[EDITOR’S NOTE: Authors in this issue have offered ideas on helping students improve their comprehension and vocabulary. In this article, two teachers remind us that the best way to improve comprehension and vocabulary is tied to getting kids to read more, a task that often seems impossible. But Davis, a teacher in Alabama, and Lyons, a teacher in Texas, were undaunted by the seemingly impossible, and each found a method for connecting kids to books. Many thanks to both of these teachers for sharing their motivational strategies.]

Reading Exercises Your Mind by Mary Davis

“May I check out two bags since it is a holiday?” one student asks.

“Mrs. D., the librarian promised she would save bag 17 for me!” another interrupts.

“I’m sorry, we can’t reserve bags,” I say.

“Have you read bag 53? It is the best yet!” Heather suggests.

“I finished another bag over the weekend!” Kyle shouts.

Are these the comments of students who struggle with reading? You bet! Some simple gym bags filled with books have changed the reading attitudes, interests, and habits of some of the students at Berry Middle School in Alabama.

After several years of teaching middle school reading to students who were years behind their peers, it was evident to me that I needed to establish a more successful approach to reading instruction than I had been using. My goal: To help students who were reading three to four grade levels behind catch up to grade level. My problem: These students lacked motivation to read and were great at avoiding any reading situation. My solution: A program I call “Reading Exercises Your Mind.”

If exercise makes a body stronger, then reading can make a mind stronger. But just as it takes a certain amount of cajoling to get some adults into a regular, consistent, and worthwhile exercise program, it takes just as much (more?) cajoling to get some of our middle schoolers into an independent reading program. “I’m too busy doing other stuff” and “It’s boring” and “I don’t like it” can be heard from the adults who don’t want to exercise or from young teens who don’t want to read. What generally gets adults exercising is the payoff they want—and that’s generally the short-term payoff (getting back in that outfit that just doesn’t fit anymore) rather than the long-term payoff (stronger hearts, lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure, more joint mobility). Likewise, with kids, what often gets them reading is a short-term payoff (getting something they want) rather than the long-term payoff (increased comprehension, improved vocabulary, more literate lives). With this thought in mind, a few colleagues and I initiated the school and home reading program at our school.

Just What Is It?

The school reading intervention program puts students with real reading difficulties (SAT scores in stanines 1–3) in an intervention class. This course supplements the regular language arts course and is taught at the sixth-, seventh-, and
eighth-grade levels as the need arises. Currently, we have 70 students in these intervention classes. We use the Qualitative Reading Intervention test (QRI-II) at pre-intervention, mid-year, and school-end to quantify progress. Class time is spent on phonemic awareness, guided reading, independent reading, and vocabulary development. Students are taught strategies such as think-aloud and retelling. This intervention program is showing us much success as students move back into their regular language arts classes ready and able to do the reading.

The home reading intervention, or what I call Reading Exercises Your Mind, puts books into students’ hands for them to read at home. This is the part that has turned lots of our students on to reading. The exercise physiologist in me wanted an exercise theme for the program. I wanted it to come across as classy and fun and enviable to other reading students. Why not have books in gym bags? Why not encourage local sports figures to give students pep talks about reading? Why not have personal trainers (teachers and parents) get students through difficult workouts (books)? Why not have rewards for getting through the workouts? My colleagues and I couldn’t think of any reason not to do this, so we wrote a grant to the Hoover City Foundation for books, received $500.00, found a donor for the gym bags, and started the program.

Reading Exercises Your Mind centers on giving students book bags (gym bags until we ran out, then big sealable plastic bags took over) with three books in each bag (see Figure 1 for a list of book groupings). Each bag focuses on one theme or topic—everything from sports to survival to science to motorcycles. All three books in the bag are about that one topic. Each book in the bag is a different level of difficulty, starting at about a second-grade level and going up to around the fourth- or fifth-grade level. We follow the Goldilocks rule—we try to have a “too easy” (independent reading level) and a “too hard” (frustration reading level) and a “just right” (instructional reading level) book in each bag. Of course, readability is about the student's reading ability and interest, and that changes from student to student, so what’s “too hard” for some will be “just right” for others; however, since this program is for students who are scoring poorly on our assessment exams, we can make some assumptions about book levels as we assemble the bags.

Students check out bags and take books home to read. The “too easy” (independent level books) are read alone, with students telling parents about the book when they complete it. Parents use a “retell scoring guide” to help them determine how well students told them about the book (see Figure 2, p. 54). The “just right” (instructional level) book is read with parents; students ask for support whenever they need it. The “too hard” (frustration level) book is read to the student by the parent. This read-aloud component is critical as students’ reading comprehension and vocabulary development are supported through the read-aloud experience. Again, students must retell the story, and parents complete the retell evaluation. When students have completed the entire book bag, they complete the “running man” form (see Figure 3, p. 55).

Obviously, to do this, we’ve got to have parent support. I’ve found that one problem in working with struggling readers is that there is often a lack of parental support. Many parents are working several jobs and don’t have the time to help. Some parents want to help but don’t read well themselves. My colleagues and I decided that we’d assume that the parents were our allies, and if we showed them how to help their children, they’d be willing to do so.

We encourage parent support by starting the program with a big parent night. Food and babysitters are provided so parents can’t use the “I’ve-got-to-fix-dinner” or “There’s-no-one-for-my-toddler-to-stay-with” excuses for not attending. During this event, parents not only hear about how the program works and get their evaluation forms (more are always available in the bags), but we also model what retells ought to sound like. This modeling is imperative if parents are going to feel comfortable evaluating their child’s retell performance. We also explain how to fill out the
Figure 1. Bookbag themes and books (books listed from easiest to hardest within each bag)
Voices from the Middle, Volume 8 Number 4, May 2001

Davis and Lyons | Improving Reading by . . . Reading

Figure 2. Retell scoring guide

retell form and discuss the “running man” form students must complete. Our principal is there to talk about the importance of this program, as are local sports stars (this can be the high school football coach, an Olympic hopeful, or a true Olympic champion; we once hosted Willie Smith, Olympic gold medal winner in the 4 x 100 relay). Parents receive lots of positive feedback for being active partners in their child’s education. Parents end the night by looking over the contract that teachers, students, and parents would be signing.

Once students begin checking out book bags, there are short-term incentives for finishing the books. Students who finish 3 bags get a bookmark or comic book. We wanted students to reach this point by November (after starting in September). After their fifth bag, students got a book from the book fair ($5.00 maximum). The book fair is in November, so all students selected a book, and it was held for them until they reached this goal. Incentive number three required eight bags to be read. When this happened, students went on a field trip to a bookstore where they could choose yet another book (again $5.00 maximum) and then return to school for an ice cream sundae party. The grand finale was reserved for students who completed ten bags. These students went on an all-day field trip to the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, had lunch at a park, went on a tour of the Hoover Library, and stopped by McDonalds for a free dessert. This trip was scheduled in May and kept students reading all year long.

Take-Home Reading Program

Student Name ____________________________

Your child’s daily homework assignment is to read for a minimum of 15 minutes each evening. Either the parent or another adult is to listen to the child read and RETELL the events or facts read. Please indicate the child’s level of success with the RETELL. An additional assignment is for the parent to read ALOUD to the student for at least 10 minutes. Please briefly discuss with your child what you read aloud each night and record what you and your child thought about the book.

Rate of Success

1=Told all of the important events or facts
2=Told about many of the events or facts
3=Told only one or none of the events or facts

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Parent Signature

Figure 2. Retell scoring guide
Challenges and Successes

Students in this program raised their reading scores 1 or 2 stanines on the SAT. They began to experience success in their regular language arts classes and, most important, continued reading. This shift in attitude toward reading also showed up in a shift in attitude toward learning. Not every student was successful, of course. Some parents—not many—wouldn’t help. Some students had such severe problems that in spite of great gains, they were still not successful in their on-level classrooms. A second year working with those children has been very important.

This program has been successful because parents, students, and teachers worked together. At school, students had time to work on reading in a small-group setting. At home, parents had the use of accountability tools to help them keep their students on track. Extrinsic and intrinsic rewards were an important factor. Finally, great books that students really could read in cool-looking gym bags helped a lot. At one point, I actually had two students fighting over who would get to check out a certain bag. That fight was a high point of my career!

A school and home reading program can work if you’ve got the right tools. Look in your area for small grants or generous donors to help fund books and gym bags. Find local sports stars who are willing to talk with parents and students. Teach parents how to be our partners, and offer rewards to students for sticking with the workout. It’s definitely worth the work!

Story Starters: A Means of Captivating and Motivating Adolescent Readers by Shirley Lyons

The words “if only” have crossed my mind in the past several years as I have entered my eighth-grade, inner-city classroom. If only I could stop the tardies. If only I could get the attention of the whole class from the very start of the period. If only I could motivate students to read a book—to pick up a book, for that matter! If only I could get them to respond to characters and plots. If only I could improve their reading skills. It would be glorious!

Finally, after teaching reading to eighth graders for eight years in an urban setting, I have found a method that has given me some of those glorious moments. I’ve named this strategy “story starter.” Story starter is a lesson that begins with my reading aloud a short (5–10 minutes) selection that will grab students’ interests. It may be an excerpt from a book, a magazine, a newspaper, or an Internet article. After reading aloud, students then write in their story starter journal. These are student-made journals using 8 ½" x 14" newsprint (but any size would work). Each student takes about four pages, puts them together, folds them

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**Reading Exercises Your Mind**

Bag #________

Students: Please complete the following information and return it to your reading teacher.

Which book(s) did your parent read aloud to you?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Which book(s) did you read and discuss with your parent or read alone?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Student’s signature: _________________________

Parent’s signature: _________________________

Date: _________________________

Progress Report: So far, I have completed this many bags: _____________

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**Figure 3. The “running man” form**
in half, and then staples the pages together along the folded side to keep the booklet intact. This gives each booklet the outside page for the front cover, fourteen inside pages, and one outside page for the back cover. Since we’ll use two pages for each story starter lesson, each journal is good for seven days.

Front covers are designed by students. The cover should include the student’s name and class period, and then something about the topic we’re reading: survival, family, friendship, discoveries. Often, students design covers last after they’ve had a chance to absorb the scope of what we’ve been reading. That means some students even design a cover around a specific novel.

The point of story starter is not just to read aloud to students (which certainly will help connect them to books), but also to improve their listening comprehension by requiring some active listening. I do this by asking students to jot down some notes—anything from single words to quick phrases to complete thoughts—while I’m reading to them. They write these notes in their journals on one of the two pages they’ll be using for that particular story. The point isn’t to take lots of notes, but only to take some notes while listening. They also can sketch pictures instead of writing words. They know the notes are there to help them remember what the selection was about. If a picture is more effective than words, then they should draw. Later, students will answer questions—sometimes only one, other times as many as four or five—over what I read aloud to them. They’ll answer these questions in their story starter journal.

**Putting Story Starters into Action**

At the sound of the tardy bell, I begin the reading. Within a few classes, students realize I’m reading aloud something that’s interesting, so tardies diminish as the “What’s she gonna read today?” takes hold. As I read aloud, students jot down notes in their story starter journals. At first, some students put too much; others put too little. Few, however, get it just right. We keep doing it, though, and sooner (for some) or later (for others) they find

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**Monday:** *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis, pages 26–28

Questions:
1. Does the man in charge of the line treat Bud fairly? Use your notes to support your answer with a detail in the story.
2. What do you see as a bad thing about the way Bud’s pretend family treats Bud?
3. What do you see as a good thing about the way Bud’s pretend family treats Bud?
4. Draw a character or an event you recall from this story. Be prepared to explain why you chose to make this drawing. (Note: I always offer this as the final option.)

**Tuesday:** *Thank You, Ma’am* by Langston Hughes (short enough to use the entire story)

1. Compare this boy in the story to Bud in *Bud, Not Buddy*. What’s interesting about both boys?
2. Compare Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones with Bud’s pretend mother. Which mother do you like better?
3. What lesson(s) do each of the boys in each story learn?

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**Wednesday:** *The Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt, pages 5–8

1. How does Georgie’s mother treat him?
2. List all the characters who know how badly Georgie is being treated.
3. Why does Georgie keep Steve a secret?
4. Think of all the male characters you’ve heard about this week. Which one has the worst situation? Why?

**Thursday:** *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Kimberly Kirberger, pages 306–307 (“Teenager’s Bill of Rights, Our Rights with Friends, with Parents and other Adults, with Everyone”)

1. Which right did you think was most important? Why?
2. What right(s) would you add to the list of rights in this selection?
3. What rights were violated for each of the characters we’ve met this week?

**Friday:** Repeat any selection students request.

1. Which selection did you enjoy most and what was it about that selection that made it stand out for you?
2. Select one of the selections and write a letter of advice to a character in that selection.

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**Figure 4.** A week’s worth of story starters
the “just right” amount of information they need for what we’ll do next.

After the oral reading, students answer questions over the selection. This is a very quick process (10 minutes) that occurs while I take roll, distribute materials, sign any forms students have placed on my desk. I keep the time short because a) we have other things to cover, and b) students who don’t like to read generally don’t like to write. By limiting their time here (10 minutes) and space (one journal page—half a sheet of paper), students aren’t overwhelmed.

Later, we discuss comments students made in their journals as they answered questions. During this time, they have the opportunity to hear several thoughts on the same topic. For example, after reading aloud a portion of Christopher Paul Curtis’s book *Bud, Not Buddy* (pages 26–28), one of the questions students answered was, “Does the man in charge of the line treat Bud fairly?” One student answered, “Yes, because everyone else was hungry. There were a lot worse people in the line that needed food more than Buddy,” while another responded, “No, because he was about to hit Bud for nothing.” Then another student said, “I think the man treats Bud fairly because if he got there late, he doesn’t get a chance to eat. That would not be fair to other people that have been standing in line for a long time,” while still another disagreed with, “No, I do not think he is treating him right because all kids need to eat.”

Benefits

To help you get started with using story starters, see Figure 4 for “A Week’s Worth of Story Starters.” This gives you the selection and questions you might want to ask for each selection. Figure 5 gives you a list of popular selections. If you use this read-aloud method, then after a while you might notice the same benefits I’ve seen in my classroom:

• As long as I keep choosing interesting story starters, students keep showing up on time to class.
• Listening comprehension has improved.
• Note taking skills have improved.
• Students constantly want to know “so what happens next” and that means they are checking out the books so they can find out what happened in the story.
• Students are learning to listen to each other as we briefly share answers to the open-ended questions.
• Students are learning that reading is not boring.

All in all, I found that story starter did exactly what I wanted—gave me some glorious moments as some of my if-only’s were answered.

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Voices from the Middle, Volume 8 Number 4, May 2001
What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able To Do. June 1999. Finally, the report makes recommendations for improving the system of teacher education and professional development. In medicine, if research found new ways to save lives, health care professionals would adopt these methods as quickly as possible, and would change practices, procedures, and systems. Although reading is the cornerstone of academic success, a single course in reading methods is often all that is offered most prospective teachers. Even if well taught, a single course is only the beginning. IELTS Reading Test 57. Adam’s wine. A Water is the giver and, at the same time, the taker of life. And the future? If we are to believe the forecasts, it is predicted that two-thirds of the world population will be without fresh water by 2025. But for a growing number of regions of the world the future is already with us. While some areas are devastated by flooding, scarcity of water in many other places is causing conflict. Reading Passage 2. Is it any wonder that there are teacher shortages? Daily, the press carries reports of schools going on four-day weeks simply because they cannot recruit enough teachers. But why? There is no straightforward answer.