



## Taming the Beast:

# How I Took Back Guided Reading

BY LAURA SANDLING

Just as I was about to bring the class back together after a turn-and-talk (all names are pseudonyms), Isaiah, one of my more outspoken students, piped up and said, “Guys, stop talking or else we won’t have time for stations!” Although I shook my head at his delivery, he was right. We had to get started quickly so I could see the two groups I was scheduled to meet with that day.

I smiled as I watched the kids hurriedly quiet themselves, legs crisscross applesauce, ears ready to listen. No one can deny that guided reading is our favorite part of the day. As a teacher, I love getting to help small groups of students with a specific reading skill, while my other students interact with literacy in a hands-on way. But this has not always been the case. I used to think guided reading was the worst.

Let’s just say that in those days, Isaiah would not be rushing the class to start stations. Small group instruction was constantly interrupted by students with issues from everything to bickering with another student to “emergency” bathroom breaks. By the end of my second year of teaching, I knew I had to do something to take back my guided reading time and to give my students independence and responsibility

during station time. Somehow, somehow, I had to tame the beast and take charge of this crucial time. Through lots of trial and error and then sticking to what worked, I have found several key instructional and organizational tips for maximizing this crucial portion of the literacy block. Guided reading can go from a chore to an enjoyable and learning-filled part of the day with clear procedures and high expectations.

### **Building Our Stamina, Building Our Foundation**

“Yes, I love building our stamina!” Scarlett bounced up and down happily as I let the students get their book bins. It was only the second week of school, but my students quickly embraced the time we spent doing “Read to Self” to build our stamina to prepare for guided reading and stations. As the two sisters Gail Boushey and Joan Moser outline in their book *The Daily Five* (2014), building stamina in reading is a crucial step before the teacher can start meeting with any students. Additionally, this stamina must be built independently. Yes, independently. You may think you are already doing this, but think about when you first introduced “Read to Self” or another station.

Were you going around praising students as they read quietly, did great work on an activity, or “really focused”? When I first started to pull groups for guided reading, I consonantly wondered why my students would suddenly stop focusing and doing well, almost as if we had not just spent weeks practicing. This was because the students were not truly independent. I thought I was giving them support with my constant praise, but in reality, I hindered by students because I trained them to rely on my praise if they were doing well. Now, I know that the key to building my students’ stamina is to stay back. It is hard at first because it is natural to praise students, but they need to be able to do a great job on their own, under their own power.

It is especially important to track your students’ stamina. At the beginning of year, I use a stamina chart to graph how many minutes my students can read independently without interruptions. When they get to 25 minutes of focused reading, I know my students are truly independent. Whether you are using the Daily 5 or other literacy station models, building your students’ stamina is the first step.

### **Prepare and Model, Model, Model!**

At first, I would lose count of the number of interruptions during guided reading. I would hear, “Ms. S., can I go to the bathroom?” to the ever-distressing, “What am I supposed to do?” I stayed frustrated for almost three years until it finally clicked: my students are not going to magically know what to do if they do not know what to expect.

Along with helping your students build their stamina and establishing their independence, the key is to model, model, model. Even though it may be tempting to get every procedure and lesson over with in one day, DON'T do it! Students need many opportunities to practice with and without the teacher's help. To accomplish this, use a variety of mini-lessons to teach and model desired behaviors (Diller, 2003). Every year, I teach mini-lessons on what the students will be doing and what I will be doing during guided reading. Then, together we model correct behaviors and incorrect behaviors.

Finally, we practice! Make sure the materials are prepared and ready. Students should have their book bins or bags, word tiles, journals, headphones... whatever is needed to make your literacy activities run. I also check to see if my students are comfortable with one literacy station before I introduce another. We might spend several days or weeks to insure we have down the desired behavior and stamina. Literacy station innovator, Debbie Diller (2003), suggests giving students about six weeks of practice time in their stations before even pulling small groups.

Furthermore, just as the lesson plan is imperative to the whole-group, it is crucial for the small group table. The pioneers of all things guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell (2012), outline a helpful structure of a guided reading lesson which includes: 1) introduction of text, 2) reading the text, 3) discussion of text, 4) explicit teaching points, 5) word work, and 6) extending understanding. You can use this format or another helpful plan to keep your guided reading lessons on track.

### **Use Tried and True Procedures**

#### **Ask Three Before Me and the Emergency Chair**

I would be lying if I said that my students never have questions during our guided reading and Daily 5 time. However, I teach the "Ask Three Before Me" procedure, which means they ask three friends before they wait in the "emergency chair." Even when they choose to sit in the emergency chair, my students know to wait until I can pause in my guided reading lesson to assist.

#### **Wear Antlers or a Hat for No Interrupting**

Whenever I meet with a guided reading group, I put on my trusty candy-cane antler headband. Yes, the antlers are as crazy as they sound. However, when I have them on, they easily convey to my students that they are not allowed to interrupt me because I am with a small group or reading with a student. I have seen teachers wear baseball caps, flower crowns, or funky glasses. Pick whichever fits best with your personal style, but remember to teach the hat's importance!

### **Give the Students Choices**

Finally, one of the biggest changes I have seen from my guided reading and station time is to give students choice. I used to assign students the activity they would be doing if they were not meeting with me. However, I quickly learned that students will be much more engaged if they get to choose their activity. Once you have taught all the procedures and students have built their stamina for that activity, let your students choose what they want to do.

### **Conclusion - Never Stop Reflecting**

Now that you have received an overflow of information on guided reading and stations, it is time to take a step back. Remember that your guided reading groups and instructional stations should always be evolving. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2012), guided reading requires self-reflection from the teacher. Even the most experienced teachers need to evaluate their small group lessons and review what their students are doing when they are not at the guided reading table. If you are armed with the fundamentals, establish procedures that work best for your classroom and students, and reflect on your practice, you too can tame the beast!

#### References

- Boushey, G., & Moser, J. (2014). *The Daily 5: Fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Diller, D. (2003). *Literacy work stations: Making centers work*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Fountas, I.C., & Pinnell, G.S. (2012). Guided reading: The romance and reality. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(4), 268-284. DOI:10.1002/TRTR.01123



*Once you learn to read,  
you will be forever free.*

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS