines because students have experienced silent reading, journal work, and observed and/or participated in a student-led discussion on a read-aloud text or their own independent reading.

- If you need help, try using a different strategy or approach; work slowly.
- If that doesn’t work, ask students sitting in your group.
- If that doesn’t work, ask a student in a different group.
- If you still need help, write your name on the chalkboard under “NEEDS HELP.” Then read or complete something you can do independently until I can help you.