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CHAPTER 1

Developing the Read and WRAP Framework

At its core, this book is about why independent reading (IR) matters, what it looks like in action, and how we can unlock the “magic” of IR in every ELA classroom, every day. Specifically, we will zoom in on the Read and WRAP (*write, reflect, analyze, participate*) framework that I developed with my students: ten to twenty minutes of independent reading followed by meaningful writing, reflection, conversation, and community building. When we maximize this time, when we protect this time, the rewards and possibilities are endless—for students, for educators, for everyone.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that far too many of our nation’s middle and high school students—in small towns and big cities, before and after the pandemic, and due to a wide range of factors—do not

- have access to books they are interested in reading;
- read or write frequently enough (volume);
- identify as readers and/or writers;
- enjoy reading and/or writing;
- feel engaged or empowered in the learning process;
- have authentic opportunities to discuss their reading, writing, and thinking;
- feel connected to their classroom community; and
- have tools to address the various mental health challenges.

While I certainly do not have all the answers, I believe, with all my heart, that creating a solid, daily framework for independent reading in middle and high school ELA classrooms should be part of the solution. Here is how the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2019) defines independent reading:



Read the full statement on how NCTE defines independent reading.

a routine, protected instructional practice that occurs across all grade levels. Effective independent reading practices include time for students to read, access to books that represent a wide range of characters and experiences, and support within a reading community that includes teachers and students. Student choice in text is essential because it motivates, engages, and reaches a wide variety of readers. The goal of independent reading as an instructional practice is to build habitual readers with conscious reading identities.

As we continue the process of reimagining education, and reimagining adolescent literacy instruction, one thing is certain—every school should make independent reading a priority. When we do, we begin to address the challenges listed on the previous page (lack of access, volume, belonging, identity, enjoyment, etc.) and increase the number of students who possess the literacy skills to thrive in this crazy thing we call life.

Of course, components of our ELA block can and should change depending on the day and week, lesson and unit, standards and objectives, students and grade level, and school and community. Independent reading, however, should remain a constant. When done with intention and care, independent reading—coupled with our WRAP time that follows—provides significant social-emotional and academic benefits that we will explore in more detail later this chapter and throughout this book. Ultimately, independent reading is an essential practice if we are serious about nurturing a generation of readers, writers, and leaders; if we are serious about educating the whole child; and if we are serious about centering students in our classrooms and schools.

Independent reading is an essential practice if we are serious about nurturing a generation of readers, writers, and leaders; if we are serious about educating the whole child; and if we are serious about centering students in our classrooms and schools.

Educators reap the rewards of independent reading, too. Since committing to our Read and WRAP routine, I have become a more optimistic and empathetic educator. I have become more

efficient and effective. I have yet to “burn out” (although I’ve certainly been close at times) and plan to stay in this profession for the long haul. (This is another benefit of our Read and WRAP routine—it increases the likelihood that schools retain teachers and maintain strong, stable ELA departments.) Before looking too far ahead, however, I think it’s important to first look back. To return to the fall of 2015, which turned out to be an inflection point in my teaching career.

MY JOURNEY WITH INDEPENDENT READING

In 2015, I decided to make the “loop” from a middle school to a high school in the same Nashville community, which meant that I had the honor of teaching many of my eighth graders again as ninth graders. I also had the opportunity to work for an incredibly supportive leadership team. For one of the first times in my career, I felt truly empowered. And what a difference it made.

When Ms. Travis or Dr. Jackson walked into our classroom and students were “just reading,” they smiled. They knew how much work went on behind the scenes to make that happen. They knew how much our students benefited from this routine. Sometimes they’d turn off their walkie-talkies, grab a book from the shelf, and join us. Not once did they disrupt, doubt, or question. They championed innovation. They championed students. They championed teachers as we worked together to build a schoolwide literacy culture.

There was only one big problem: time or the lack thereof. Our high school ran on a traditional block schedule, which meant that I saw my students for roughly eighty minutes, every other day. When you factor in two weeks for semester exams, another two weeks (at a minimum) for end-of-year state tests, and another day or two each quarter for district-mandated benchmarks, we were already down to 150 school days. Cut that in half and we were at seventy-five days. Not to mention teacher and student absences, field trips and fire drills, pep rallies and assemblies, and (fingers crossed) snow days. Seventy-five days. That’s it!

In seventy-five days, there was no way anyone could teach every standard. Well, let me rephrase that: in seventy-five days, there was no way students could “demonstrate mastery” of every standard, especially when many entered high school with significant literacy gaps. In seventy-five days, the “traditional” way of doing high school English was simply not going to work. We tried.

The findings were significant:

- Fourteen out of fifty reported that they read zero books independently the previous school year. Another fifteen reported reading just one or two.
- Thirty-five out of fifty said they rarely or never read outside of school.
- Twenty-seven out of fifty literally could not name the best book they read in middle school, responding with “I don’t remember,” “No idea,” “None,” or a teacher’s three favorite letters, “IDK.”
- Thirty-two out of fifty reported a neutral or negative attitude toward reading.

To be clear, this was/is an adult problem, not a student one. As I told my students then, and as I tell new groups every fall, I get why they stop reading. In fact, if I were in their shoes, sitting in a classroom without engaging texts to choose from or consistent time to read, knowing that many adults in education simply see them as scores and numbers, I would feel the same way. Shoot, I often do feel that way as an educator.

Every year, more and more of our students are asking, *Why? Why do we have to read this? Can't we do something else? Why don't we have a voice in our education?* Again, these are legitimate questions. We should all be looking for ways to enhance the ELA and school experience for everyone. We cannot continue to do things the way they have always been done, especially when “that way” didn’t work particularly well in the first place.

Sometimes we forget that books are competing against several formidable opponents for our time and attention. For better or worse (and probably both), smartphones and social media have changed our lives and our world forever. Teens are turning to YouTube and TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram, for both entertainment and connection. Teens, like all of us, crave acceptance and belonging. They thrive when engaged and empowered. They despise boredom and being told what to do. A student might debate various options:

Hmmm, I could slog through *Lord of the Flies* for hours on my own or I could use ChatGPT to help me write the essay? I could struggle through Shakespeare or I could spend that time writing my own music? I could complete this “test-prep packet,” or I could eat dinner with my family for the first time all week and then hop on NBA2K with my friends to unwind a bit? I could

complete the homework assignment that my teacher probably won't even look at, or I could finally catch up on my sleep?

For a lot of our students, it's an easy decision—whether adults agree with them or not. (And to be clear, I'm not excusing all student behavior but rather trying to explain it.) Instead of judging our students (“Why don't they just . . . ?”) or blaming the latest technology (ChatGPT arrived on the scene while I was writing this manuscript), let's take a deep breath and begin to understand where they are coming from. Let's acknowledge that for a young person to pick a book over a controller, the experience has to be meaningful.

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Another factor to keep in mind, our young people are exhausted. The school day is tiring enough on its own, and when you throw in extracurricular activities and after-school responsibilities, it becomes unsustainable. Something has to give. For many of our students, many of the assigned texts, whether we are talking whole-class novels or the steady diet of “close reading” passages and accompanying questions, are not working. We need to recognize that a text is not “rigorous” if no one reads it. A lot of lesson and unit plans look challenging and “complex” on paper, especially if they have the seal of approval from a testing company or district office. However, walk into that ELA classroom and pay attention to the person who is doing all the work—the teacher. Meanwhile, the students are participating passively, at best. Some politely nod along and take notes while others choose to shut down, doze off, or find their own entertainment. (Even in classrooms where students are generally compliant, consider this: when is the compliance the goal of education? We can do better!)

MAKING ROOM FOR BOTH INDEPENDENT READING AND WHOLE-CLASS NOVELS

While we could argue about the merits of *Lord of the Flies* and other ELA department staples, I am not going to waste the time or energy here. I believe that is the wrong way to frame the conversation. In today's climate, people are expected, if not encouraged, to have a “take” on everything. Sports. Politics. Parenting. Education is no exception. *Pick a side. Get off the fence. Yes or no. For*

or against. Prior to the pandemic, I occasionally took the bait and engaged in unproductive Twitter spats with strangers. No longer. I spend far less time online and refuse to accept interview requests from those who are looking to perpetuate the reading “war” narrative. The rhetoric is harmful and counterproductive. I am troubled by the lack of nuance. I am troubled by the fact that those outside of the classroom continue to pit educators against one another—either for “clicks” and dollars, or even worse, to sow distrust and undermine public education.

There is too much polarization and not enough collaboration. There is too much teacher shaming and not enough support. To paraphrase a line from Ray Bradbury, there is too much burning and not enough building. Speaking of Bradbury, I recently made a big personal and professional move—from Nashville to New Jersey. My new middle school featured *Fahrenheit 451* in its eighth-grade curriculum. Since I had not taught the book before, I was skeptical.

Ultimately, however, the novel turned to be an overwhelmingly positive experience. We created one-pagers for each of the three sections. We explored powerful themes, such as happiness, technology, conformity, and censorship. We wrote powerful personal narratives and brilliant novel continuations that Bradbury himself would have admired. We spent time observing and appreciating nature and reading poetry from the likes of Mary Oliver and Robert Frost. Inspired by StoryCorps’s mission—“to preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world”—we also completed a digital storytelling project where students interviewed family members about their childhood, changes in society, overcoming hardship, immigrating to the United States, career advice, their happiest memories, and so much more.

Which brings me back to this point: there is more than enough room for both choice and the required, whole-class reads, “classic” or contemporary. We do not have to pick one or the other. In fact, when we do choice well, it enhances our experience with the required texts. In Chapter 7, I will detail how we can balance independent reading with our required texts. In the meantime, here is the CliffsNotes version:

- We dedicate the first month to our “Intro to Lit” unit (see Chapter 4) and establishing our independent reading routine, which sets the tone for the rest of the year.
- We are intentional with our whole-class reads. We set clear learning targets and assign relevant, meaningful writing tasks. We read the texts at a quick pace and avoid

over-teaching them. We encourage choice, collaboration, conversation, and critical thinking.

- While there is no perfect or magic ratio, we spend roughly two-thirds of our 180 days reading books of our choice. We dedicate the remaining one-third, then, to our required texts. Of course, with some groups, the ratio may be closer to 75:25 or 80:20.
- Whether a choice book or required read, we start nearly every one of our 180 class periods the same way—with our Read and WRAP routine. This ensures that by the end of the year, every student has read often (a minimum of ten to fifteen minutes every day, not including the time outside of school) and read widely (a minimum of five or six genres).

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I am not “for” or “against” *Lord of the Flies*, especially without context. I am, however, *for* any text, old or new, that gets our students back into reading and helps our classroom come alive. I am *against* any text, old or new, that pushes our students away from our ELA classrooms. I am *for* whole-class novels when taught with care and intention. I am *against* whole-class novels when taught without students in mind. I am *for* literacy experiences that spark joy and growth, and I am *against* those that cause harm. I am *for* students and educators working together to develop a literacy game plan that makes sense for their classroom, school, and community. I am *against* one-size-fits-all programs and top-down mandates. Finally, and most emphatically, I am *for* a daily independent reading routine, where students in all ELA classrooms and in all schools are encouraged to read and respond to a variety of beautiful, rich, and complex texts.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LITERATURE AND LITERACY

In 2021, the *New York Times Book Review* asked eight authors under forty to “name the writer or writers who have most influenced your work and explain how.” (The article, “The Books That Made Me: 8 Writers on Their Literary Inspirations,” could serve as a delightful mentor text to help students write their own “The Books That Made Me” piece.) As I read through the eight interviews, it became clear that each list differed drastically.

However, what did the eight writers have in common? What could we learn from their respective journeys? For me, the biggest takeaway was that all eight read often and read widely . . . eventually. Every author had someone in their lives—whether it was a parent, sibling, neighbor, teacher, or librarian—who ensured they had book access, who respected their reading choices, who built relationships, who understood the importance of representation, who encouraged them. I also found it telling that even our world’s most prolific writers tend to succeed in spite of school, not because of it.

For example, Tommy Orange, author of *There, There*, did not finish a single novel in high school and only began reading fiction after college. Orange said, “No one was telling me what to read then, I was out of school and doing it all on my own, so I read what I liked” (Qasim, 2021). Meanwhile, Alyssa Cole spoke about the value of reading broadly: “I’m a multigenre writer, and this is the result of being a multigenre reader — picking up anything and everything I could get my hands on as a child.” Cole credited authors such as Stephen King and Toni Morrison for inspiring and influencing her in a multitude of ways. She also credited manga, a genre often dismissed by educators. (Here’s one more quote from Cole that’s too good not to share: “I think what we read as children — what makes us feel seen or, for marginalized readers, not seen — plants the seeds of the stories that grow in us over years and decades.” Wow.)

Gabriel Bump grew up reading *Sports Illustrated* “as all mildly athletic teenage bookworms once did.” (Guilty as charged.) Eventually, Bump moved from sports writers such as Scoop Jackson and Gary Smith to literary giants such as Hemingway and Baldwin. The key takeaway is that Bump started with what he loved and developed a positive reading identity. Later, with the support of his teachers and family—but notably not his school’s ELA department—he began to explore different authors and genres, which is precisely what we should be doing with each student: meeting them where they are, building confidence, and continuing to support them on a reading journey that will hopefully continue long after they leave our classroom. And even if that journey stalls when they move on to the next teacher or the next school, we have done our part. One rich reading year is better than none. One rich reading year can change a student’s entire trajectory.



Read the original article, “The Books That Made Me.”

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Jason Reynolds, the 2020–2022 National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, understands this intimately. Reynolds admits that he, an award-winning, bestselling author, did not read his first book cover to cover until the age of seventeen. In a January 2018 *Daily Show* interview with Trevor Noah, Reynolds said,

It’s insane obviously, but it’s only insane for me because I became a writer. But the truth of the matter is back then, there weren’t a lot of books for kids like me. You’re talking about the 1980s on through the 1990s. There weren’t books about young people living in black communities, especially during the time. . . . In America, you had the crack epidemic, you had hip-hop, you had HIV, and those sort of three huge pillars were never mentioned in books for young people who were living and experiencing that life and things like that, and we just didn’t see it.



Watch the full Reynolds interview

For Reynolds, it was hip-hop that gave him voice; it was hip-hop that helped him feel seen and valued. Rap music “let me know that who I already was was good enough because they got to tell the world that kids like me existed, that we walked a certain way and that we talked a certain way, and that we shouldn’t apologize for any of that.” Today, Reynolds’s books have the same effect on young people that Queen Latifah’s songs had on him.

In the interview, Noah also posed a question that many of us have been asked frequently over the years: *Why don’t kids read these days? Why don’t a lot of kids connect with Shakespeare and authors people deem to be “required” reading?* Reynolds’s response brought me back to the fall of 2015 when we struggled to connect with William Golding’s 1954 novel:

One, young people are allergic to boredom . . . and that doesn’t mean that Shakespeare is boring, it just means that often times the *teaching* of Shakespeare is boring. Two, we have to start really assessing what the literary canon is and whether or not it should remain fossilized and concrete as it is today. It’s static. Why not figure out how to expand that canon to be diverse, to be old, to be young? It doesn’t mean I want them to only read my books; it’s just a springboard, so that they then build relationships not just with literature but with literacy.

Reynolds’s distinction between “literacy” and “literature” is an important one, especially when we consider this—approximately 3.7 million US students graduate high school every year, and only

forty thousand of them will become college English majors. Put another way: 99 percent of the students we serve in our K–12 classrooms will not major in English. They will go on to major in biology and business, engineering and computer science. Others will attend trade school, join the military, or jump straight into the workforce. All deserve rich, relevant, and rewarding ELA experiences during their middle and high school journey.

As I was writing the first draft of this book, Jay, a former student and Project LIT cofounder, was finishing up her sophomore year at Belmont University. In late April 2021, she texted me her grades for the semester: straight As in classes like Human Anatomy and Physiology and Kinesiology. An exercise science major and sports medicine minor, Jay did not read one “classic” novel in high school. Instead, she devoured dozens of books—beautiful, complex books of her choice—and developed the literacy and life skills to thrive at an elite university.

I still remember the video we recorded in May 2018, near the end of her junior year. Inspired by a viral clip from Jimmy Kimmel, students stood took turns attempting to “name a book.” Looking through my phone, most clips lasted three or four seconds. And then there is Jay, standing in front of our classroom library, challenged by a classmate to name as many books as she could in ten seconds.

“Okay, you have *Fallen*, *The Hate U Give*, *Dear Martin*, *All American Boys*, *Solo*, *The Crossover*, *Ghost*, *Sunny*, *Patina*; *Everything, Everything*; *The Poet X* . . .”

There’s a quick pause.

“Uhhhhh . . . ahhhhhhh!”

Jay’s arms are out, and she’s grinning from ear to ear. The ultimate competitor (she won nearly every trivia competition at book club), Jay’s not giving up just yet.

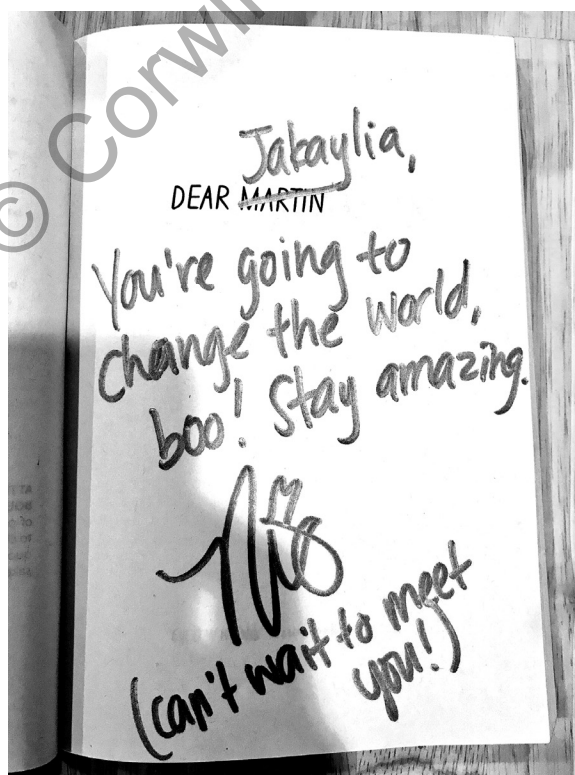
“*The Hunger Games* series, the *Immortal Souls* series, I’ve read that too. I’ve read so many series I can’t even think.”

You can hear Olivia—her future college roommate—in the background throwing out titles. Jay engages. *Long Way Down*? Yes. The Bible? “I don’t read the Bible, which is kind of bad.” *The Wild Robot*? “I’ve read that book!”

My favorite moment comes when someone asks about *The Giver*. Jay’s perplexed face is priceless. “*The Giver*? What’s that? That’s a movie, ain’t it?” At this point, you can hear me cracking up as I continue filming. “*I’ve seen the movie. I haven’t read the book.*”

The sixty-six-second video ends shortly thereafter, but it's obvious that Jay could have kept going. There's still a huge smile on her face. Reflecting on this moment years later, I can't help but smile, too. Here are a few observations:

- There was so much joy in our classroom that day. We need more moments like this. Joy is good.
- Think about how many books Jay could name in one minute. Shouldn't we want that for all students? On the other hand, how would you feel if every student in your school could only rattle off the same three or four books (because that's all they had an opportunity to read)? Even worse, what if they couldn't name any?
- Jay entered high school with a positive reading identity, but it very easily could have faded, especially if had we followed our district's scripted curriculum, which made no room for novels of any kind. Instead, with daily time to read books of her choice, with relevant and rigorous literacy instruction, with the support of teachers, classmates, and community members, Jay continued to soar—academically, socially, and emotionally.



Clearly, Jay was “college ready,” however we want to define that term. She had the stamina, fluency, confidence, vocabulary, and comprehension to push through boring reading passages on standardized tests. (Jay and her classmates crushed the ACT, outperforming their peers by 5.7 points on the English section and 4.4 points in reading.) Jay wrote clearly and compellingly, and she excelled as a public speaker, presenting at local events and national conferences. She cared deeply about her community.

So, what can we learn from Jay, one of the 99 percent who decided not to major in English? I would argue that the ability to read and write proficiently, to think critically, and to communicate clearly is more important than an understanding or appreciation of any specific text, no matter how much you or I may love it or how long it’s been in the curriculum. Besides, as Reynolds points out in an interview in *The Guardian* (Knight et al., 2022), offering choice and making room for contemporary novels actually “preserves the classics” because, in doing so, we’re creating lifelong readers who will, in time, explore a wide range of novels.

I would argue that the ability to read and write proficiently, to think critically, and to communicate clearly is more important than an understanding or appreciation of any specific text, no matter how much you or I may love it or how long it’s been in the curriculum.

I care that all students graduate high school with the literacy skills needed to choose their path in life. I don’t care if they’ve read *The Scarlet Letter*. I care that Jay had daily opportunities to read books that offered refuge from a real world full of mass shootings, natural disasters, and political polarization. Books that sparked writing and conversation. Books that reminded Jay that she mattered when people in power were trying to tell her otherwise.

So, here’s my challenge to readers: Watch Jay’s joyful video clip with your colleagues. Smile. And then continue the important conversations I know you’re having.

How many of our students can “name a book,” let alone dozens? Do our students have ongoing opportunities to read books of their choice? If not, how can we make that happen? What skills do our students need for success in the next grade level, in college, and in life? Are we focusing on the right things? What should keep doing? What should we reconsider?



View Jay’s video clip

I remember having a similar conversation in the fall of 2015. Sure, we could have made *Lord of the Flies* “work.” I know there are incredible teachers all over the country who find ways to bring classic novels to life. (And if you’re one of those teachers, please share your secrets!) However, I kept coming back to this. *Was this the best use of our limited time?* No, it was not. *Was there a different way? A better way?* Yes, without a doubt.

DEVELOPING THE READ AND WRAP FRAMEWORK

I knew that I had just seventy-five days to help my students become passionate, proficient readers and writers, to help them navigate the traditional challenges of high school along with the newer struggles brought on by technology and social media. I knew that **every text and every task had to be intentional**. And so, like any good coach, I returned to the drawing board.

I wanted to maximize the time we had together. I wanted to prioritize the most important literacy skills and concepts. I wanted to increase the likelihood that students would choose to make reading and writing a part of their lives on the remaining 290 days of the year (and the following year, and the year after that). I wanted students to feel empowered and connected to our classroom community.

None of that would have been possible if I stuck with *Lord of the Flies* for the next eight weeks, or if I had been forced to follow a scripted curriculum that was not designed with any of our students in mind. At the very least, it would have been a lot harder. What did we do instead? What was our new game plan? The general adjustment was simple:

1. **We dedicated the first ten to twenty minutes of every class period to independent reading.**
2. **Following independent reading, our classroom came alive as we engaged in five to ten minutes of authentic writing, reflection, conversation, and community-building.**

Write
Reflect
Analyze
Participate

At the time, there was no name for this powerful post-reading routine, but I eventually developed an acronym (because educators love acronyms and we don’t have enough of them). Daily time to Read and WRAP . . . **which stands for Write, Reflect, Analyze, and Participate**. *Let’s wrap up our reading. Let’s talk and (w)rap about our books.*

Being literate is not simply about reading in a vacuum; it's about reading and thinking and discussing and applying what we've read to our own lives and experiences. This is how WRAP has boosted independent reading in my classrooms. It makes reading a community-building, life-enhancing experience.

One of the reasons schools have moved away from independent reading is the lack of accountability. Students “drop everything and read” while the teacher grades papers. The reading eventually ends (assuming it even began), and the class moves on to the next activity. There are no opportunities to dig deeper or to check for understanding. When “independent reading” looks like this, I understand why schools abandon the practice. That's why the WRAP piece is so critical.

WRAP is where we dig into meaningful writing and analysis. Where we review conflict and point of view and setting. Where we write book reviews, alternate endings, and author letters. Where we craft sonnets and create beautiful one-pagers. Where we appreciate author's craft and gain inspiration for our own stories. Where we learn, once and for all, the difference between a comma, colon, and semicolon. Where we collaborate with classmates and engage in authentic conversations. Where we reflect on our progress and set goals for the future.

Was this revised game plan perfect? Of course not. Was our revised game plan better than the initial one, the one with the kids on the island? Without question. Our Read and WRAP routine was, and remains, one of our most powerful practices because it allows us to do the following:

- Honor the interests and needs of each individual reader
- Build community and create a sense of belonging
- Increase engagement and investment (and ultimately outcomes)
- Hold students “accountable”
- Begin each class period smoothly and calmly
- Establish credibility and earn students' trust and respect
- Serve as a positive reading role model

Furthermore, our Read and WRAP routine helps students:

- Process what they are reading and develop “troubleshooting” strategies
- Deepen their understanding of the text, world, and self

- Get more “reps” and practice with key literacy skills and standards
- Give and receive book recommendations
- Set and achieve personally meaningful goals
- Take charge of their reading and learning
- Experience success and build confidence
- Gain inspiration for their own writing
- Think more clearly, critically, and creatively
- Reset, reenergize, and refocus during what is often a grueling school day

Upon reflection, I believe that establishing our Read and WRAP routine in the fall of 2015 was the best pedagogical decision I have ever made. Since then, I have taught in three schools across five grade levels (8th through 12th grade) and two states. I am constantly making adjustments; units get tweaked, added, and removed all the time. However, Read and WRAP remains, and I now have a decade of evidence—attendance, behavior, reading attitude, writing quality, NWEA/MAP growth, ACT scores, and more— to defend the practice.

By prioritizing access, time, choice, and community, by keeping our students at the center, and by trusting the process, we all continue to get a little bit better every day.