SEVENTH EDITION

Children's Literature, BRIEFLY

Terrell A. Young | Gregory Bryan
James S. Jacobs | Michael O. Tunnell

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Gregory Bryan completed his Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia. He is a member of the faculty of education at the University of Manitoba, Canada, where he teaches children's literature and early and middle years literacy courses. Greg was born and raised in Australia and returns home as often as possible. His published books include biographies of his favorite writer, Henry Lawson, and his favorite picture book illustrator, Paul Goble. *Mates: The Friendship that Sustained Henry Lawson* is an authoritative dual biography of two Federation-era Australian writers. Greg won the Midwest Independent Publishing Association 2018 Book Award for the best biography for the book *Paul Goble, Storyteller*.

James S. Jacobs began his teaching career as an instructor of English in grades 7 through 12. He next taught English at a junior college where, to his disappointment, he was assigned a children's literature course. Expecting flat content and simplified writing, he was surprised to discover literature that could hold its own against any literary standards. Following this new love and life path, he returned to graduate school for a degree in children's literature. He taught at Brigham Young University and is now a professor emeritus. He has written about Lloyd Alexander, authored a picture book, and served on the Caldecott Committee. While teaching at Brigham Young, he earned a teaching credential in elementary education and then gained classroom experience as a fourth-grade teacher for two years at a U.S. Army school in Germany.

Michael O. Tunnell is retired from Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah), where he taught children's literature and served as chair of the Department of Teacher Education. He has also served twice on the Newbery Award Committee, as well as on the selection committee for the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Besides this text, Mike has published other professional books, including *The Story of Ourselves: Teaching History Through Children's Literature* (Heinemann) and *Lloyd Alexander: A Bio-bibliography* (Greenwood), and has written articles for a variety of educational journals. His children's book titles include *Mailing May* (Greenwillow), *Halloween Pie* (Lothrop), *The Children of Topaz* (Holiday House), *Wishing Moon* (Dutton), and *Candy Bomber* (Charlesbridge).

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Preface

In 2018 the National Council of Teachers of English published a position statement titled "Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children's and Young Adult Literature." The statement specified knowledge and skills that teachers must develop to effectively share literature with children and young adults.

1. Teachers must know the literature with a "broad and sustained knowledge of quality books" across genres and be aware of resources such as review journals, websites, and blogs that can "provide them with knowledge of new books and their potential for classroom use."
2. They should be readers themselves, as "teachers who are engaged readers do a better job of engaging students as readers."
3. They must be prepared to affirm diversity and exercise critical literacy by "engaging all students with diverse books."
4. They should understand and use appropriate pedagogy, which includes both learning "appropriate and effective strategies for helping students find books that will engage them as readers and as participants in critical, significant conversations about their lives" and developing "strategies for supporting student knowledge of literary crafting—that is, how authors develop characters, construct plots, and employ other literary elements to create an exemplary work."

We believe that *Children's Literature, Briefly* is a resource that embraces and expands on these qualifications. It offers prospective teachers and librarians the tools necessary to be well acquainted with the literature, including resources for learning about new books as well as those that have been available over time. One of the two major sections focuses on content in books of various genres, approaches, and styles. A chapter on multicultural and international books is also available. Chapters in this section provide a wide range of information and guidance helpful for exploring critical issues and affirming diversity. Appropriate pedagogy is interwoven in the major section treating characteristics and crafting, as well as in the content treatments. Future teachers and librarians increase their love for reading as they explore the richness of children's and young adult literature and recognize how many of these benefits extend to adult literature as well.

About *Children's Literature, Briefly*

When the first edition of this book was published in 1996, Mike and Jim stated in the preface that they felt the subtitle should be "A children's literature textbook for people who don't like children's literature textbooks." Until that time, they had taught children's literature at the university without using a textbook because virtually all the ones available were too expensive and too extensive for an introductory course. They owned and regularly consulted the available texts, but they seemed more like reference books. The biggest concern, though, was neither the cost nor the length but the hours stolen from students when they could be reading actual children's books. The focus of a children's literature course should be on those marvelous children's titles. They

are more important than any textbook, including this one, and Mike and Jim originally wrote this book on that assumption.

Since that time, two additional authors have been added to this textbook, bringing fresh and additional perspectives to the field of children's literature and to the pages of this book. Though the massive children's literature tomes are still around today, a variety of shorter texts are now also available. As with the authors of competing textbooks, we have written our book as an overview to shed light on children's literature and its use with young readers. However, one way in which ours may differ is in its conversational rather than academic voice. We have made an effort to make the reading as enjoyable as possible, while still providing all the pertinent information and ideas relating to the topic.

Our job as teachers, whether university or elementary, is to introduce children's books and illuminate them for our students. These books can offer insight and pleasure without having to be explained, analyzed, or used as objects of study. Yet appropriate commentary, if it is secondary to the books and doesn't become too self-important, can help both teachers and children find their own ways to the rewards of reading.

The goal of this text, then, is to provide a practical overview of children's books, offering a framework and background information while keeping the spotlight on the books themselves. That's why we kept the textbook itself and each chapter short.

And that's why we limited the book lists. The world of children's literature offers only one completely dependable book list—your own. Throughout the following chapters, we present ours, absolutely trustworthy in every way—to us. You are allowed to harbor serious doubts about our choices, but the value of the lists is that they may save you time wandering up and down library aisles.

New to This Edition

In revising the previous edition of *Children's Literature, Briefly*, we continued to concentrate on trying to achieve greater clarity—making the book as user friendly and understandable as possible. This required us to constantly reflect on literature, literacy education, and education in general. Though our philosophies have remained mostly unchanged, we believe that we understand them better than before and have been able to communicate them more clearly and effectively.

Besides the changes mentioned already, we have made a number of other alternations, including the following:

- Updated book examples and included new research findings to keep the book as relevant and up to date as possible.
- Reorganization of the text to bring multicultural and international books to greater prominence.
- Substantially increased focus on diversity in its various forms throughout the textbook. This includes an especial focus on Indigenous children's literature, and a section on LGBTQ+ literature.
- Conscious inclusion of books and creators reflective of North America's diversity within the recommended book lists.
- Increased recognition of the prevalence and popularity of graphic novels and verse novels.

- Conscious inclusion of graphic novels and verse novels in the lists of recommended books.
- Added a section on expository informational books.
- Increased visual appeal of the textbook. Throughout the book, color illustrations and book covers have been added to enhance the discussion and facilitate greater reader understanding. Similarly, the addition of color in the typesetting and design is intended to help make the book even more engaging and easy to read.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the reviewers of this edition of our text for their valuable insights and comments: Melanie Koss, Northern Illinois University and Nicholas Husbye, University of Missouri, St. Louis.

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1 Read, Read, Read

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student will be able to:

- Summarize the immediate and long-term benefits of engaged reading.
- Identify differences between text books, reference books, and trade books.
- List strengths of trade books that make them an invaluable tool for teaching and learning.
- Describe the role of the teacher in engaging students in reading.
- Differentiate between extrinsic and intrinsic incentives for students to read.
- Describe how each suggestion for organizing the classroom would contribute to a student's motivation to read.

Entertaining and informative stories never go out of fashion. For as long as humans have walked on Earth, we have been telling stories to amuse and educate one another. In a modern world where oral storytelling occurs relatively less frequently than in the distant past, stories today are often conveyed through books. As such, reading is indisputably important. Even in a 21st-century climate of constant controversy and limitless lawsuits, where almost no one appears to agree on anything, reading receives unanimous and unqualified support. An anti-reading position gets no one elected to office and makes no one a hero to the people for telling things the way they see them. No magazine or newspaper prints an article about the evils of reading or how time spent with print is wasted. No film star increases in popularity by begging people not to read. The push is always toward more reading. After all, as Tim O'Brien, the author of the multi-award-winning Vietnam War book *The Things they Carried* (1990), says, "Books and writers have power in our lives (2017)." Prolific Abenaki children's author Joseph Bruchac (2017b), agrees, saying, "A story is a powerful thing. It reminds us of our humanity but also of the necessity of remembering our place on Earth." So why is reading universally acclaimed and, given the power that books and stories can have in our lives, how can we motivate children to read?

Benefits of Engaged Reading

Engaged Reading—Immediate Benefits

Like eating healthy food, engaged reading simultaneously yields both pleasure and benefit. When we chomp down on a juicy red apple, nibble on fresh green salads, or dine on delicious pink salmon, the delightful taste rewards us right then. No one needs to confirm the results; from our own personal taste buds, we know immediately that the bite is satisfying. In addition, our digestive

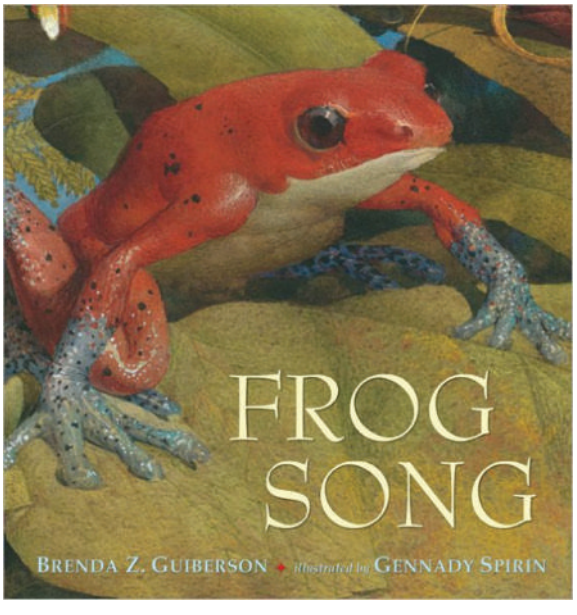
system then turns the food into nutrients that keep us going. Benefits—energy and robust health—automatically follow the pleasing food, but the primary reason for eating is the immediate reward of tasting good and satisfying our hunger.

Immediate is the operative word. At the very moment their eyes pass over the words, engaged readers are personally motivated, focused, and involved. They have their reward as soon as they are drawn into the subject, thinking of nothing beyond those sentences, paragraphs, and pages, even the reading process itself. Engaged readers often don't even see words after the first line or two. In a story, they see scenes, people, and action. In nonfiction, they test theories, think of applications, or chew on the facts.

When we already have an interest in what we read, engaged reading comes naturally. No one wonders if the instructions to assemble a swing set for a much-loved but impatient 3-year-old will make good reading. The purpose is determined, and the reading engages immediately. Before the first word is read, we know the instructions are worth it. At a library, a child with an interest in dinosaurs is drawn to a book on the subject. At a bookstore, a birder is drawn to the field guide and nature sections. Even when a book is not particularly well-written, the person who is interested in the topic becomes an engaged reader without persuasion or effort.

If a reader does not display a specific interest, some books create that interest. The manner in which *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008) begins often entices readers to turn to the next page, and the next, and the next. Readers are left breathless at the conclusion of the opening scene, in which a family is slaughtered in their own home, a toddler somehow flees the house and escapes the murderer (if only temporarily), and the knife-wielding assailant sets out in hot pursuit of one more victim. That potential victim, however, has made it to the local graveyard, where it will be raised and protected by the cemetery ghosts!

Nonfiction can have the same immediate attraction. Brenda Guiberson and Gennady Spirin's (2013) collaboration, *Frog Song*, is magnetically attractive, stunningly beautiful, and wonderfully informative. First of all, who doesn't love frogs? Even those who *do not* are likely to have their minds changed by *Frog Song*. Spirin's illustrations are as beautiful as any found in picture books.



The detailed, colorful, bold artwork is breathtaking. It perfectly complements Guiberson's fascinating text about the remarkable adaptability and, frankly, almost unbelievable lives of different frogs from across the globe.

These are amazing creatures: the water-holding frog of desert Australia loads up on water before burrowing into the ground to withstand what might potentially be years of arid heat before it reemerges at the next rainfall; Chile's Darwin frog keeps its tadpole offspring safe inside its vocal sacs for almost two months before "burping" them out of its mouth as froglets. What of Ecuador's Surinam toad, which carries as many as 100 eggs in the skin of its back until, after a period of four months, the froglets burst from that skin to begin their life of independence? Or Oklahoma's Great Plains narrow-mouthed toad, which makes a home of an occupied tarantula burrow? Or Canada's wood frog, somehow surviving north of the Arctic Circle, frozen all winter? No one is likely to read *Frog Song* and walk away without an awakened, renewed, or magnified appreciation of frogs. If that is not enough, readers who enjoy the combined talents of Guiberson and Spirin in *Frog Song* will also enjoy the opportunity to learn about dinosaurs through the Guiberson-Spirin collaboration for *The Greatest Dinosaur Ever* (2013).

Immediate reward, a dependable criterion for determining why people choose to read, is difficult for others to predict. Yes, we can choose books that reflect the interests of a reader, and yes, we can recommend books that are pleasing to us. But only the individual reader knows what is personally attractive and satisfying, and to what degree.

When we look only for specific information—the sodium content in a frozen lasagna, the definition of *arcadian*, or what a teacher said in the note a student brought home—it is essential that we get the facts but not essential that we read them ourselves. Seeking information from print indeed can be engaging, but if someone else reads and tells us what we want to know, we generally can be satisfied. In her transactional theory of literature and reading, Louise Rosenblatt (1978) calls this reading for facts *efferent* reading. We are engaged and motivated to acquire that knowledge, but it is not imperative that we discover it with our own eyes.

Aesthetic reading is different from efferent reading, because the goal is not to acquire facts but to participate in an experience. In aesthetic reading, readers focus on what they are experiencing as their eyes pass over the words. This kind of reading cannot be summarized by another but must be done personally because it is not centered on data. The facts are not the most important part, engagement with the experience is. Knowing the plot of *The Winter Pony* (Lawrence, 2011) and the eventual outcome of the ill-fated Terra Nova Expedition is not the same as experiencing with Scott of the Antarctic the difficulties and depravations of the race to the South Pole in 1911–1912. Being told that their teacher is going to die comes nowhere near joining the student protagonists in *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* (Anderson, 2016) as they bumble their way through skipping school to visit her in the hospital to help her experience one last perfect day.

Reading for experience—aesthetic reading—can no more be done by someone else and then reported to us than can another do our eating to save us the trouble and yet still give us the benefits. We don't want information on food flavors; we want those flavors to flow over our own taste buds. When we read for experience, simply knowing how the book ends doesn't satisfy us. We want to make that journey to the final page ourselves because when we have lived in a wonderful book, we are never quite the same again.

In short, engaged readers—those who read for personal reasons—know the satisfying feeling of finding pleasure in print and being rewarded in two areas: locating information and gaining experience.

Engaged Reading—Long-Term Benefits

In addition to the immediate rewards offered by engaged reading, a stunning number of benefits accumulate over time as by-products of reading extensively, including simply choosing to read for personal pleasure. Research from across the world has demonstrated that, among other benefits, those who read extensively can expect the following:

- Increased automaticity and speed. We learn to read faster and can therefore read more (Boakye, 2017; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).
- Increased motivation to read even more (Arnold, 2009; Powell, 2005).
- Gains in reading achievement (Mol & Bus, 2011).
- Increased confidence and self-esteem as readers (Arnold, 2009; Powell, 2005).
- A sense of achievement and increased confidence overall (Scholastic.ca, 2017).
- Expanded vocabulary (Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Huang & Liou, 2007).
- Improved reading comprehension abilities (Diego-Medrano, 2013).
- Increased verbal fluency (Cullinan, 2000) and reading fluency (Wilfong, 2008).
- Increased knowledge of various topics (Neuman & Roskos, 2012) and higher scores on achievement tests in all subject areas (Krashen, 2004).
- Greater insights into human nature and decision-making (Bruner, 1996).
- Better understanding of other cultures (Short, 2009) and world issues (Howard, 2011).
- Increased empathy and concern for other people (Guarisco, Brooks, & Freeman, 2017).
- Higher scores on general knowledge exams (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).
- Pleasure derived from learning and seeking to learn (Wilhelm, 2016; Wilhelm & Smith, 2016).

Remember that all these benefits arrive naturally as we continue to read personally pleasing materials. The focus of that reading is still on the immediate rewards—we pick up books because they are interesting and satisfying—but unmistakable growth and development comes as we spend time with books we like.

Three Different Categories of School Books

Schools use books as tools of education, and those books fall into three distinct categories: reference, text, and trade. Each type of book is philosophically different and serves a different purpose.

Reference books are those volumes a person consults for an immediate answer to a specific question, such as a dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas, or thesaurus. Textbooks are designed for use in formal instruction, presenting a dispassionate view of a subject in an organized, methodical manner. These two varieties—especially textbooks—are the books most often associated with classroom instruction, yet students seldom choose them for personal reading. Textbooks and reference books are not authentic literacy materials. Authentic literacy materials are the types of materials that are read not just within the walls of a schoolroom but are also read for real-life purposes and pleasure outside school (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006).

Trade books are published for the retail market and typically are available in bookstores and libraries. They are written by authors who want to express themselves in a way they hope will appeal to readers who seek pleasure, insight, and knowledge. However, with the exception of English Language Arts teachers, educators historically have not considered trade books of much use in the classroom. Textbooks and reference books both have an important role in education, but trade books should not be dismissed.

Some Strengths of Children's Literature Trade Books

People can and do acquire substantial knowledge beyond the walls of formal education when they read often and broadly. We need to recognize that books can create interest for readers, that people learn better when they are interested, and that many of us can learn a great deal by reading widely on our own. The purpose of both fiction and nonfiction children's literature trade books is not so much to inform (which they do very well) as it is to excite, to introduce, to let the reader in on the irresistible secrets of life on Earth.

The following points identify some of the many strengths of trade books:

Engaging Writing and Illustrations

Trade books are written in interesting and engaging language. They are deliberately written to both entertain and inform. The language creates images by using precise, colorful vocabulary. The sentences are varied and read interestingly. Trade books have the freedom and space to make meaningful comparisons, and use detail to enlarge understanding. Trade books also allow a personal viewpoint to emerge in the writing. Information has more power to inform and entertain when it is presented through a strong, individual voice. Trade book authors shape and develop their views in individualized language, allowing for a personalized explanation that often results in more meaning and perspective. The style is generally not detached and objective. The authors often deliberately infuse their opinion and interests. Almost without exception, trade book authors are writing content about topics in which they are passionately interested. That passion comes through.

Where illustrated, the artwork in children's literature trade books is generally of a superior quality. Picture books often contain stunning illustrations—in many cases, the best art in the world can be found reproduced within the covers of a picture book. Trade books are designed to be appealing and enticing to engage young readers.

Reflections of Individual Reading Abilities and Interests

For a variety of reasons, children's literature trade books come in all sizes, formats, lengths, levels of difficulty, and levels of detail. Different books suit different levels of reading ability and interests. In a typical classroom, the reading abilities of students vary widely; so do their interests. Because of the number and variety of trade books, students at many levels—even those with reading difficulties—can locate titles on any subject. They can find books they can read, learn from, and enjoy.

Trade books can provide simple, brief introductions to any topic. Alternatively, trade books can otherwise provide the space to bring a subject to life with interesting observations and deep details, presenting the reader with a richer understanding of a topic. Today, books of 300, 400, or 500 pages on a topic are not uncommon for children. They can satisfy their thirst for knowledge on a topic and then move on to another subject they are interested in learning about.

Many Perspectives

Books are available on any subject, providing overviews as well as exhaustive treatments from a variety of viewpoints. For example, dozens of trade books about dinosaurs are available, rounding out reader knowledge as much as one chooses. There are dozens of books about dancers, dogs, or

disasters. One can take his or her pick. Because trade books are typically shorter and more quickly read, one can read many trade books and get many perspectives.

Currency

Trade books are written and published frequently, and often present the latest findings, opinions, ideas, and information. What's more, they do it on current topics of interest, reporting and reflecting what is in the news and on people's minds right now. As an example, every four years when new candidates run for election as president of the United States, children's biographies of the leading candidates appear on bookstore shelves. These books appear well before the election, providing even young readers with an opportunity to get to know about the man or woman who might become president.

Tools of Lifelong Learning

Trade books are available in all libraries and bookstores. They are the books people use most often to learn about the world after they have graduated from school. Trade books are the stuff of real-life reading. Trade books are food that feeds the minds of toddlers at their parent's lap, children developing reading abilities, youths exploring boundaries, adults establishing themselves, and the elderly passionately pursuing new topics for learning.

The Teacher's Role in Developing Engaged Readers

Reading Role Models

One concern is that teachers are not sufficiently strong reading role models. Recognizing the importance of teachers as role models for their students, Applegate and Applegate (2004) coined the term *Peter effect*. In the Christian bible, when a beggar asked Peter for money, he replied that he could not give the beggar what he did not have. Applegate and Applegate contend that a teacher who is not an enthusiastic, engaged, motivated reader cannot model for children reading enthusiasm, engagement, and motivation. In one study, Applegate and Applegate classified more than half of 195 preservice teacher study participants as "unenthusiastic" about reading

Teachers can help create the desire to read when they introduce and read from a variety of children's books they personally like. Although no method is foolproof, choosing personal favorites to recommend to children seems likely to be at least as successful as any other way of selecting titles. When teachers introduce and read from books they genuinely like, students are more likely to be motivated, for two reasons:

1. Those books generally are good books. There is a reason the teacher likes them. They usually are more solidly crafted and contain more levels on which children can make connections.
2. When teachers recommend books that are personally meaningful, a genuine and irresistible enthusiasm accompanies their words. When people read books they like and then talk about them, those who listen are often influenced by their excitement and conviction.

Insofar as reading is concerned, nothing we offer children is more important than an adult who reads. Children end up doing what we do, not what we say, and all the admonitions about the

importance of reading in their lives will fall on deaf ears if they view us as people who don't take our own advice. Students need to see their teachers reading and hear them talking about books. During the time when the whole class is reading self-selected books, teachers should often be reading, too. At other times, they should talk with students who are having trouble engaging in reading, helping to motivate them. A teacher also might begin the day by briefly sharing with students something interesting from his or her personal reading.

Without such overt and honest examples, the power of a teacher's influence is often lost. A graduate student wondered why her example of being an avid reader didn't rub off on her children. She finally realized that she hadn't provided a reading model for them because she did her reading in the bathtub or after they were asleep. They never saw her with a book.

Learning from Motivated Readers

A group of college-aged Americans living in Germany was trying to learn German but making slow progress. An old hand offered a piece of advice that made an enormous difference: "If you want to speak like the Germans, listen to the way Germans speak." Embarrassingly simple and obvious, this advice changed the course of the Americans' learning, which until then had been too formal and academic.

We adapt that advice to reading: "If we want students to be motivated readers, we must look at how motivated readers read." This is why ability-grouped reading is fraught with problems. If the less capable, less motivated readers only ever see and hear other less capable, less motivated students reading, they gain no exposure to the attitudes and behaviors of voracious readers. It is important that everyone gets this experience. Teachers sometimes believe that students need careful preparation to read a book or that they have to be bribed or prodded into reading. Yet some children jump right into books, reading without the benefit of preparatory steps or the intervention of either a carrot or a stick. Two principles underlie the motivation of these eager readers: (1) Reading is personal, and (2) reading is a natural process. The following common characteristics of motivated readers reflect these two principles:

1. Motivated readers don't read for others but rather for their own purposes. They read what is important to them and know that real reading isn't done to answer someone else's questions or fill out a worksheet.
2. Motivated readers have personal and identifiable likes and dislikes in books: subject matter, authors, illustrators, genres, formats, styles, and so on.
3. Motivated readers feel rewarded during the reading process. They find immediate pleasure in the book and don't read simply because they will need the information at some later date.
4. Motivated readers don't feel trapped by a book. If they so choose, they can put it down and move on to something else when it no longer meets their needs.
5. Motivated readers aren't hesitant about passing judgment on a book. They have their own viewpoints and don't apologize for them.
6. Motivated readers read at their own rate. They skip, scan, linger, and reread as necessary or desirable. They speed through some long books, yet may take considerably longer to savor and complete a much shorter book.
7. Motivated readers don't feel obligated to remember everything they read. They find reading worthwhile even if they can't recall every concept or idea, and they allow themselves to skip over words they don't know as long as they understand the idea or story.
8. Motivated readers read broadly, narrowly, or in between, depending on how they feel.

9. Motivated readers develop personal attachments to some books. They speak of *love* for a particular book. It becomes like a treasured friend.
10. Motivated readers find time to read regularly.

Motivated readers don't look over their shoulders as they read. We adults shouldn't get anxious when students put down books without finishing them, when they devour what we think are worthless books, when their taste does not reflect our own, or when they read narrowly. Motivated readers are in charge.

Once they leave school, the number of people who do not read books is staggering. Over a quarter of U.S. adults have not read a book in the past year, whether in the traditional paper and print format *or* digital e-book formats (Perrin, 2016). Unmotivated readers—the ones who can read but don't—are sometimes called *alliterate*. The alliterate person has all the necessary know-how to unlock the meaning in print but chooses not to pick up books. Essentially, the ideal reader is a finely tuned balance of both ability and desire. Schools need to do more to address a student's reading desire or motivation.

People who continue to read when it is no longer required do so for personal and immediate reward. They read what already interests them. They also read to discover new interests through a skillfully written account that takes them places they never have been before. Author Gary Paulsen, whose early years in Minnesota were largely spent in the library, suggested we should "read like a wolf eats" (1987b): in great hulking bites, with vigor, and as often and much as possible. In the middle of this enthusiastic sampling of print, we will find those things that personally are worth it, while allowing the rest to slough off naturally. All the while, we increase our range of reading skills, build our general knowledge, and strengthen our education without being aware of our growth. The real benefits come automatically.

The more children read, the better readers they become (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001), opening up an ever-increasing reading ability gap over their struggling and unmotivated peers. Stanovich (1986) has described this as the *Matthew effect*, whereby the rich (capable and motivated readers) get richer and the poor (struggling and unmotivated readers) get poorer.

Connecting In- and Out-of-School Reading

Some children don't read *outside* school because they have negative experiences with reading *inside* school. At the same time, some children actually *do* read outside school but are considered nonreaders in school because of the types of reading required there (Booth, 2006; Forbes, 2008; Worthy, 2000).

Moje (1986) identifies a lack of connection between in-school and out-of-school reading. This disconnection isn't just in the texts children read in school versus out of school. Even with the same texts, the way that children read outside school is different from what is expected or, indeed, required of them in school. Moje argues that classroom reading often lacks the dynamic, authentic, functional, and social purposes of the reading that young people do outside school. She believes that schools need to do a better job in connecting reading to students' interests and experiences, making reading more authentic and purposeful and thus reforming the schools, rather than attempting to reform the students.

Authentic literacy tasks are the types of activities that are practiced not just within the walls of a schoolroom but also for real-life purposes outside school (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). In many classrooms, however, reading instruction involves the liberal use of things such as worksheets and basal reader textbooks—the types of materials that are used only in schools.

Indeed, Woodward, Elliot, and Nagel (2012) claim that 75% to 95% of classroom teaching is structured by textbooks programs (p. 24).

It is important for teachers to be aware that authentic reading and literacy tasks increase students' motivation to read (Gambrell, 2015; Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Marinak & Gambrell, 2016). Teachers need to listen to what their students have to say and use that information to enhance the appeal and the effectiveness of classroom reading time (Moje, 2000). Teachers should use students' out-of-school experiences to help shape the in-school experiences that they provide for their students (Moje, 2000; Sanford, 2005–2006). In doing so, more positive readers' identities might be developed.

When we ignore students' interests or negatively judge their reading tastes, we run the risk of turning them away from reading altogether. Author and librarian Patrick Jones (2005) relates a story from his childhood. He was an avid reader of wrestling magazines. On one occasion, the 12-year-old Jones approached the librarian at a public library and nervously asked if the library had any wrestling magazines. Jones says that the look that came across the librarian's face at the "mere mention of wrestling magazines in her library" was so sour that he thinks he might accidentally have asked the librarian to show "what her face would look like if she sucked on a lemon for a hundred years!" Despite the humorous way in which Jones relates the story, there is little humor in his concluding remark: The librarian "made me feel stupid, and I never went back" (p. 127).

Teachers (and librarians) need to be aware that the literacy practices of any given classroom will likely favor or empower some students, and this often comes at the expense of other students (Cairney, 2000). Jones felt decidedly disempowered by the librarian's reaction to his wrestling magazine inquiry and decided not to go back to the library. We need to be careful not to place negative value judgments on students' out-of-school reading. It is far better for us to embrace children's out-of-school literacies and welcome them into the classroom. We will not only do our students a favor, but we may be in for some pleasant surprises. One of the authors of this text, Gregory Bryan, remembers how a student challenged him to read one of Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* books. Although Greg approached the book with reluctance, he enjoyed the slapstick humor. Another time, Greg turned to Gary Paulsen's (1987a) *Hatchet*, thinking, "There is no way this book can be as good as my seventh-grade students say that it is." Ever since that first reading, *Hatchet* has been one of Greg's favorites.

Reading Incentives

There are basically two forms of motivation—intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation to read is that whereby reading is a reward in and of itself. Extrinsic motivation involves reading being used as a means to another end, such as a reward or prize. Teachers sometimes use an incentive program to introduce children to books and get them involved in reading. Reading incentive programs are of two types: teacher generated and commercially prepared. Either might result in intrinsically or extrinsically motivated students.

Teacher-generated reading incentive programs generally use a chart or other visual record to keep track of each child's reading. Often thematic, the chart may be called "Shoot for the Moon," with a rocket ship for each child lined up at the bottom and a moon at the top. For every book read, the rocket ship advances an inch. Or paper ice cream cones may line the back wall. Every time a child reads a book, the title is written on a paper scoop of ice cream and placed on the cone. When every cone has 10 scoops, the class has an ice cream party.

Commercially prepared reading incentive programs are available to schools and school districts. Although the specifics differ from program to program, they usually give point values to

books, which can then be redeemed for prizes. To be sure that children read the books, a quick evaluation is included as a part of the program—usually, a multiple-choice quiz that requires the child to score within a certain range to get credit for reading the book.

Both kinds of programs—teacher generated and commercially sponsored—have the potential to be helpful or harmful. Given this, educators need to carefully consider the potential benefits and risks before they employ reading incentive programs (Marinak & Gambrell, 2016). Incentive programs are helpful if they actually aid children in finding and getting involved with books. Sometimes the extrinsic rewards offered in an incentive program will be just what children need to be encouraged to read when they otherwise would not. Once a child has taken the first step, he or she might then find enjoyment in reading and in turn develop into a genuinely engaged, intrinsically motivated reader. Yet teachers need to exercise caution about incentive programs. Some research shows that extrinsic rewards actually can hinder the development of intrinsic motivation to read (Krashen, 2004), and that such programs are potentially damaging in terms of their influence on the development of lifelong readers (Fawson & Moore, 1999).

When teachers offer a prize as a reward for reading, they must be able to determine when the prize overshadows the book. Research by Gambrell and Marinak (2009) suggests that if we are to employ a reading incentive program, an important consideration should be the notion of *reward proximity*. If we want children to value pizza, then the reward should be a pizza party. If, however, we want children to value books, then we should give them books as reward for their reading. Unrelated rewards—what might be termed *tokens*—may actually undermine and decrease motivation to read (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Marinak & Gambrell, 2016).

Although concerns exist with individual reading incentive programs, group motivation and group record keeping are largely positive and helpful. The teacher who requires students to keep records of their personal reading can tally each week's reading and then display the increasing total—perhaps in a thermometer where the temperature rises with continued reading. Teachers sometimes use paper footprints, upon which each student records the titles of each book that he or she read. The footsteps are taped to the wall; as soon as the footsteps extend around the room, the students are rewarded with a reading party or book celebration.

These visual summaries provide bragging rights to everyone in the class, as opposed to the individual successes offered by the rocket ship or ice cream charts. When a goal is reached, everyone participates in the victory, even those kids who have read few or no books. No one but the teacher is aware of the amount that each child reads, so no additional stigma is placed on those who are not performing. This system gives the teacher the opportunity to work individually with those students who need extra time and attention.

It is important, however, to remember that one reward—and one reward only—keeps people reading over time: the reading itself. Over the long haul, people turn to books because books are worthwhile, not because they are the means to treats or grades.

Organizing the Classroom to Encourage Reading

Teachers desirous of making reading a prominent feature of the classroom landscape will want to plan so that books fit smoothly and easily into the school day and their students' lives. Five areas to consider when organizing the ideal reading classroom are providing access to books, making time for reading, creating a reading atmosphere, working with parents or caregivers, and choosing meaningful activities.

Provide Access to Books

The love of reading cannot be taught generally; it depends on contact with specific titles, certain subjects, and particular authors. To engage all students, a wide variety of books of different formats and levels of difficulty needs to be available in the elementary classroom. All grades need fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Every lower grade needs some chapter books. Every upper grade needs some picture books. The most sincere and devoted intentions to help children become readers turn to dust if books are not readily accessible for teachers to read aloud and introduce to the class and for students to pick up for self-selected reading time.

Appendix A suggests specific ways to acquire books and build a classroom library. Appendix B lists some appealing magazines.

Make Time for Books

Put reading on the agenda. If reading for its own sake doesn't appear on the daily schedule, the message to students is clear: Reading is not *really* that important after all. Children with a teacher who makes time for reading to be on the schedule every single day quickly learn the messages that reading *is* important and that books are valued.

Four useful ways to structure time for books are (1) reading aloud, (2) allowing self-selected reading, (3) introducing books to children, and (4) going to the library.

Make Time to Read Aloud

Classroom read-alouds do not occur as often if teachers fail to schedule them into their daily teaching plans (Boyd, 2014). Leaving read-alouds to occur only when time becomes available results in them being overlooked. Good experiences with read-alouds don't just happen. They should be scheduled into a teacher's lesson plan book because they are a critical component of a successful literacy program (Fox, 2013). They are also more likely to be successful when certain principles are followed:

1. Reading aloud at the same time every day has a number of advantages over working it in when convenient. Having a scheduled time:
   - Assures the teacher and the class that the reading *will* happen.
   - Legitimizes the activity by making it a regular part of the school day.
   - Allows the students to anticipate the experience.
2. Teachers should honestly like the books they read aloud. There is an enormous difference between reading a book aloud only because it's handy and reading a book aloud because it's loved.
3. Teachers should not read unfamiliar books aloud. The temptation is great to discover the contents of a book along with the class, but too many drawbacks can occur:
   - The teacher may not like the book.
   - The book may have unpleasant surprises: words the teacher isn't comfortable saying aloud, a character with negative traits who shares a name with a child in the class, or something in the plot that's inappropriate.
   - The teacher can't dramatize or emphasize highlights because they are unknown ahead of time.
   - Most important, the teacher's enthusiasm for the story will likely be weak because he or she is learning at the same time as the children.

4. Teachers should do the oral reading themselves. Even if a child is skilled enough to read the book aloud, the teacher's participation carries a message: "Our teacher *wants* to be part of this activity; it must be important." In addition, students get to see a teacher's personal involvement in books that, over time, generally will include both laughter and tears. Children benefit from much more than the story when an adult reads aloud.
5. Teachers should not expect all students to like every book. They should tell the class, "We will read many books in class this year. No one will like them all, but I expect everyone will find some they do like."
6. Teachers should establish rules for read-aloud time. Some teachers allow students to draw; others don't. Some are not concerned when children put their heads down on the desk; others are. If anything bothers a teacher, it must be fixed, or the distraction will weaken the reading experience.
7. Teachers should allow students access to the books they have already shared as read-alouds. After the teacher has read a book aloud, students will often want to read that same book. This allows students to revisit their enjoyment of the book, perhaps discovering details they may have missed during the class read-aloud.

Make Time for Self-Selected Reading

Students need time at school to read books of their own choosing (Gambrell, 2011; Springer, Harris, & Dole, 2017). Self-selection of texts is highly motivating. The vast majority of children report that their favorite book is one they have chosen for themselves and say also that they are more likely to finish a book they have chosen themselves (Scholastic, 2017). Endowed with the increased willingness to work hard borne of the motivational benefits of choice, students often can succeed with material that, for all other intents and purposes, might be considered well beyond their reading capacity. One needs to look no further than the many, many young readers who persisted with the complex Harry Potter books simply because they made the choice to do so because they were motivated to do so.

During self-selected reading time, the number-one rule is simple: For the allotted time, everyone has the opportunity to read material of his or her own choosing. Other things to remember include the following:

1. Anything personally interesting is fair game. Where children are concerned, the important thing is not *what* a child reads but *that* a child reads. When children have positive and enjoyable reading experiences, they will more likely embrace quality literature when the time is right. While children are young, however, it is important to allow them to read the things that they enjoy. When forced to read certain texts, many children will resist the imposition and lose the motivation to read.
2. If someone starts a book and loses interest, finishing it is *not* required.
3. The teacher makes no written assignments for the books read during self-selected reading time.
4. At the end of the reading period, students may be given the opportunity to discuss what they have been reading during self-selected reading time.
5. The teacher should anticipate possible distractions or interruptions and let students know what to do about them. Fine-tuning the activity is inevitable—no one can consider every possible difficulty beforehand. But being clear on as many points as possible makes for a smoother reading time, for example:
   - What does a student who finishes a book in the middle of a reading period do? (Students should be sure to have at least one additional book in their desks, particularly when they are getting to the end of the one they're reading.)

- Do children have to stay in their seats during the entire reading time? (Some teachers allow students to get up quietly and find another book; others don't allow them to wander about for any reason.)
- What happens if a student took the book home last night and forgot to bring it back today? (A box or plastic carton of short books or magazines might be available so that appealing reading material isn't difficult to locate.)

6. It isn't necessary for self-selected reading to be conducted in absolute silence. A teacher calling out for silence is potentially more distracting and disturbing. Let's not forget that outside school, very little of the reading that people do is completed in a setting in which there is total silence. There is a place for the helpful and motivating influence of reading conversations between students if the talking is subdued enough not to distract others (Bryan, 2009).

Make Time to Introduce Books to Children

Simply releasing children into a world filled with books does not make them readers. If they have no interest in books, no reading habit, and nothing they are looking for, children can easily ignore a wealth of superb titles. It is up to the teacher to bridge the gap between book and child, and one successful way to do that is for the teacher to introduce new titles to the students.

There are many ways to introduce books. But all that's necessary is holding up the book so students can see what it looks like while telling them something about it. Teachers are most successful when introducing books they have read and liked, but it's possible to introduce books they don't yet know. Reading the blurb on the back of a paperback or on the inside flap of a hardcover usually provides enough information to present the book to the class.

The time to introduce a book should be on the daily schedule, but the number of books shown to students can vary. For the first week or two of the school year, teachers may want to introduce as many as five or more per day to ensure that enough books have been presented to get the students started. After that, a book or two every day is fine. The point is to provide students with some titles they can look forward to trying out.

Make Time for Going to the Library

If the school has a library, teachers should plan to get their children there regularly. Some teachers elect not to sign up the entire class, but after a few introductory visits, they make a schedule for students to use the library singly or in pairs before and after school, at lunch, or during the school day. If the class visits together, the teacher should always stay in the library and circulate among the students, helping them find good books. The more titles they know and the more excitement that's generated for books, the more successful the library visit will be.

Even with the teacher present in the library, students may wander aimlessly and create small disturbances. Giving them specific directions before entering can help eliminate trouble and streamline the process. These three directions from the teacher to the students work as well as any:

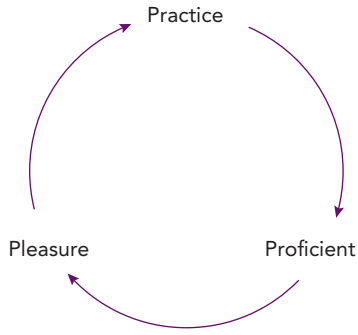
1. *Try 'em on.* "Your job is to find books that fit you. One way to pick a good chapter book is to turn somewhere near the middle and start reading. If you read two or three pages and find the story interesting, this could be a good choice."
2. *Check 'em out.* "Check out the books that appeal to you."
3. *Read 'em.* "Sit down and read your books until we all are ready to go back to class."

Create a Reading Atmosphere

In light of the new literacy studies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Street, 1995), literacy is now recognized as a situated phenomenon. That is, the ways that people use and understand literacy vary according to the situation. With the new literacy studies, a shift in focus occurred, providing the genesis for an increased awareness and sensitivity toward the social and cultural role of reading and how these social and cultural interactions influence readers. Gee (2000) reasoned that literacy makes sense only in terms of the context in which it takes place. A classroom context where reading is valued has an atmosphere that says "Books are important." That message may be delivered in a number of ways:

- Make the emotional climate safe but exciting. Accept students' reactions to books—never belittle them. Hope that students will catch your enthusiasm for books without expecting them to mirror your reading preferences.
- Promote the idea of a community of readers. Focus on developing a group attitude that reading is a pleasurable way of making discoveries about the world. Everyone in the community will have the chance to select reading materials that reflect his or her personal choices and interests.
- Liven up the room. Pin up children's writing and drawings inspired by books. Display books or book jackets. Write to publishers to ask for free, attractive materials—posters, postcards, bookmarks—to give to students.
- Keep the classroom library visible, not behind locked cabinet doors. Have books become a part of the classroom's interior decoration scheme.
- As your personality and classroom space permit, allow students to do self-selected reading in places other than at their desks. You may want to set up a reading center—a place designated for pleasure reading that may have pillows, a comfortable chair or couch, and other homey furnishings. But make sure everyone gets to use the reading center. If it becomes the domain of those who finish their work first, those students who need it most may never get the chance.
- Connect students and authors. Children are curious about the people who write their books. Enliven the literary atmosphere in the classroom by encouraging young readers to contact authors through their personal websites. Using the e-mail address usually available at each site, students can write to their favorite authors. If an author doesn't have an internet address, have students write letters to the author in care of the publisher. Publishers' addresses are available on the internet and can often be found on the back of a book's title page. Invite local authors to the classroom. Invite distant authors to connect with the classroom via Skype. Although some authors charge money, many authors will do such things free of charge in order to promote their own books.
- Create an environment in which every student has enjoyable, successful reading experiences. We believe in the *pleasure–practice–proficiency* cycle (see Figure 1.1). Regardless of their experiences or abilities as readers, we believe that in the hands of a capable and caring teacher, all children can have fun with books. Despite struggling with literacy, children can still be scaffolded and guided through positive, pleasurable reading experiences. And the more students derive pleasure from reading, the more likely they are to continue to read and to practice, which will in turn help them develop into better, more proficient readers. The better we get at reading, the more pleasurable the pursuit becomes, so the more we practice, and so on.

Figure 1.1 Pleasure–Practice–Proficiency Cycle



Work with Parents or Caregivers

Except at the often painfully polite back-to-school evenings, parents and teachers usually have contact only when there is trouble. As a result, teachers and parents have a natural hesitancy to communicate—much to the delight of many children, who prefer keeping their two worlds separate. The teacher who decides to bridge this traditional gap between school and home can do so with relative ease and much positive effect on children and their reading.

You need to initiate this contact, either through a letter or a meeting with each child's caregivers. To gain support for your approach to reading, that contact should make two points: Let caregivers know about your emphasis on personal reading and request their support in helping it work.

Communicate with Parents or Caregivers

Communicate to parents or caregivers the benefits of regular, year-long reading for their child, both in school and at home. Include your own views on the advantages of daily reading, and perhaps cite research that supports those ideas (see earlier in this chapter and Chapter 17 for ideas).

Request Parental Support

Request parental support for each child's personal reading at home. Caregivers can help their child in the following ways:

- Encourage the child to read regularly at home. Setting aside a certain time is helpful. (If you require students to read daily outside school, mention that and ask for support.)
- Talk with the child about the books being read.
- Read with and to the child.
- Buy books as gifts for birthdays and holidays, and allow the child to buy from school-sponsored book clubs when possible.
- Help the child create a place in his or her bedroom to keep personal books.
- Read where the child can see you.
- Periodically tell the child about what you are reading.
- Volunteer to come to the classroom and assist children with their reading.

Choose Meaningful Activities

The purpose of having children engage in an activity after reading a book is to enhance their experience, not to check their reading or to evaluate their comprehension. Remember that not every book a child reads must result in a written report or other learning activity. In fact, most personal reading experiences should *not* be coupled with an assignment. But when a learning activity does center on literature, children should be able to select from a variety of titles.

Teachers with the best of intentions can interfere with motivated readers. Often, the most difficult hurdle is simply *getting out of their way*. Whatever an adult does that keeps the child from becoming involved with the book is something to be avoided. We should always ask ourselves, "Are the things I am asking my students to do in response to a book adding to their enjoyment and understanding of that book?" Any practice for which the answer is "no" is a practice to be avoided.

The ideas in this chapter come from years of classroom experience—both ours and others'. Unfortunately, following these ideas to the letter won't guarantee that every child will become a motivated reader. No reading approach, person, or program has a 100% success rate with children. Simply expect that in every classroom, you will have some tough nuts to crack—children who will not fall in love with books no matter what you do. Implementing these ideas, however, will increase the odds that children will read more and read better.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The focus of this chapter included:

- In engaged reading, we can achieve immediate benefits, such as pleasure of reading, and some long-term benefits. These may involve faster reading, expanded vocabulary, improved comprehension, increased knowledge, improved decision-making skills, and so on.
- Books used as tools of education fall into three distinct categories: reference books, textbooks, and trade books. They are philosophically different and serve unique purposes. Reference books are those a person consults for an immediate answer to a specific question. Textbooks are designed for formal instruction. Trade books are targeted at readers who seek pleasure, insight, and knowledge.
- Trade book authors and illustrators create engaging books. They are available everywhere in all sizes, formats, and lengths. Taken together, a series of trade books about a given subject can explore that subject from a variety of viewpoints. Trade books are also published frequently, providing the latest information. They are the tools of lifelong learning.
- Teachers should be reading role models for their students. Given they want their students to be motivated readers, they should know that for motivated readers, reading is personal and a natural process. Teachers should also try to connect their students' in-school and out-of-school reading.
- There are basically two forms of motivation—intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic reading motivation is when reading itself becomes rewarding. Extrinsic motivation involves reading being used as a means to another end, such as a reward or prize.
- Teachers should plan so that books fit smoothly and easily into the school day and their students' lives. Five areas to consider when organizing the ideal reading classroom are providing access to books, making time for reading, creating a reading atmosphere, working with parents or caregivers, and choosing meaningful reading-related activities.

2 What Is a Good Book?

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student will be able to:

- Understand the varied criteria by which adults choose books for children.
- Describe how the quality of the book and the taste of the reader become important in judging a book.

Teachers and librarians often select books for children, a task that is enjoyable but also challenging, as there are thousands of titles from which to choose. While we often gravitate to titles with which we are familiar, we want to ensure that we select good ones. This is harder than it might seem, since we're not always sure what "a good book" means. Left to our own choosing, we thumb through titles, trying to find something that seems beneficial and desirable for young readers. We forge ahead, sometimes oblivious of the criteria we use to determine what is good. But there certainly are criteria to guide our book selection and help us determine what a good book is.

Choosing Children's Books

All adults choose children's books according to some kind of requirement, even though we may be unaware of exactly why we pick one book over another. Our first responsibility when selecting books, then, is to determine what guides our choices. For instance, some individuals select books for children because of:

1. Their messages or the lessons they teach. We want children to learn the correct lessons about life. If a book teaches what we want taught, we call it a good book.
2. Their large, colorful illustrations. Young eyes need stimulation, and color provides more stimulation than black-and-white illustrations.
3. The absence of harshness. Since children will face life's challenges soon enough, they should be allowed to enjoy childhood. Protect them from the tough side of life as long as possible.
4. The absence of scariness. We don't want to invite fears or nightmares.
5. The absence of swearing. We don't want books to model inappropriate behavior.
6. Their short length. Keep the reading easy.
7. Simple vocabulary. We don't want to frustrate or overpower children.
8. Familiar content. We think our child will respond to a book about zoos because we go to one often. If a book connects with a child's experience, it will be a better book for the young reader.
9. Personal or social preference. We want the values and social views represented in the book to be what we consider appropriate.

One of the problems with these reasons is that they represent narrow-minded and sometimes misguided perspectives; they focus only on the proverbial tree while missing the forest. If we want to create lifelong readers by choosing books that appeal to the greatest range and number of children, we need to view the book as a whole instead of focusing only on one of its small elements. The most trustworthy standard for considering the book as a whole is to look at the experience it offers. Book titles with lasting value can almost be defined as experiences that recreate the very texture of life.

Problems can arise, however, in trying to convince others of the power of that experience. It is largely human nature to think others will respond the way we do. When books please us, we think they are well written or have other measurable literary value that ought to be recognized by our friends. When books don't appeal to us, we think that they lack merit for almost everyone. The following two cases illustrate these points:

- **Case 1:** "*The Wind in the Willows* (Grahame, 1908) is a classic," he said. "It has received critical acclaim for a century, and I loved it. If you want a wonderful experience, take it now and read it." So she did. Her response was different, however: total boredom. How do we explain that a book of acknowledged literary merit can excite one person, whereas the friend he recommends it to finds the title definitely ho-hum?
- **Case 2:** The librarian held up a book between thumb and forefinger like a 5-day-old fish. "Diary of a Wimpy Kid books lack quality and merit. This series is predictable and weak." Max, a third-grader, reads the beginning of the newly released *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Meltdown* (Kinney, 2018) and can't put it down until he finishes. A trained librarian judges a title to be substandard literature, yet Max considers it a good book. How can this be?

Readers often don't see eye to eye when it comes to judging whether a book is worthwhile because *good book* is a common phrase with two different definitions, one based on quality and the other on taste.

Judging A Book: Literary Quality Versus Personal Taste

Quality

A good book is one created by a knowledgeable and skilled author in which the elements of literature measure up under critical analysis. Quality has nothing to do with how old or new a book is. Books from decades or centuries past are not necessarily better works—even some so-called classics may not be well written. Some people may be inclined to find that current books are stronger while not realizing their reactions may be determined by a variety of factors having little effect on the quality of writing. Modern themes, language, or societal issues may trump the author's writing skill for some individuals—even if they don't realize it. For instance, a novel that deals with an issue a person feels strongly about (bullying, child abuse, destruction of the rain forests, autism) may lead readers to confuse subject matter with quality writing. Of course, it is the skill with which a story is told and not the issue or topic that makes for a well-written story.

However, there is no exact recipe for solid writing; if there was, anyone privy to the formula could predictably crank out an award winner. As W. Somerset Maugham once said, "There are three rules for writing a good novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are" (Stephens, 1990).

What we do know is that all writers draw from the same words found in the dictionary, make use of the same rules of grammar, and apply the same elements of literature (see discussion in this chapter). Yet it remains a mystery how one author can blend the identical raw materials into a veritable literary feast, whereas another concocts only a run-of-the-mill tale. The simple truth is: Some books *are* better written than others.

Although most of us are unable to create fiction like the masters of literature, we are still able to acquire the experience and skills necessary to recognize great writing. We have long used a variety of accepted rubrics to evaluate the written word, and although the evaluation process remains subjective, operating within the purview of these critical elements gives us common ground for making sounder literary judgments. For instance, style and language, character, plot, pacing, setting, tension, mood, tone, point of view, theme, and accuracy are the literary elements most commonly examined in judging excellence in fiction. (See Chapters 14 and 15 for characteristics of good nonfiction.)

1. *Style and Language*. How a story is told is as important as the story itself. Style is the way a writer manipulates all the facets of language—such as word choice, syntax, and sentence length—to tell that story (see Chapter 3). For instance, the language use in Tess Hilmo's *With a Name like Love* (2011) helps readers visualize both the character and setting:

   > The early evening light settled around Susanna Love's shoulders, and streams of orange and scarlet danced in the sky above her head. Ollie noticed how mama's long purple dress rippled around her thin legs in the breeze and couldn't help but marvel at how beautiful the whole scene was. It was like living poetry. (p. 17)

2. *Character*. Good books must have characters that are unique and believable. People who live between the covers of a book must be as real as people who live across the street. It is impossible to identify with or have feelings for a person unless we know the individual, and it is the author's job to show us the character's personality in such a way that we can become involved with his or her life.

   Authors do not paint all of their characters with the same attention to detail. There are many types of characters such as protagonists, antagonists, round, flat, static, and foils. For instance, the main characters or **protagonists** must be **round** or multidimensional so we know a great deal about them. Harry Potter is both the protagonist and a **dynamic** character—one that changes over the course of the story—in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998). Readers know little about other characters who are **flat**. For instance, Neville Longbottom is quite forgetful and obedient. Because we see little change in him in the first book of the series, he is both flat and **static**. Meanwhile, Draco Malfoy, a proud, arrogant student from a pure-blooded wizard family, serves as the **character foil**, or character whose traits are the opposite of the protagonist. Moreover, because Malfoy's thuggish friends Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle behave merely as bullies under Draco's direction, they function as **stereotypes**. Finally, some books have a character that creates the major conflict in the story and is known as the **antagonist**. Lord Voldemort serves that role in the *Harry Potter* series.
3. *Plot*. A good plot shows what happens to the characters in such a way that the reader cares about the outcome. Every plot must have a conflict, and how that conflict is resolved carries the book to its conclusion. Well-defined plots introduce a question early on that will be answered yes or no by the end of the story. Such a question is referred to as the "major dramatic question" (MDQ) and is not asked outright but is clearly evident. The plot, then, is the series of events that lead to the yes or no answer. For instance, the MDQ of *The*

Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend (Santat, 2014) is "Will Beekle find the friend he is looking for?"

Similarly, in the 2009 Newbery winner *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman, 2008), the toddler, who comes to be known as Nobody, survives the brutal murder of his family even though he is the assassin's chief target. When the murderer, Jack Frost, realizes the child is out of his grasp, he sees it as temporary: "He had not failed. Not yet. Not for years to come. There was plenty of time. Time to tie up this last piece of unfinished business. Time to cut the final thread" (pp. 32–33). At the onset, the author leads his readers to wonder, "Will Jack eventually kill Nobody Owens?" thereby creating the major dramatic question that drives the plot. The development of and growth in Nobody's character come in part from facing the conflict (survival) implicit in the MDQ.

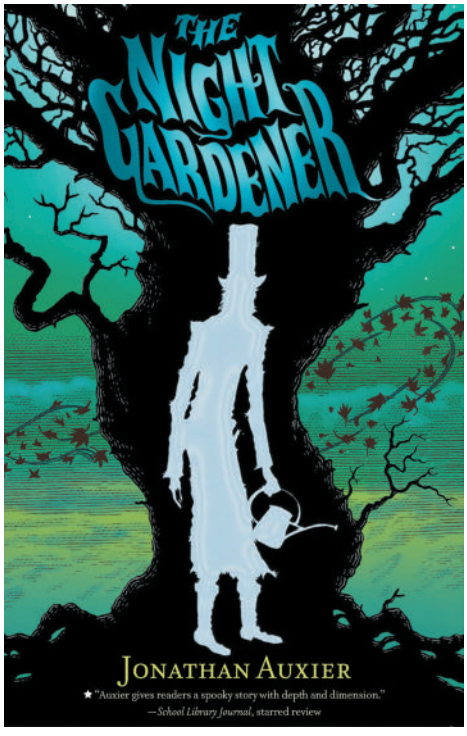
Erin Entrada Kelly's 2018 Newbery-winner *Hello, Universe* (2017) is tautly plotted, with the entire story taking place in a single dramatic day. Her following book, *You Go First* (2018) is condensed into a single week. *You Go First* is about two friends who live across the country and play online scrabble together. The author wanted readers to realize "that no one struggles alone" even if they are separated by 1,000 miles. When questioned about her decision for the story to take place in such a short time frame, she responded:

> "In many ways it happened by accident. However, when I was young I liked it when books were tautly plotted like that. *Hello, Universe* takes place in a single day and I got so much positive feedback on that one detail, so I started to think about this one-week timeframe. I also liked the idea of how much our lives can change in such a short period of time in both big and subtle ways" (cited in Roper, 2018).

4. *Pacing*. Pacing is how quickly or slowly a story moves. Although most books tell their stories at a relatively constant rate, pacing can vary according to the author's desire to linger over the content or move the story along. The author's pacing can even reinforce a part of the story, as in Spinelli's (1990) *Maniac Magee*, in which the short chapters and short sentences mirror the constant running and rapid movements of the main character. Likewise, Kwame Alexander's verse novels *The Crossover* (2014), *Booked* (2016), and *Rebound* (2018) capture the energy, rhythm, beat, and movement of both basketball and soccer.
5. *Setting*. The setting is when and where the book takes place. The place can be as vast as a planet or as small as one room. The time may be in the past, the present, or the future, or it may be unspecified in imaginary worlds. When detailed and fleshed out, the physical surroundings add credibility and depth to the story.

   The setting may serve a number of functions. In the case of Gary Paulsen's (1987a) *Hatchet*, the setting even serves as the antagonist as 13-year-old Brian survives 54 days dealing with everything the wilderness throws at him. In other books the setting may clarify the conflict, illuminate a character, or act as symbols. In Jonathan Auxier's (2014) *The Night Gardener*, the setting creates a scary mood that prompts readers to wonder what horrors lay ahead for the young protagonists Molly and Kip at Sourwoods:

   > At the far end of the lawn stood Windsor mansion. The house had obviously been left vacant for some years, and in that time it seemed to have become one with the landscape. Weeds swallowed the base. Ivy choked the walls and windows. The roof was sagging and covered in black moss.
   >
   > But strangest of all was the tree.
   >
   > The tree was enormous and looked very, very old. Most trees cast an air of quiet dignity over their surrounding. This one did not. Most trees invite you to climb up into their canopy. This one did not. Most trees make you want to carve your initials into the trunk. This one did not. To stand in the shadow of this tree would send a chill through your whole body. (pp. 13–14)



Credit:The Night Gardener. Text copyright © 2014 by Jonathan Auxier. Illustrations copyright © 2014 Patrick Arrasmith. Cover reproduced with permission of the publisher, AMULET Books, an imprint of ABRAMS, New York, NY.

6. *Tension*. Fiction that lacks tension is bland. Tension makes the reader want to read in order to find out what happens to the individuals involved in the problem and how the conflict is resolved. Even in picture books, tension—a close relative of suspense—is what piques and sustains readers' interest.
7. *Mood*. The mood is the atmosphere evoked in the writing: spooky, hilarious, innocent, understated, exaggerated, philosophical, or even caustic. Most teachers tend not to discuss the mood of a book. In fact, most literary and literacy instruction focuses primarily on literary elements such as character development, setting, and plot. Yet few people say things like, "I love books with such and such a character," or "I love books with a certain setting." Very often people *will* say things like, "I love funny books," or "I love scary stories," or "I love mysterious books." Obviously, well-constructed characters, settings, and plots help to establish the mood, but we must not forget how important—and appealing—the mood can be.
8. *Tone*. The tone is the author's attitude toward the subject or audience in a particular book. In some poorly written books for children, the author—who in almost all cases is an adult—talks down to readers. Writers who respect their audience as readers, as thinkers, and as people, are more likely to present their work in a manner that is not condescending, belittling, or didactic.
9. *Point of View*. The point of view is the position taken by the narrator. Most stories are told in first person ("I") or third person ("he" or "she"). Some authors write the story from alternating points of view so that it is told from the first-person point of view of two or more characters, as in R. J. Palacio's *Wonder* (2012) and Gordon Korman's *Restart* (2017).

Palacio captures the voices of Augie Pullman, his fifth-grade classmates, his teenage sister, and her friends. Korman tells the story from the perspective of Chase Ambrose and a variety of middle school students and teachers.

In Erin Entrada Kelly's *Hello, Universe* (2017), the chapters also use an alternating point of view for the characters Virgil, Kaori, Chet, and Valencia. The chapters featuring Valencia are told in first person, allowing readers to experience those portions of the story from her viewpoint. The chapters highlighting the other three characters are told from a limited omniscient third-person point of view, allowing the readers to experience the thoughts and experiences of only that character.

10. *Theme*. The theme is the story's central idea. Themes are best expressed in complete sentences. For instance, "Friends often sacrifice for one another" is more powerful than the one-word topic "friendship." Although activities and discussions related to one-word topics may be entertaining and promote learning, these types of topics are not substantive enough for students to make deeper connections to their lives and the world around them, therefore perpetuating a superficial treatment of theme.
11. *Accuracy*. Whenever books deal with real facts, whether centering on them in nonfiction or using them as background in fiction, they must be true. Writers need to do their homework to gain and keep readers' trust.

    To write her nonfiction Scientist in the Field books, Sy Montgomery participates in immersive research where she becomes part of a research team. She climbed a 10,000-foot mountain into the cloud forest to write *Quest for the Tree Kangaroo: An Expedition to the Cloud Forest of New Guinea* (2006). Montgomery stated, "Fieldwork is very demanding physically. I work out three times per week to stay in shape" (in Young, 2008). Some of her other books have involved her swimming with piranhas, electric eels, and dolphins in the Amazon River, or being submerged in the ocean in a steel cage an arm's length away from great white sharks and their 300 razor-sharp teeth. Few other nonfiction writers have taken the same kind of risks to ensure the accuracy of their books.

    Up to this point, we have focused on the written word. However, it is important to note that in judging a title's overall quality, especially with illustrated books, we must go beyond the words by considering the illustrations, as well as the design and layout.
12. *Illustrations*. The art or photography in a book can strengthen and extend the content beyond the words. The marriage of illustration and text can yield an experience more powerful than either alone. (See Chapter 4.)
13. *Design and Layout*. All visual elements of a book—such as the cover, the colors, the margins, the spacing, the font style and size, and the positions of page numbers—are a part of the design and layout. Although word order is not affected by the design and layout, word placement on the page is—particularly in picture books. The visual appeal of a book can determine if a potential reader will pick it up or leave it on the shelf, and the look of a page can affect the reader's desire to keep reading and exploring its content. In Tunnell's (1999) *Halloween Pie*, for instance, the words shown on the next page undulate within a snaking current of steam carried by the wind. The steam—laden with the scent of freshly baked pie—and the text lead readers from the witch's cottage to the cemetery, where graveyard creatures are focused by the tantalizing smells.

Of the 13 components listed, three provide most of the information for judging the quality of fiction: style and language, character, and plot. When a book reveals its story in powerful language, contains memorable characters, and follows a compelling plot, the book generally can be

said to be of high quality. Such is the case of Stacy McAnulty's *The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl* (2018) and N. H. Senzai's *Escape from Aleppo* (2018).

One additional characteristic of a quality book is worth noting: believability. The key to creating a good book is to make everything believable. We know that fiction is the product of an imagination. The people never lived. The story is made up. The setting often is invented. So why do we care about these people who never were, doing things that never happened, in a place that may not exist? Because the emotional reality is absolutely true. Because their imagined lives reflect the actual lives of living, breathing people. Because we can get genuine experience through living side by side with fictional characters while they endure their trials and enjoy their successes. We participate, we enjoy, and we learn—all simultaneously. Yet if anything in the book reminds us that what we read is invented, the story loses its power, much in the same way that the spell of a movie is broken when we notice a boom microphone hanging over the head of the police chief. All the elements in a story must be logical, sensible, and consistent.

Authors can also disrupt the magic of their storytelling by becoming too enamored of their words or their ideas. The use of figurative and descriptive speech, for instance, should meld seamlessly into the narrative. A passage can be beautifully written yet be overwritten. The best of descriptive prose never points to itself as if to say, "Look how ingeniously crafted I am." Such writing interrupts the reader, breaks the spell, and is considered by many to be a writer's self-indulgence. When telling a story, an author ought to stay out of sight, so to speak.

Yet a writer can pay careful attention to all the elements of fiction, skillfully and unobtrusively weaving together a praiseworthy book, and still not win the reader's heart. Readers' tastes also influence how they respond to books.

Taste

The second definition of a good book is simply "a book the reader likes," quality notwithstanding. For instance, *The Wind in the Willows* is judged to be quality literature for children. This prototype of modern animal fantasy skillfully delineates the four main characters, contains satisfying action sequences, and is told in rich and varied language. But some children never become engrossed in the story when they try to read it, nor do they particularly like to have it read aloud to them. The book has definite literary merit—it is critically a good book—yet for those who are not taken by the story, it has no appeal. Conversely, the Diary of a Wimpy Kid books have won no literary awards, yet they continue to be read by many who find pleasure in reading these tales of a young middle school boy seeking popularity. Thousands of children in over 140 countries sail through the series, reporting that each Diary of a Wimpy Kid title is a good book. Some adults may think that children who read such stories should feel shame for doing so, but so far, no guilt has been detected in those who move quickly from one volume to the next. Perhaps what matters is that these youngsters are reading and finding their own experiences or fears mirrored in the situations that face Greg Heffley.

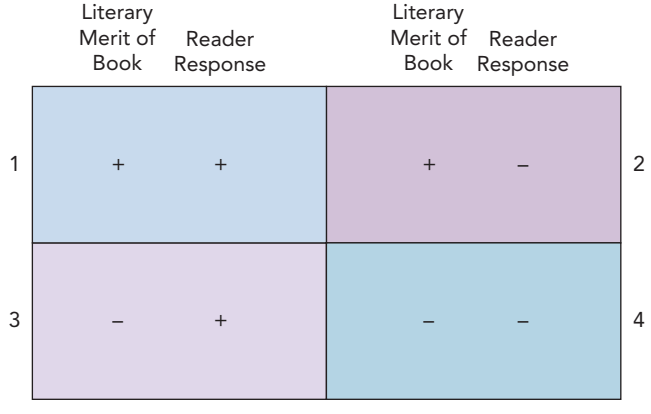
So, when determining which books are good, a problem surfaces: The positive feelings a reader has about a book are the same whether they come from a quality book or one of low literary merit. As long as a reader likes a book, quality or not, it can be considered "good." Were we able to identify precisely the sources of our positive responses, we would more accurately say, "I like this book because the author's skill took me places and showed me things I had not previously thought about or experienced." If the book is well crafted, believable, and supplies all the elements needed for a rewarding new experience, the author should feel content. What the writer of the book brings to the work creates this "good" response. On the other hand, if we like a book because it serves

as a link to something already a part of us, we might say, "I like this book because it connects me with something important in my life." When the book presents us with a view or situation we are hardwired to like—reliving my summer with Grandma, supporting my view that society undervalues females, or illustrating how a selfish child learns kindness—credit for positive feelings toward the book belongs largely to the reader. When we like a book, we usually don't examine the source of our responses. We don't ask if the book takes us to new places or connects us with the old. We just say it is a "good" book. We gain some insight by asking ourselves, "Does the 'good' feeling come because of the author's skill, or does it come because of my background and expectations?" Figure 2.1 depicts the roles and meaning of "good" in book quality and reader response.

A book can be written well or badly, and a reader can respond positively or negatively to both strong and weak books. Quadrant 1 of Figure 2.1 shows that an author has written a book with literary merit, and the reader likes it. We have no problem with a reader who responds positively to quality writing. A well-crafted book deserves no less. Similarly, quadrant 4 presents no difficulty. The author displays little skill in producing a book of minimal merit, and the reader does not respond well to this flawed product. These two blue shaded quadrants pose little problem for the teacher and student.

But problems may occur when a quality book is not well received. Quadrant 2 shows that an author has written a good book, but the reader doesn't care for it. Teachers who recognize quality literature may have a tendency to feel they are shirking their duty if children don't respond favorably to a quality book. Teachers who redouble their efforts to convince the unbeliever that something wonderful is being missed usually frustrate the skeptical student and make the book even less enjoyable. In quadrant 3, the reader accepts a weak book with open arms. This scenario is often played out as a teacher tries to show the young reader just how poor the book really is. These sincere efforts are generally as successful as trying to dam the Mississippi River using a teaspoon. Attempting to convince enthusiastic young readers that a book is not worthy of devotion is foolish and often counterproductive. These readers have read the book and liked it. All we can do, and should do, is continue to mention and offer different titles that may appeal to those readers. Allowing individual response is wisest in the long run. (See the discussion of "engaged reading" in Chapter 1.) After all, if children read nothing, then our opportunity to broaden their taste and judgment about books is nonexistent.

Figure 2.1 Evaluating Books: Four Possible Outcomes



In both quadrants 2 and 3, the teacher needs to accept the honest feelings of the reader, misguided as they might be in the adult eye, and continue to provide and introduce books that might challenge the readers. Doing so carries no guarantee that young readers will like them, but it does increase the chances that this may happen. Direct attacks on positive responses to poor-quality books, however, almost guarantee that a rift will develop between teacher and student and, in the case of quadrant 2, between a student and a genuinely good book. No young reader wants to be forced to defend his or her choice in reading material.

Understanding that a positive response can be a result of either the author's skill or the reader's individual taste, and experience can help in solving some mysteries about how readers respond to books. When a class of 30 college students read a not-very-good biography about Maria Tallchief, an Osage ballerina who captured the attention of the dancing world in the early 20th century, all the students, except for five women, pronounced the book "mediocre." But the enthusiastic handful who loved the book couldn't understand why the others were not impressed by this story that had meant so much to them. During the short discussion about the book, it turned out that all of the five young women had taken and loved ballet as children. When they read about Maria Tallchief, they were reading their own stories. For them, the book served as a link to a meaningful personal experience. Lacking ballet backgrounds, the others did not find enough to interest them in the shallow way the author presented Tallchief's story.

As adults working with children, we spend our time more productively in quadrants 1 and 2 for two reasons. First, the more a book has to offer readers, the greater the chance the reader will respond. In *Julius, the Baby of the World*, Kevin Henkes (1990) identifies precisely an only child's reaction to the arrival of a new sibling. The reader participates in Lilly's jealousy, as well as sharing her outrage when Cousin Garland dares to criticize her baby brother. The author's range of emotion and humor is so broad that readers at a variety of age levels are able to respond. Often, judging literary merit is easier than identifying specific reader idiosyncrasies that predict positive responses to books. We can identify a good plot and pick out a compelling character. But we have no way of knowing that five students will be linked by their ballet lessons to Tallchief.

This whole evaluative process is somewhat like examining two new couches, both with fabric upholstery and polished wooden trim. From a distance, they appear identical, but one reflects the true value of $2,200, whereas the other carries an honest price tag of $500. However, if allowed to inspect the couches at close range, even the nonprofessional should be able to determine which couch is of real quality and which is of lesser worth. We can determine the more expensive by examining the stitching, which should be close and even; the fabric, which should be tight and finely woven; the hardwood, which should be joined perfectly, well stained, and flawlessly finished; the padding, which should be thick and firm; the weight, which should be heavy; and the comfort, which should be evident upon sitting. Once identified, however, the quality piece will not necessarily be welcomed into every living room. If its style—say Scandinavian Contemporary or Colonial—does not appeal to me, it is of no importance that I now have the $2,200 couch. I can recognize its fine craftsmanship and can see that its less expensive counterpart is lacking in quality, but that does not make me want to own the fine couch if my taste runs counter to its appearance. Ultimately, the piece must please the reader before it gets his or her stamp of approval.

Some elementary teachers taking a graduate children's literature class shared their thoughts about what makes a good book. Katie noted that she likes books that are especially well written so she can "savor the language and literary devices like chocolate." She also noted that when she is tired, stressed, or has just finished a really good book that she often chooses something "lighter—adult equivalents of the Wimpy Kid books." Jared defines good books as those that he cannot put down and seem to stay with him for a long time. Amy defines a good book as narrative

nonfiction "like those written by Steve Sheinkin." She added that she gives her students as much choice as possible, and has noticed that in time, most of her students eventually add some better-written books to their reading diets.

Taste and personal response often determine an individual's decision about the worth of a book. However, there are some generally accepted guidelines about quality writing. Some books simply are better constructed than others, offering a clearer understanding of the human experience and a deeper sense of pleasure. These quality books are the ones we need to introduce to children because they generally have more power to stir up interest and, over time, will provide readers with a more enlarging experience than will mediocre books. Although we shouldn't force these quality titles on children, we can introduce them through enthusiastic sharing. To become truly engaged readers, children must have the freedom to accept or reject a title. Just as we can't insist on a positive response to a book of quality, we shouldn't erase a positive response to a poorly written book.

In the end, the question of what makes a "good book" is one of respect: respect for the truly fine work of authors who pay their dues and create works of lasting value, and also respect for the response of individual readers who cast the deciding vote on a book's personal appeal. There is, after all, only one list of good books that is completely dependable—your own. However, although your list may have books of both lower and higher literary merit, the quality titles will end up taking you (and your students) further. (See Appendix D for Book Award Lists.)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The focus of this chapter included:

- When adults choose books for children, they do it based on their own standards. These standards are narrow and sometimes could be misguiding.
- The two criteria to judge a book are literary quality and personal taste. Adults should provide books of both lower and higher literary quality that children will read, keeping in mind that children should be given freedom to choose from these books. Eventually, children will develop their own personal reading preferences and tastes, and adults should respect their preferences.

How to Recognize a Well-Written Book

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, the student will be able to:

- Identify various characteristics that constitute a well-written book.
- Identify the elements that weaken the quality of a book.

To evaluate the literary merit of a book is to make a judgment about how well the author uses words. "This book is well written" is a typical comment of praise for the book. But what does *well-written* mean? Often, the phrase is nothing more than the speaker's way of saying the book is pleasing. If it pleases me, it must be well written. As evidence supporting a positive response to a book, the phrase "well written" has become a generalized catchall that doesn't mean much.

Choosing the Right Words

If a book is truly well written, the words between its covers are arranged in almost magical patterns that stir deep emotional responses in readers. The words do far more than relate the story's events. Authors carefully choose words that will develop the story, carefully defining character, moving the plot along, identifying the setting, isolating the theme, creating the tone, identifying the point of view, developing the mood, establishing the pace, making the story believable, and reporting information accurately.

As helpful as they might be in identifying how words support each literary element, however, they still fail to give us a clear picture of exactly what makes a book so memorable. Certainly, a book's plot must be well structured, but it cannot be separated from the major characters who are living the story. Conversely, well-defined characters lose their appeal if they are not involved in a compelling plot. The elements of writing must be integrated, crafted into a well-orchestrated whole of parts that are intricately entwined, by a talented writer.

Talented writers create works that are clear, believable, and interesting, and the rules for good writing are essentially the same for children's books and adult books. It is not as if a children's writer is in training to become an author of books for grown-ups. That would be like asking a pediatrician when he or she will at last get around to the important business of treating adults. Children deserve the best writing in books geared for them.

Once again (see Chapter 2), a story is not good because it is for a certain audience, about a particular topic, or contains certain characters; it is good because of the way it is presented. A work of nonfiction is not good because of the subject matter; it is good because of the way

it views and reveals the subject. For example, note the difference in the following reports of the same event:

- **Case 1:** The college football coach finished his 20th successful season and was honored at a banquet where his praises were sung loudly and long. As dishes were being cleared and tables taken down after the festivities, the coach talked with his friend, the college president. At one point, the coach paused and then asked, "President, I appreciate this evening more than you'll ever know. Yet sometimes I find a nagging question in my mind: Would all of you still love me if I lost football games instead of won them?"

  "Oh, Coach, we'd love you just as much," the president said as he reached out his arm, pulled the coach in close, and looked him right in the eye. "And we'd miss you."
- **Case 2:** A college student said to his classmate, "Did you hear that last night after the banquet honoring the football coach, the president said he'd be fired if he started losing?"

In case 2, the reader receives all the pertinent information: the banquet in the coach's honor, the president and coach's conversation afterward, and the gist of their exchange. In the first example, though, the reader participates vicariously in the event, discovering the point of the story and its subtle humor simultaneously with the characters.

Human beings can't draw conclusions without information, and we gain information only through the five senses. If data can't enter through one of the holes in the head (sight, sound, taste, or smell) or through the skin (touch), they can't be processed. Good writers know readers need specific information—details that enter through the senses—and take the trouble to provide it. Lesser writers generalize. The difference between providing sensory detail and generalizing is the difference between showing and telling. Where lesser writing *tells* by summarizing (as in case 2), quality writing *shows* us what is going on by providing enough sensory detail to allow us to make personal discoveries and come to personal conclusions (as in case 1). Consider, for instance, the opening paragraph of *The Illyrian Adventure*:

> Miss Vesper Holly has the digestive talents of a goat and the mind of a chess master. She is familiar with half a dozen languages and can swear fluently in all of them. She understands the use of a slide rule but prefers doing calculations in her head. She does not hesitate to risk life and limb—mine as well as her own. No doubt she has other qualities as yet undiscovered. I hope not. (Alexander, 1986, p. 3)

The reader is solidly introduced to Vesper Holly. Alexander reveals Vesper's particular personality by *showing* her skills, accomplishments, abilities, and interests. Had Alexander begun by *telling* us about Vesper, he may have summarized her character by saying, "Miss Vesper Holly is courageous, intelligent, daring, a skilled linguist, delightfully irreverent, and headstrong." We would then know what to expect of her, but we wouldn't know her as well.

The "showing" we need from the printed page comes to us in various forms: precise vocabulary, figurative language, dialogue, music in language, understatement, and unexpected insights. Though not a comprehensive list, these six characteristics identify some of the ways words create interest and personalize content.

Precise Vocabulary

By age 4, children have acquired most of the elements of fully developed language, including sentence structure, word order, subject–verb agreement, verb tenses, and so on (Morrow, 2005). The only additional refinements take place in acquiring more complex structures and in semantics—learning new words and their meanings. Semantic development continues for the rest of their lives.

English has the richest vocabulary of the 5,000-plus languages on the planet. According to the Global Language Monitor, there are one million words in the English language (Altman et al., 2009).

One of the great pleasures of language is to find within these myriad vocabulary possibilities precisely the right word to use in exactly the right place. Mark Twain described the difference between the right word and the almost right word as being like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug. And the only way to learn the fine differences between words and develop a broad personal vocabulary is to be surrounded by precise words used accurately. When Newbery-winning author Elaine Konigsburg writes for children, for instance, she tries "to expand the perimeter of their language, to set a wider limit to it, to give them a vocabulary for alternatives" (1970, pp. 731–732).

Erin Entrada Kelly is another master of providing those wider limits, largely by using precise vocabulary. In her Newbery Medal-winning *Hello, Universe*, Virgil worries about his beloved pet guinea pig Gulliver.

> It was true about guinea pigs. They weren't supposed to live alone. Virgil wished he'd never learned that, because now he was convinced that Gulliver suffered from debilitating depression. The poor black-and-white rodent had been by himself for the past eighteen months, and Virgil couldn't help but think he'd been putting the hours away in desperate loneliness. (Kelly, 2017, p. 31)

Kelly's choice of the word "debilitating" to represent Gulliver's possible depression indicates Virgil's fear for his pet's well-being since such depression could weaken Gulliver, make him sick, and feel extremely sad.

The right words do not have to be fancy or complex. Even ordinary words can be right. In *Julius, the Baby of the World* (Henkes, 1990), the birth of Julius brings misery to his sister, Lilly. To her friends, and even strangers, this former only child dutifully gives warnings about the perils of newborns. To a very pregnant woman she meets on the sidewalk, Lilly offers this dire prediction: "You will live to regret that bump under your dress!" "Will live to regret" does not mince words. It carries no waffling and allows no possibility that the situation could end well. Calling the baby a "bump" makes it less than human—reduces it to an inanimate, shapeless mass—which reveals the depth of Lilly's negative feelings more powerfully than had she said, "You will be sorry you're pregnant."

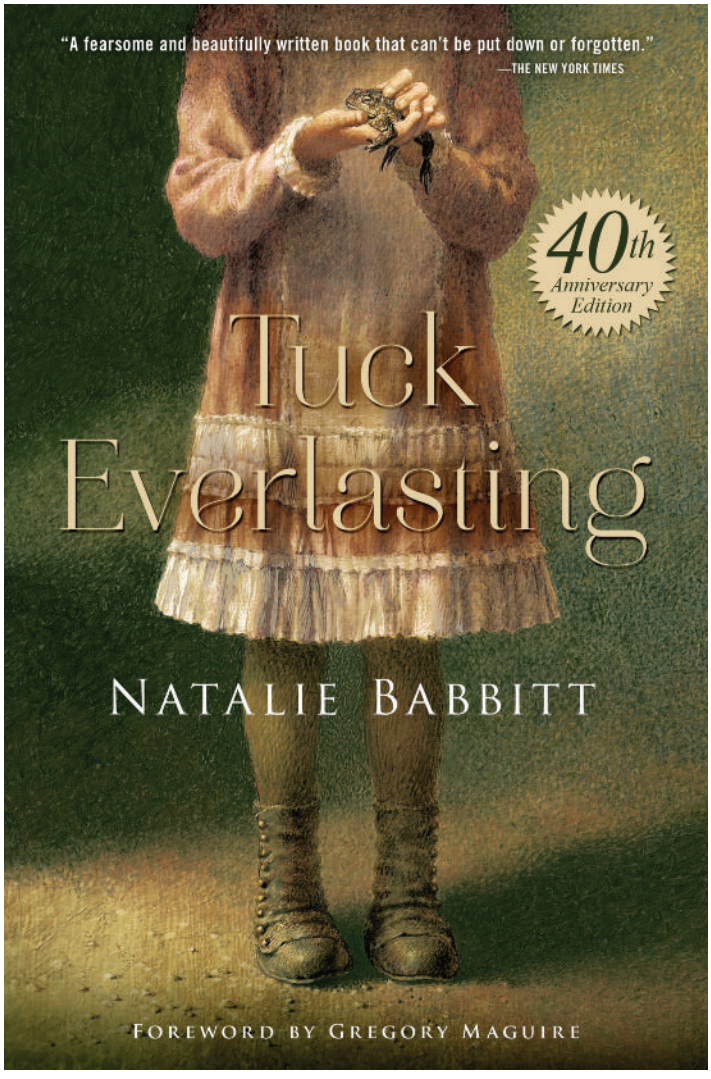
Figurative Language

Simile, metaphor, personification, and imagery are examples of figurative language. All add specificity, clarity, power, and layers of meaning. In addition, figurative language is economical. It conveys meaning quickly and with emotional intensity. For example, in *Leaving Gee's Bend*, it takes only eleven words to pique our senses: "It was worse than the outhouse on a steamy August day" (Latham, 2010, p. 186). Latham's words provide us with sensory reminders of the oppressive Alabama heat and humidity and the accompanying stench of outdoor toilets.

Another memorable example of effective figurative language is the lingering image of Mae Tuck, described in *Tuck Everlasting* as a "great potato of a woman" (Babbitt, 1975/2015, p. 7). In five words, Babbitt creates a feeling for Mae's lumpy shape, her absence of pretense, her plainness, her lack of color, her solidness, her accessibility, and other earthy and dependable traits associated with a vegetable that is not spectacular, fragile, or rare but is a nutritional staple.

Figurative language can add power and insight to whole paragraphs. It is one thing to say that Winnie Foster was made to do housework continually, but in *Tuck Everlasting*, the author underscores the seriousness of cleaning in Winnie's household by loading the description with images of war.

> Winnie had grown up with order. She was used to it. Under the pitiless double assaults of her mother and grandmother, the cottage where she lived was always squeaking clean, mopped and swept and scoured into limp submission. There was no room for carelessness, no putting things off until later. The Foster women had made a fortress out of duty. Within it, they were indomitable. And Winnie was in training. (Babbitt, 1975/2015, p. 44)



When we read the paragraph, we get the solid impression that housecleaning in the Foster cottage is the focal point of life. Only when we go back and pick out the military terms Babbitt has chosen—"double assaults," "fortress," "duty," "in training"—do we see the image of soldiers in battle that has helped persuade us of the Foster obsession with cleanliness.

Dialogue

Speech reveals character. When a person's mouth opens, truth emerges about personality, motives, desires, prejudices, and feelings. In Leslie Connor's *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle* (2018), Mason finds his best friend Benny dead at the base of a tree house in the Buttle family orchard. Fifteen months pass, and the police lieutenant is still questioning Mason for information that he believes he is withholding.

> [When] the lieutenant says, "Mason . . . I know how it is. Once something goes so terribly wrong, fear can make a person do things tha—"
>
> "You think it was *me* who did that." I gulp. "*Oh my god*!" . . . I say, "You think *I* sawed that rung. You think *I* did the thing that killed Benny Kilmartin." (pp. 251–252)

Initially shocked that the policeman thinks he is responsible for Benny's death, Mason realizes that the "sad-to-see-you faces" in the community are not because people feel sorry for his loss, but it is because they also believe "all this bad" about him. "There are people who think I did something awful. They have been thinking it for two apple seasons. All this time I have been too stupid to know that" (p. 255). With Mason's disabilities it is always his perceptions first and reality second.

Another example of dialogue revealing character can be found in *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018, p. 11):

> "After school is troublesome," says Ma.
>
> Pushing back my chair, I kiss her.
>
> "Come straight home," Ma repeats tucking in her white uniform shirt.
>
> Grandma hugs, squeezes me like I'm a balloon. She pecks my cheek. "I'm worried about you. Been having bad dreams. . . . Sometimes I dream lighting strikes. Or earthquakes. Sometimes it's dark clouds mushrooming in the sky. I wake troubled."

Jerome knows that this dialogue is both an expression of his mother's and grandmother's love for him, and the danger of a young black boy living in their neighborhood. This scene foreshadows Jerome's fate.

Music in Language

The sounds of words increase the appeal and strength of a story as they blend together, create emphasis, repeat tones, establish patterns, provide a cadence, and add variety. After 90 years, the rhythm in *Millions of Cats* (Gág, 1928) still rings in the ear and burrows into the mind: "Hundreds of cats, Thousands of cats, Millions and billions and trillions of cats." The soothing, gentle, rhyming text in *Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site* (Rinker, 2011) does the same: "Construction site, all tucked in tight./The day is done, turn off the lights./Great work today! Now . . . Shh . . . goodnight." (unpaged).

The combination of strong verbs, alliteration, and short staccato sentences work well to show the public's appreciation of and reaction to Joan Procter's species-friendly reptile house in the London Zoo in Patricia Valdez's *Joan Procter, Dragon Doctor: The Woman Who Loved Reptiles* (2018, unpaged): "They gawked at the geckos. They peered at the pythons. And they marveled at the monitors. But when they reached Joan's special enclosure, they gasped!" The explosive sounds energize this biography of a woman who defied the gender expectations of the time to make major scientific contributions.

Because the eye does not detect the fine points of language as accurately as the ear, it is common for authors to submit their writing to a final check by reading it aloud. In the Grimm Brothers' version of "Snow White," the queen questions the mirror about her beauty in language that is subtly yet powerfully different from the better-known Disney version.

> Mirror, mirror on the wall, Who is fairest of us all? (Grimm Brothers, 1972, p. 2)

The Disney version creates an uneven meter by inserting the article "the" before the predicate adjective "fairest," making it more difficult to read aloud; the cadence is rougher and the sound choppier. The language in the Grimm Brothers' original text flows, falling smoothly and

effortlessly from the mouth. The result is a more musical reading. It also echoes an archaic form of speech that matches the "once upon a time" setting of the classic fairy tale.

Varied sentence length is another feature of language that appeals to the ear. In natural speech patterns, sentences are of differing length. These diverse sentences add variety to the language, creating balance, interest, and appeal. For most readers, the many short sentences in the Disney version interrupt the flow of the story, creating a degree of choppiness. The varied sentence construction used by the Brothers Grimm helps produce a smooth and flowing narrative that reads with a musical quality. Having more words per sentence is not necessarily an earmark of good writing, but in this case, the longer sentences help paint stronger, more emotion-laden images.

Understatement

When facts and feelings are presented clearly in writing, readers draw their own conclusions without being told precisely what to think. Readers then participate in the experience instead of being led through it. Part of this participatory process is understatement, which presents minimal but carefully chosen facts and details without any explanatory comment. Understatement is simply very brief "showing."

Overstatement and sensationalism are the opposites of understatement. A simple example can be found in Appelt's *The Underneath* (2008). The characters, abandoned and mistreated dogs and cats, exhibit their unhappiness or pain through the noises they make. But the author chooses to overstate their misery by frequent repetition of "unhappy" words, such as "Ranger . . . howled and howled and howled" (p. 74). But worse are the sensationalized exclamations: "*Yeeeeeeooooooowwwwww!*," "*Aaaaaaarrrrrrrgggggghhhhhhh!*" (p. 292). And the incessant use of "sound" words with added letters to approximate onomatopoeia and multiple exclamation marks: "CRRAAACCKKK!!! SPLLIIITTTT!!! BOOOMMMM!!!" (p. 267). Such overstated writing is a cheap way of trying to create excitement and tension but ultimately falls short.

The power of understatement is evident in *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975/2015). Angus Tuck tries to convince young Winnie, whom he has grown to love like his own child, not to drink from the same magical spring that has transformed the Tucks into people who cannot age or die. When the Tuck family is forced to move away, Angus is uncertain of what Winnie will do—let her life follow its natural course, as he counseled, or submit to the enticements of living forever. In the epilogue, Angus and Mae Tuck return to Winnie's town 60 years later and visit the cemetery. When he discovers her tombstone, Angus's throat closes, and he briefly salutes the monument, saying, "Good girl." No long discourses with his wife about Winnie's wise decision. No fits of crying or sentimental remembrances. Just "good girl." Readers are left to draw their own conclusions, but it's clear how Angus feels.

In Don Lemna's (2008) *When the Sergeant Came Marching Home*, the author creates a bit of dark humor through the use of understatement. Donald's father, newly returned from World War II, moves his family to a remote Montana farm. In the summer, Donald attends the Fourth of July celebration in the small town nearby. He is minding his own business when someone speaks to him.

> "I lost my finger," a small voice behind me said.
>
> I looked around and saw that there was a little girl with large, dark eyes, about five or six years old. She held her hand up, and I saw that it had only three fingers . . . .
>
> "I put it in Father's machine," she said, looking sadly down at it. "It chopped it off."
>
> "That's too bad," I said.

> "There was blood all over the place," she said. "My mother fainted."
> I imagined her mother falling over, and I nodded at her.
> "It didn't hurt at first," she said.
> "Well, nice talking to you," I said. "I'm going to get an ice-cream cone." (p. 187)

Donald thinks he's finally escaped the unnerving little girl, but the little voice is suddenly there again.

> "Gears," someone said. It was the little girl. She was sitting beside me.
> "What?"
> "There was a hole in Daddy's machine and I wondered what was in there."
> I didn't reply.
> "There were gears in there," she said. (p. 188)

Though the event the little girl describes is horrific, her deadpan, understated, and rather detached descriptions make for a strangely funny scenario. Donald is new in town and doesn't realize the girl is well known for her dispassionate accounts of her maiming. This becomes clear to him when a friend shows up and instantly responds to the girl's presence. "'Hello, Joanne,' Rachel said. 'Don't tell me about your finger'" (p. 189).

A final example comes from Lois Lowry's (1977) novel *A Summer to Die*. Meg's family is going through a period of mourning as it becomes clear that leukemia is at last going to take her older sister's life. On the way home from a particularly good hospital visit, the family sings childhood songs, capturing the comforting feelings of what life used to be like before Molly became so ill. After that scene, the next words are, "Two weeks later, she was gone" (Lowry, 1977, p. 108). No jarring telephone brings news of the inevitable. No explicit details describe her last moments. We have lived through the disease, joined in the family's efforts to understand and draw together, and now the inescapable has arrived. That's all we need to know. Understatement gives power to writing because of what is not said and shows that an author trusts readers to make important, personal connections with the story.

Unexpected Insights

Like life, good stories contain occasional small surprises. We live with characters as they work their way through problems but may be delighted suddenly by an eye-opening insight about the human experience that comes from their struggles. For instance, Maniac Magee wonders why the people in East End call themselves black. "He kept looking and looking, and the colors he found were gingersnap and light fudge and dark fudge and acorn and butter rum and cinnamon and burnt orange. But never licorice, which, to him, was real black" (Spinelli, 1990, p. 51). "That's absolutely right," we find ourselves saying. Although we are aware that differences exist within races, we might not have seen the general truth with such fresh precision until we looked at skin colors through Maniac's perceptive eyes.

Albert Marin is also skilled in delivering such insights to readers. In his *Very, Very, Very Dreadful: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918* (2018), Marin accurately portrays how the filthy trenches and overcrowded barracks of World War I contributed to a global disaster that killed more than three times the number of war casualties.

> What former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson once said about boxing also applies to the military: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." Despite officers' best efforts, war plans go awry the moment fighting begins. The reason is simple: the human mind is not omniscient; it cannot

> foresee everything that can happen. Stupidity, bad information, enemy actions, and dumb luck all play a role in the outcome of battle. Thus, armies, like prizefighters, must quickly adapt to changing conditions or face defeat. (p. 33)

Marin's juxtaposition of boxing to war brings unexpected insights about the complexities of battle and how much of the 'bad information' was how little doctors knew about hygiene 100 years ago.

Even an animal fantasy has the potential of revealing subtle insights about the human condition. In *Masterpiece*, by Elise Broach (2008), an extended family of beetles lives in the walls of a Manhattan apartment. When the young beetle Marvin overhears the apartment's humans talking of divorce, he asks his mother, "Why don't beetles ever get divorced?" His mother's answer: "Well, our lives are short, darling. What would be the point? We have so little time, we must spend it as happily as possible." She continues to explain that a day not being stepped on, having enough food and a safe place to sleep, and having family and friends close by is—"well, that's a good day, isn't it? In fact, a perfect day." Marvin's mother offers us—the human race—a bit of insight into our petty, self-made troubles that make getting along so difficult. Her parting words as she tucks Marvin into bed: "Also, we have no lawyers" (p. 171).

In *Charlotte's Rose* (Cannon, 2002), a 19th-century Welsh woman has lost four children as babies and is saddened because they died unbaptized and are therefore damned. With another couple and some family members, she agrees to meet with a pair of traveling missionaries, one thin as a pole and the other looking like a mountain with a beard. She starts the conversation.

> "I was told you . . . don't baptize your babies. Is this true?"
> The mountain with the beard nodded.
> "Why not?"
> "Why should we?"
> "So they won't go to hell."
> "Why would babies go to hell?"
> "Because they have not been cleansed of sin."
> Mountain smiled. So did Pole.
> "God deliver us from sinful babies," said Pole.
> "Gambling babies," said Mountain.
> "Drinking babies."
> "Cussing babies."
> "Lying babies."
> "Cheating babies."
> "Thieving babies."
> I laughed, and so did Papa and the Bowens. (pp. 71–72)

And so does the reader. The new perspective—the unexpected insight—simply brings a smile to the lips.

Skilled writers, who pay attention to small details and keep looking until they discover truth, help us to find a freshness and more precise understanding even in familiar things. When Beric, the youthful slave and protagonist in *Outcast*, accidentally cut his hand while in ancient Rome, he instinctively lifted the wound to his mouth. Instantly he tasted the blood, "both salty and sweet" (Sutcliff, 1995, p. 118). Those of us who also have raised a nicked finger to our lips recognize that Sutcliff's "both salty and sweet" describes accurately the

unusual taste of our own blood, and we automatically say, "That's it. That's exactly what blood tastes like." Unexpected insights add depth and credibility to the story while providing the reader with recognition and connections.

Drawing a Line in the Sand

Author, editor, and former vice-president of Penguin Publishing, Patricia Lee Gauch gave author Tess Hilmo the advice to "draw a line in the sand" in her writing. Gauch suggested that authors embed an assertion early in their books that readers would know would be overturned. For instance, in Kate DiCamillo's (2003) *The Tale of Despereaux*, the author draws the line in the sand when a mouse has given birth and only one baby in the litter is born alive. The father mouse asks if the mother will name him, to which she responds: "Will I name him? Will I name him? Of course, I will name him, but he will only die like the others. Oh so sad. Oh, such a tragedy" (2003, p. 12). Yet, readers know he will live (after all, the book's title bears his name). Likewise, in E. B. White's (1952) *Charlotte's Web*, Fern is told the runt pig (later named Wilbur) will never survive. Child readers know Wilbur will survive to be the book's main character.

Hilmo drew a line in the sand in her own books. In *With a Name Like Love* (2011), Ollie, the daughter of an itinerate preacher, stayed in each town for only three days of revival meetings before moving on to the next one. The book begins with the family pulling into Binder, Arkansas. "Binder was a pitiful place, worn thin from years of want. It was exactly like all the other towns her daddy dragged them through. It was exactly the kind of nothing Ollie had come to expect" (pp. 7–8). Readers, however, know to expect something different for Ollie in Binder—and they are right. Likewise, in her *Skies Like These* (Hilmo, 2014), Jade's parents send her to spend the summer with an aunt who she barely knows. Jade thinks to herself about her aunt:

> Lunatic, Jade thought, squeezing her eyes shut. She should have been signing up for the summer reading program down at the library like she did every year. She should have been organizing the pantry and trying out new cookie recipes and playing mini golf with her friends. Anything other than being in the middle of nowhere with a woman she hardly knew. What were her parents thinking, sending her off like this? (p. 8)

Readers become more engaged in their reading and feel smart about the predictions they make when authors draw a line in the sand.

Elements of Weak Writing

The easiest definition of weak writing is to say it is the opposite of good writing: not clear but fuzzy, not believable but implausible, not interesting but dull. But that isn't very helpful when we are trying to identify what makes writing not effective. However, some weak elements stand out, particularly in children's books: didacticism, condescension, and controlled vocabulary.

Didacticism, discussed more fully in Chapter 5, is writing that pretends to be a story but actually is a lesson. Good books can and do provide lessons, but in good books, the stories themselves matter most while the intended lessons are secondary. They are secrets for readers to discover rather than sermons to be endured. The learning and insights—the lessons—arrive as additional gifts, by-products of experiencing a good story. A book is weakened if its main purpose is to promote the message instead of to provide an experience.

Condescension may be slightly harder to pin down than didacticism. Condescension often results when the author underestimates the reader's abilities, as in labeling the esophagus a "food tube" in a nonfiction book aimed at fourth graders. "Food tube" is an uncommon and babyish term, and 10-year-old children are perfectly capable of saying and reading "esophagus." Condescension doesn't trust the reader to get the point and overexplains the obvious.

Evident mostly in books for very young readers, a condescending tone also treats children with a certain wide-eyed amazement bordering on phoniness. In *The Boat Alphabet Book*, for instance, the general, straightforward description of different kinds of boats occasionally slips into a condescending tone. Accompanying a realistic drawing of an oceangoing tanker is this text: "Tankers are ships that carry liquids. Most tankers carry oil products such as crude oil, kerosene, grease, and gasoline." The entry then concludes with, "What else could a tanker be carrying? Maybe chocolate milk?" (Palotta, 2001, p. 22). This question talks down to young readers in a misguided effort by the author to fit in with his audience—to be "one of the kids." Instead, he is pandering to his audience. It's as if he's turning away from the children to wink at other adults in a conspiratorial way, indicating how well he believes he's relating to his young, naïve readers. But by condescending to them, the author destroys the tone he established at the onset—a serious look at both the pleasurable and utilitarian uses of boats and ships.

Controlled vocabulary is based on the idea that children learn to read easy words first and then graduate slowly to more difficult ones. However, so-called dumbed-down text, which overly controls vocabulary and arranges words in unnatural patterns ("I see the mat. The mat is tan. It is a tan mat."), often has proven to be more difficult for children to read and understand than text with interesting words and language patterns. The dumbed-down text does not correspond with what they have learned about language through the ear or the natural sounds of oral language (Goodman, 1988). Children can sometimes learn difficult words more easily than seemingly simple ones. If first graders are shown the words "surprise," "was," and "elephant," the one they will learn to sight read first is "elephant." Although it is longer and more difficult, it is also more specific. Try drawing a picture of a surprise or a was. The hardest of the three—the one that takes the most exposures to become included in children's sight vocabulary—is the verb "was." This insight led to a temporary improvement of core reading programs.

In the 1980s, publishers of basal readers recognized the power of natural text and began to include excerpts from authentic literature as a part of their reading programs. However, in the 1990s, school districts began buying and using sets of controlled-vocabulary paperback books instead of basal textbooks. Therefore, to meet demand, basal companies also began to include with their literature-based reading series sets of controlled-vocabulary paperbacks. Today, teachers must choose wisely because, once again, reading materials available in the elementary schools may focus on particular word patterns, largely ignoring the appeal of natural language and cohesive stories.

In short, the standards for a well-written children's book are no different from the standards for *any* well-written book. The author treats the audience with respect and writes so that the text is honest and interesting. The literary devices (see Figure 3.1) employed to achieve that honesty and interest operate so smoothly they remain virtually invisible. The story (fiction) and the information (nonfiction) are so compelling that the reader sails along, engaged in the insights and precise language and unaware of the talent and time necessary for making the final product appear so effortless.