

Fall into Your Stories

Ideas for how to help the people you love

learn how to love to read

by Kevin D Stein

An Introduction

Some people love to read. Some people not so much. In my life, most of the time, I am very happy to let people do what they like to do. In fact, I've been a high school teacher for over 20 years, and if I have one overriding philosophy, it is to trust my students and only do what I can to help students learn how to learn when they want to learn. I'm a pretty hands off teacher. But when it comes to reading I will do anything I can to get my students, and even friends and family members, to pick up a book.

So why am I so pushy about reading? I want to start with the most important reason (there will be lot more to come throughout the rest of the book):

People cannot actually choose to not read until they are able to read!

This might seem like the most basic and true of ideas, but I would like to look at it a bit more closely. When I say someone has to be able to read, I do not mean that they need to be able to decode letters on a page. I am not talking about the mechanics of reading. Rather, I am talking about the ability to read quickly (about 200 words per minute); read for meaning by connecting ideas between sentences and paragraphs without having stop and puzzle things out; and being somewhat skillful at guessing the meaning when coming across unknown vocabulary words or phrases.

To be able read quickly, infer meaning, and comprehend across sentences and paragraphs requires that a person read a lot. So to **knowingly** choose not to read, requires that a person already be a reader.

This book is designed to help you help the people you care about, whether they be students, daughters and sons, friends, cousins, a neighbor, or grandparents, get to the point where they can choose not to read. Each chapter consists of:

- A short story of 500 to 1000 words. The vocabulary in each story is almost all (more that 95%) drawn from the most common 2000 words of the English language. Readers will, I hope, not have to struggle with the meaning of words in order to enjoy the story. At the same time, the stories themselves deal with adult themes and are concerned with the difficult and sometimes messy lives of characters who could be real people. Just because readers can benefit from clear and simple language does not mean that they want to slog through a story that feels as if it is written for a child.
- A short section of theory on how people read, how they become readers, and what reading does for us as human beings. I hate to use the word theory, because much of what I will be talking about in these sections is based on personal experience, my interactions

with students and friends, and solid research. Instead of theory, let's think of it of stories about reading.

- Activities you can do using the short story and based on reading theory. These activities will help draw the reader back to the story repeatedly. More importantly, it will give you and the readers a chance to think about and get excited about the stories. Reading is a personal act. But sharing and talking about a story is the fuel that helps our passion for reading continue to burn.

There are 10 stories in the book. If the person you are sharing this book with reads all ten stories and the two of you do even some of the activities together, then your friend/relative/neighbor/student will have become a reader. And then, if they chose to stop reading, perhaps the best thing you can do is accept their decision (but if you are anything like me, you will continue to secretly stash good books under their pillow or in their bags on the off chance they might change their mind).

But in my experience, once someone gets to the point where they are a reader, they rarely close a book, put it back on a shelf, and walk away from all the worlds they can find between two covers. It is my hope that this book will help the people you care about take their first tentative steps through some of those worlds. Perhaps they will be stumbling hesitant steps. Perhaps most of the time they will be looking down at their own feet in an attempt not to fall. But occasionally they might look up, catch a glimpse of a sky painted a shade of blue they have never seen before, and feel, if only for a moment, the joy of experiencing something entirely new. The goal of this book is to help you walk with them and support them as they become a reader.

1. *For One Picture*

The girl's mother didn't say anything when the girl bought a motorcycle. She didn't say anything when the girl passed her driving test. She didn't even say anything as the girl packed. She just watched as her daughter put a few shirts into an old cloth bag and set a camera on top. But the next morning, as the girl was about to drive away, the mother finally said, "You are making a mistake. You should go to university."

The girl closed her eyes. She looked as if she was counting to ten. Then she opened her eyes and smiled and said, "I'll be back as soon as I find one perfect picture." She was wearing a leather jacket. She kicked the bike's engine into life and raced away along Ginko Road. She raced away under the shade of the trees, getting smaller and smaller.

After few weeks a letter arrived for the girl's mother. The ink was blotted where rain drops had fallen on the paper. The girl wrote, "My bike is in great shape. It is the fastest thing I have ever known. The air here is different. It smells green and fresh, like someone has brushed everything clean." There was a picture. It was of a boy with no front teeth about to bite into an ear of corn. The girl's mother pinned it to the wall of her bedroom and looked at it before she went to sleep. She wondered how the boy could eat the corn with no teeth.

The girl's mother went to the crowded Thursday market to buy cheap fruits and vegetables. She listened to her favorite radio program on Sunday afternoons. She played cards with her friends. And she waited for another letter. It came when the leaves were turning from red to brown. There was no note in the envelope, just a photograph. It was a picture of a man smoking a cigarette. He was standing in a shop window and hanging a yellow dress on a manikin. The picture made the girl's mother laugh. But she didn't know why. She hung it next to the first picture.

When the snow fell, the girl sent a picture of one of the fishing woman from the north islands. The fishing woman was holding a heavy net full of shells. The fishing woman looked strong and young, but she was probably older than the girl's mother. More pictures arrived. A mountain of old bicycles reflecting the afternoon sun. A little girl with only one leg jumping rope in the street. The mother pinned each picture to the wall. She took them down and looked at them every night. She thought the pictures were beautiful. She thought that maybe they were perfect. But she began to hope that maybe they were not. She began to hope that maybe there were so many more beautiful things in the world. She began to wonder how her own daughter had become the kind of person who might be able to find them.

How we read

When I was in high school, I had a good friend named Adam. He was the best storyteller I ever met. He would become the characters in his stories, changing his voice every so slightly for each one. He paused at just the right moment to let you imagine what was coming next before pulling you along in an unexpected direction. He was the kind of guy who could tell you the exact same story three or four times and you wouldn't stop him; it was a pleasure to watch him put the pieces of the story together again and again. But Adam had never read a book in his life. He would sometimes brag about it. One day he picked up a terrible sci-fi book full of bad puns I was reading and read the back cover. It took a while, but when he finished, he asked if he could borrow it. I was spending the night at his house and as usual, before I went to sleep I read for thirty minutes or so. I remember because when I was ready to put my book down, I asked Adam how much he had read.

"Three pages," he said.

"Three pages? In thirty minutes?" I said.

"I'm not used to reading." He turned out the lights.

Now I know how right Adam was. Reading is both a mental and physical activity. And just like a person has to practice swinging a bat or pulling back the string of a bow, readers need to practice the mechanics of reading. But just what are the physical parts of the reading experience?

Luckily there has been a mountain of research on how people physically read and Paul Nation (2009) has collected much up it together in a way that makes perfect sense. When people read they do three things:

1. stop and look at a group of letters (a *fixation*)
2. jump to the next group of letters (a *saccadic*)
3. return to previous groups of letters they have read (a *regression*).

These three eye movements are the physical components of reading. A real reader, a person who reads with fluency, can read about 300 words per minute. But how do they read so quickly? Certainly my friend Adam wasn't reading at anywhere near these speeds. And it wasn't because he couldn't read. He could sound out the words in his head and follow the meaning of what was on the page. But he was probably, like many beginning readers, slowly moving along at about 50 to 80 words per minute. Part of the problem is beginning readers have not figured out where to focus their eyes as they read. A well-practiced reader focuses on about 10 letters of English, or

one and a half words, at a time. Getting used to how many letter your eyes can take in and where to focus on a page takes practice.

When a reader jump to the next group of letters, they aren't actually reading anything. For a practiced reader it happens in the blink of an eye and is as easy and as natural as a child skipping across a playground. But just like that child, there are going to be a lot of stutter and a few tumbles on the way to figuring it all out.

Finally, everyone's attention wanders a bit here and there while reading. But practiced readers only have to back and focus on a group of letters and read it again 15% of the time. If a reader hasn't figured out how many letters they can read at one time and how to focus on the next group of letters, they will of course have to look back at what they have already read more often. Literally they will be taking two steps forward to each step back.

So now we have a decent idea of the physical practice of reading, and we know it takes practice to improve, but there is one more aspect of reading that I think is perhaps under-appreciated. It is the different types of silent reading. These types of reading are clearly outlined by Barbara Birch (2007). The first is the type of reading that most inexperienced readers are engaged in. These types of readers will focus on a group of letters and hear the sounds of the letters in their head. Each sound is heard and put together which makes a word which will be sounded out clearly and separately. If this is how a reader is "hearing" the words on the page, then of course their reading speed can only be as fast as they are able to sound out the words. Now imagine some of the best public readers you have ever heard. Perhaps it was a grandmother with a lilting voice reading books to you before bed, or an elementary school teacher who made a story come alive by the way her voice quivered with fear or was tinged with sadness. These talented public readers usually read at around 100 to 150 words per minute and they do not read each word separately let alone sound out letters to make words. So you can imagine that an inexperienced reader who reads silently in this style is going to be reading quite slowly.

The second type of reader hears entire words. These readers are subvocalizers. They read and activate the parts of their brain responsible for moving their mouth when reading aloud. It is probably similar to the slightly stilted sound of how a computer reads text out loud. Once again, these readers are only able to read as quickly as they hear the words in their head. So even the most talented reader who is subvocalizing will only be able to read at about 100 words per minute, far short of a fluent reading speed.

Years of research has helped take one of the most private of human activities, what happens when a person cracks open a book and reads, and made painted a clear physical portrait of what is happening. And now that we know what beginning readers might be doing, we can read with them and support them in such a way as to speed up the journey from beginning to fluent reader.

Working with

For One Picture

I wrote *For One Picture* one early evening after school had been officially let out for summer vacation. I was a senior homeroom teacher at the time and I was spending a lot of time thinking about my students' futures...

[the rest of this chapter will be a series of activities to help students repeatedly engage with the story to improve their reading speed and get used to the physical act of reading.]