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Accountable Student-Managed Reading:
A Framework to Drive Engagement, Comprehension, and Lifelong Literacy

JUNE 2026

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Scholastic Research & Validation. (2026). Accountable Student-Managed Reading: A Framework to Drive Engagement, Comprehension, and Lifelong Literacy White Paper. New York: Scholastic.

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Introduction: A More Effective Approach to Independent Reading in the Classroom

Accountable student-managed reading is an approach in which students take ownership of their reading while engaging in structured, purposeful reflection and meaning-making. Through this approach, teachers can monitor and support students as they strengthen comprehension and reading stamina.

> *Students are arriving at college having rarely, if ever, read a book cover to cover.*
>
> *— Horowitch, 2024*

Sustained reading is one of the most powerful drivers of literacy development. Decades of research show that the amount students read is closely tied to their growth in vocabulary, comprehension, and knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Allington, 2012). In response, schools have worked to increase access to books and provide students with time to read, recognizing that students need both opportunity and engagement to develop as readers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Sustained reading is essential for building stamina and comprehension. The challenge is ensuring that time spent reading consistently leads to meaningful understanding.

The Reality in Classrooms Today

Across classrooms, educators often observe a similar pattern: Students begin books but do not always finish them, and student-managed reading can be inconsistent or superficial. Even when time is dedicated to independent reading, it does not always translate into sustained engagement or clear evidence of understanding. At the same time, teachers often have limited visibility into students' independent reading experiences—what they are reading, how consistently they are engaging, and what they are taking away (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Fisher & Frey, 2012).

These challenges tend to show up in predictable ways:

- Students start books but do not finish them.
- Reading is inconsistent or lacks depth.
- Students struggle to sustain attention across longer texts (Hiebert, 2014).
- Evidence of comprehension is limited or inconsistent (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

These classroom experiences reflect broader shifts in reading behavior. Students are reading less frequently, and more of their reading is fragmented, focused on shorter passages rather than sustained engagement with full texts (NAEP, 2022; Scholastic, 2023). Students who engage less frequently with full-length texts are less likely to build the knowledge and endurance required for advanced reading (Lemov, 2016; Wexler, 2019).

> *"Without regular opportunities to read deeply, students may not develop the stamina or comprehension needed for long-term success.*
>
> *— Hiebert, 2014*

This pattern is pervasive, extending from elementary school classrooms through secondary and university settings. As noted in *The Atlantic*, "students are arriving at college having rarely, if ever, read a book cover to cover" (Horowitch, 2024), reflecting broader shifts away from sustained, long-form reading. Reporting in *The New York Times* echoes this trend, finding that "many teenagers are assigned few full books to read from beginning to end—often just one or two per year" (Goldstein, 2025). Together, these trends suggest that students are encountering fewer opportunities to engage deeply with extended texts, with implications for their ability to sustain attention, build knowledge, and make meaning from complex ideas.

Strengthening Reading Through Structure and Accountability

The challenge is not a lack of commitment to reading, but a gap in how reading experiences are structured. Time and access are necessary, but they are not sufficient on their own. Without clear expectations, consistent opportunities to demonstrate understanding, and visibility into student thinking, reading may not lead to meaningful comprehension or growth.

Research points to a consistent set of conditions that support effective reading:

- **Consistent reading volume over time** (Allington, 2012; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998)
- **Purposeful engagement with texts** (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000)
- **Opportunities to respond through writing and discussion** (Graham & Hebert, 2011)
- **Ongoing teacher monitoring and feedback** (Fisher & Frey, 2012)

Taken together, this research underscores that reading is most effective when it combines student ownership with intentional structure and accountability.

> *Comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.*
>
> *— Snow, 2002*

A Framework for Implementation

Accountable student-managed reading provides a practical way to bring these elements together in classroom practice. Rather than replacing existing reading time, it strengthens it by ensuring that time spent reading leads to meaningful outcomes.

The approach can be understood through three interconnected phases:

1. **Set the Conditions for Independent Reading:** Students begin with both ownership and clarity. They select texts based on interest and guidance, while teachers establish clear expectations and routines that support consistent engagement.
2. **Structure the Reading:** Reading is supported in ways that help to build comprehension. Texts are approached in manageable sections, and students read with a clear purpose, supported by prompts and questions that help them monitor understanding (Shanahan et al., 2010; Hiebert, 2014).
3. **Review, Reinforce, and Extend the Reading:** Students are given the time and space to make meaning of what they're reading. They reflect on their reading through writing, discussion, and response activities that deepen comprehension and extend engagement (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

What This Looks Like in Practice

When implemented effectively, reading becomes both student-driven and instructionally meaningful—not just something students do, but something teachers can see, respond to, and build on. Teachers can observe who is engaged and who is struggling—while students are actively making sense of what they read, not just moving through pages. The result is a classroom where reading is both independent and connected back to instruction.

Students:

- Read consistently and with purpose.
- Engage actively with texts.
- Demonstrate understanding over time.

Teachers:

- Establish clear expectations.
- Monitor progress regularly.
- Use student responses to guide instruction.

> *Teaching students to understand what they read requires explicit instruction and practice.*
>
> *— Shanahan, et al., 2010*

These outcomes are made possible through three core practices:

1. Responding to Text-Based Questions

Students need to respond to targeted, text-based questions that focus attention on key ideas, details, and meaning. These responses provide visible evidence of comprehension and help students engage actively with texts as they read. Text-dependent questioning is a well-established instructional practice that supports understanding, recall, and analysis (Shanahan et al., 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2012). When students are asked to return to the text for evidence-based responses, they are more likely to move beyond surface-level reading and demonstrate deeper understanding over time (Hiebert, 2014).

2. Writing About Reading

Students need to regularly write in response to what they read, using short, structured prompts to capture thinking, reflect on ideas, and make meaning from texts over time. Research demonstrates that writing about reading strengthens comprehension and retention by requiring students to organize ideas, make connections, and clarify understanding (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Even brief, structured writing tasks can lead to measurable gains in reading achievement (Graham & Perin, 2007; Shanahan, 2006), while also supporting knowledge building over time (Wexler, 2019).

3. Reviewing and Extending Understanding

Students need to revisit and extend their understanding through structured reflection and response activities connected to their reading. These activities may include independent reflection, written responses, partner conversations, or extension tasks that help students synthesize ideas and make connections across texts. Opportunities to reflect on and respond to reading support deeper processing and help reinforce comprehension over time (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). These routines also help make student thinking more visible without requiring extensive teacher-led instruction.

Together, these practices reinforce the core outcomes described above. They allow teachers to establish clear expectations, monitor progress, and respond to student thinking—while ensuring that students read consistently, engage actively, and demonstrate understanding over time. Importantly, they integrate into existing classroom routines, strengthening outcomes without adding unnecessary complexity.

Why This Matters Now

As students encounter fewer opportunities to engage with sustained, complex texts, the need to strengthen reading practices has become more urgent (NAEP, 2022; Scholastic, 2023). By the time students reach high school and college, many have had limited experience reading full-length books independently, which can impact their ability to engage with complex texts and ideas (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Scholastic, 2023). Without intentional structure and accountability, students may struggle to build the stamina, knowledge, and comprehension required for success in school and beyond (Wexler, 2019).

Accountable student-managed reading helps students develop the habits and skills needed to read deeply, think critically, and engage meaningfully with complex texts These habits and skills are integral to success in school and beyond. These outcomes are made possible through three core practices:

> *"Reading is not a natural process; it must be taught explicitly and systematically for most children to become skilled readers.*
>
> *— Moats, 2020*

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