

5 Tips for Teaching Novels When Students Won't Read

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Literacy

Making lessons accessible to resistant readers can enhance the learning experience for everyone—including those who read the whole book.

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Vadym Drobot / Alamy

I first encountered a problem that every English teacher faces during my teacher preparation program: Many students were not reading. After months of reading book reviews that were frequently little more than poorly disguised plagiarized summaries, I taught in a way that penalized students who did not complete the book and rewarded students who did.

Unfortunately, by the end of the semester, I was left with a handful of students who were so lost and unprepared that they could only stare at our final assessment. Instead of motivating students to read, I had effectively blocked students from accessing the learning.

As a secondary English teacher, I was prompted by this experience to consider a central question in my teaching practice: How do I teach students to read great novels while providing lessons that are accessible to all students, including those who appear unwilling to read?

The Extreme User

Every student can read a novel, and teaching students to read novels in school helps them develop critical reading skills for texts and the world. Some students appear unwilling to read because of a variety of challenges both inside and outside the classroom.

These readers are what I refer to in the English classroom as “extreme users.” According to Bill Moggridge, the extreme user theory, which originated in design work, proposes that a product or service can be better designed by understanding the full range of viewpoints and avoiding the pitfall of designing for yourself.

Before, I was planning for students who were guaranteed to finish the books; I was planning for myself. When I started planning based on which students had the greatest need, it made learning more accessible to all.

5 Ways to Enhance Everyone’s Reading Experience

Although the goal is for each student to finish the novel, and those who do will undoubtedly benefit more from class, this method structures in-class learning to support the extreme users, allowing all students to access the learning regardless of the page number they reach.

1. Examine and read key chapters and quotes together. Do this as a class to supplement independent reading. *Readicide* and *Deeper Reading*, both by Kelly Gallagher, are pedagogical books that provide useful structures for analyzing texts. The School Reform Initiative also provides free reading and discussion protocols that make learning accessible. I use the first chapter, a central scene of conflict, and quotes throughout the book that highlight major themes.

Reading the first chapter aloud with students is critical for getting them over the hump and providing the context needed for improved comprehension during independent reading. Depending on the English level you teach, the number of chapters or quotes you examine together will vary.

2. Make audio versions of the text available. Reading can be difficult for students because of dyslexia, emerging language development, or even personal preference. The content barrier is broken for these students by providing audio recordings of the text. Teachers can record their own readings, use the library’s audiobook resources, or find another teacher’s recording on YouTube.

3. Teach overarching themes or skills that will be useful in analyzing that novel. Students will forget many of the details of what they learn in school, but we can help them achieve larger transfer goals—knowledge and skills that they will use outside of the classroom—through our coursework. We can make learning more authentic and accessible by planning around transfer goals rather than just teaching the text. For example, the focus of a unit might shift from students reading and discussing *1984* to students recognizing social injustice in the world.

4. Provide smaller and diverse supplemental texts. These are works that pair with the book, such as poetry, nonfiction articles, videos, or songs. These will provide multiple entry points for your students to comprehend the book’s themes and ideas.

5. Allow for choice in what books students read. Instead of teaching just one novel, offer a selection of three or more texts to increase student engagement and provide differentiated options based on reading level and interest. To choose books for an effective unit, organize them by theme or style. You can encourage students to read for pleasure by using digital tools.

Student Impact

When all students have access to the class, it empowers them as learners and prepares them to become independent readers in the future. I consider myself fortunate to work in a small school community because I can observe progress across grade levels. I taught the current seniors in their ninth and 10th grades at my school. Looking at the class and individual students shows that these strategies were beneficial.

One former student, who would open her novels freshman year to a random page and pretend to read, read to page 100 her sophomore year. She’s a senior now, planning to major in English, and she stops by to tell me about the latest books she’s read. She is one of many “extreme users” in the classroom that I built these strategies around.

Don't give up on teaching novels in the classroom when you're dealing with your own extreme users, those kids who just don't seem to want to read. Instead, join me in making books and schoolwork more accessible to everyone.