

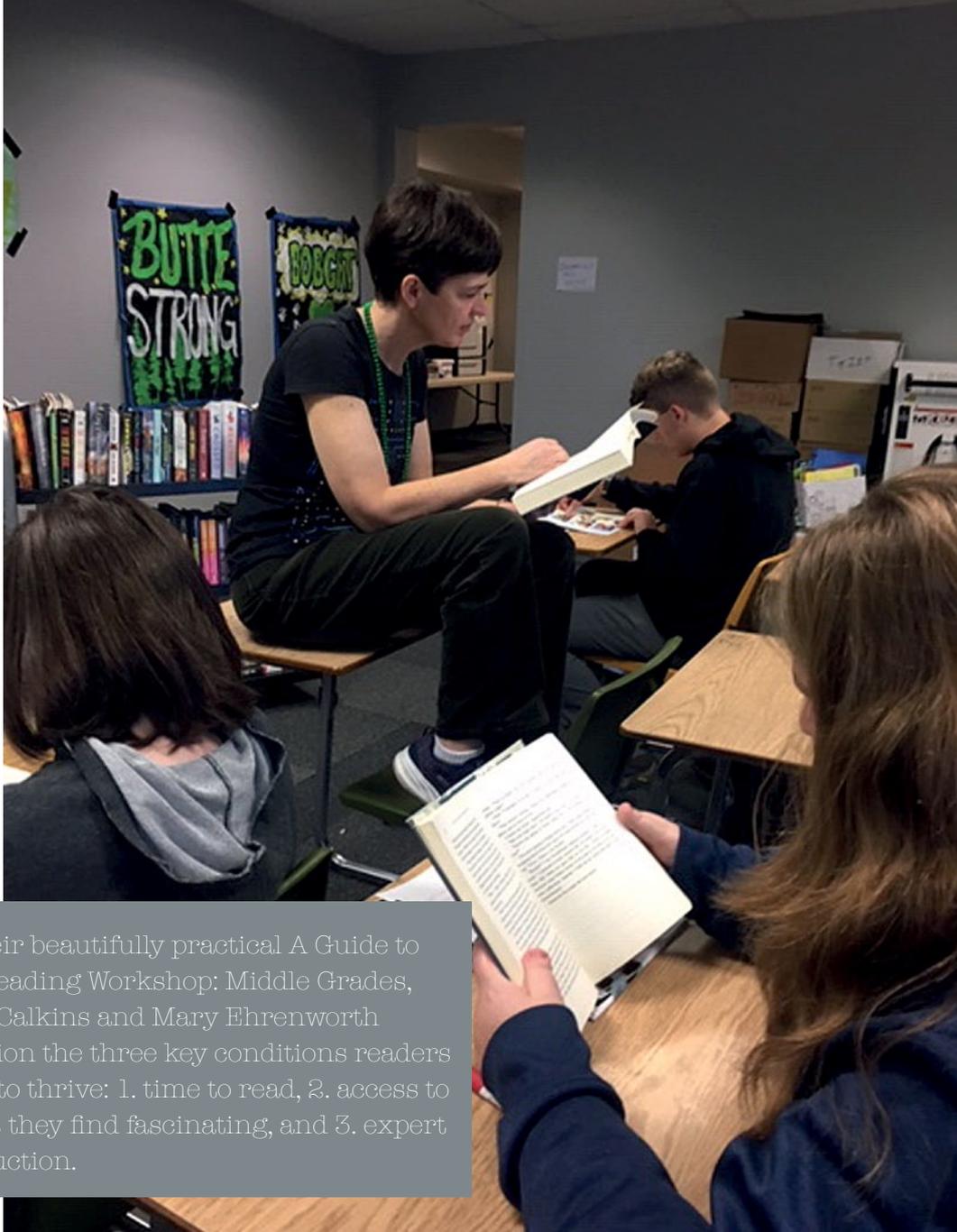
# The Unexpected Power of Reading Conferences



Engaged readers tend to talk about what they're reading and discuss how they relate to it. **Jori Krulder** shows how to engage and inspire an authentic love of reading through one-to-one conferences with students.

## 'I don't read.'

At the beginning of the school year in my high school English classes, I always encounter at least a few students who adamantly declare their antipathy towards reading. When I first began teaching, over 20 years ago, this shocked me. I have long been an avid reader and the idea that someone could dislike such a pleasurable activity frankly mystified me. This speaks not only to my naivete, but also to how poorly teachers are often prepared to grapple with the teaching of reading. From my very first year of teaching, I recognised the urgency of helping students develop into readers, but it has been a career-long journey of trial and error and benefitting from the wisdom of brilliant educators such as Donalyn Miller, Penny Kittle, Lucy Calkins, and the like before I began to achieve some notable success in this endeavour. My latest discovery has been the reading conference, a crucial piece in the puzzle that has taken reading instruction in my classroom to the next level.



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English is one of those subjects that encompasses limitless possibilities—and there are many things I desire for my students. I want my students to write a lot and find ways to better understand themselves and the world around them. I want them to develop their voices and find opportunities to make their ideas heard. But most of all, I've decided that I want them to experience the joy and satisfaction of reading, because this opens up more opportunities for learning than anything else.

In their beautifully practical *A Guide to the Reading Workshop: Middle Grades*, Lucy Calkins and Mary Ehrenworth mention the three key conditions readers need to thrive: 1. time to read, 2. access to books they find fascinating, and 3. expert instruction. Teachers face many challenges when it comes to helping students develop a love of reading, from carving out time for students to read independently to making good books accessible to students. Research on reading instruction repeatedly reinforces the importance of giving students time to read books of their choice in school, but one of the most daunting issues we face with choice reading is the instruction piece. How do we know if students are actually reading? How do we assess the learning students are gaining from choice reading and what do we do when we find students struggling? All too often, English teachers are expected to address students' reading needs without actually being taught how. My very first year of teaching, I realised that I was woefully ignorant when it came to reading instruction and intervention and I have spent the past 22 years seeking effective ways to help students become engaged readers. Reading conferences are one of my latest and most effective experiments in this quest.

I've tried many choice reading accountability measures over the years, including reading logs of various formats, book reports, assorted handouts, and reading quizzes on Accelerated Reader, but reading books such as Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer* and Penny Kittle's *Book Love* helped me realise why those assessments were so unsatisfying and ineffective. If I wanted my students to become authentic readers, why was I assigning them activities in which real readers—including myself—would never voluntarily engage?

I had to ask myself: What do real readers do? One important part of my own reading life is talking about what I read with others. So, I decided to try an experiment and take away all accountability measures for choice reading except for one-to-one conferences with me. The results were profoundly positive.

### Logistics of conferencing

Although the idea of talking about books with students is appealing (honestly, it's one of the main reasons I became an English teacher), the first thing I had to tackle were the logistics of the conferences. What would my other students be doing while I was chatting with each individual? How would I know the right questions to ask during our conversations? What would I do with the information I gained from talking to my students about their reading?

In my on-level 10th grade (ages 15–16) English classes, I allot 10–15 minutes of our 55-minute periods for choice reading, and my students range widely in reading ability and motivation. I was worried that juggling everything going on in my classroom would be overwhelming, but with some structure and fine tuning, I was able to have great discussions with two to three students each day, managing to talk with each of my students at least once a month (and sometimes more for those who needed more support).

Here's how I do it:

#### Getting started – Reading triage

At the beginning of the period each day, I greet students and quickly take down the page number they are on in their books. This serves several purposes. First, it is a reminder for students to have their books out and open for reading right at the beginning of the period. Also, it gives me a quick way of assessing their independent reading progress. If a student has read only a few pages over the course of the week, I know they are probably in need of some help in engaging with their books or choosing a new one, and a conference is a perfect way of doing this.

As soon as students have settled down to read, I grab my reading conference binder and sit down in one of two chairs I've arranged in a comfy corner of my room, calling over a student to begin our chat. I've established norms for independent work in my classroom, so, by and large—with occasional reminders, students know that this is a time to work quietly on their own.

#### Keeping track of conversations

To keep track of which students I speak with and what we talked about in our conferences, I put together a ring binder with dividers for each class and a sheet for each student, along with extra sheets in the back.



I always start out by asking each student what they are currently reading, what page they are on, and what rating (from 1 to 5 stars) they would give their book and why. This gives us a jumping off point for what to talk about next. I also have some general reading conference questions to refer to if I am stuck for something to ask, but the more I conference with students, the easier it is to know what to talk about. I only need to remember the purpose of reading conferences: supporting students in thinking about their books and helping them find books they enjoy.

Here are some questions I use:

What made you choose this book?

What is happening so far in your book?

Tell me more about the characters. Who is your favourite? Least favourite? Why?

Which of the characters is most like you? Least like you?

Which of the characters would you like to have as a friend? Why?

Is there a problem or conflict in the book? What is it?

Is there anything that bothers you about this book?

What has surprised you in this book so far?

Does this book remind you of other books you have read? movies or TV shows you've seen?

What's the last book you read that you really enjoyed? What made it great?



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### 'Grading' choice reading

Grading choice reading is a challenge. Real-life readers don't get scored for reading for pleasure, but I do want to encourage students to find books they enjoy and to give them a way to keep track of their own reading progress, so I created a simple sheet for them to record the books they finish, along with their thoughts about what they read. When students finish a book, they complete this sheet, bring it to our conference, and we use it to talk about the book and what they might like to read next.

I do not have a requirement for how many books students must finish and these sheets are not scored in any way. They are simply saved in the student's class file for reflection at the end of the grading period. The only score my students receive for choice reading is this reading reflection each six weeks, in which students write their thoughts and feelings about the books they've read and what they'd like to read next.

### The results of my choice reading experiment

I was frankly concerned when I began this experiment that, without the accountability of points entered in the gradebook, my students would not be motivated to read. My fear, however, was proven beautifully unfounded. With our regular conversations, it is far easier to notice and support students who are struggling with finding a book they enjoy. This has led to a marked increase in students actually reading. Every year, I have at least a few students tell me that this is the first book they've ever read on their own—and what should they read next?

I've also discovered some unexpected benefits. Because I am having one-to-one conversations with students, I begin to get to know them better, even (and sometimes especially) the students who initially disliked reading. This became crystal clear a few years ago when I received an email from Zane, a 10th grade boy who did not seem to enjoy coming to class—or school at all for that matter. The contact itself was a surprise because 15-year-old boys are not prone to writing unsolicited emails, but the succinct message was even more monumental. It simply read: 'I'm kinda getting addicted to reading. I found another book that I want to read and I'm actually happy about it. I never thought this would happen until a few days ago and I got into your class.'

I have been working hard to create a warm, welcoming environment in my classroom where students feel engaged and connected, not just to the curriculum, but also to each other and the school. I didn't realise that a simple thing like talking for a few minutes about a book would be such a powerful way to create the connection I had been seeking all along.

**Jori Krulder is an English teacher of over 20 years whose passion in the classroom has been sparked anew by the connections she's made with other educators on Twitter. She's TheExperimentalTeacher @JoriKrulder. She is author of several online publications, as well as chapters in Brian Sztabnik's The Best Lessons Series books: *Literature (Volume 1)* and *Writing (Volume 2)* - 15 Master Teachers Share What Works.**