

# OUT OF SCHOOL READING

## Unit 6 Authors and Actors

**Purpose:** As early as first or second grade, some of your students may have decided that “reading is not for me.” They may have experienced difficulties in learning to read. They may have been turned off by assigned readings that were of little or no interest to them or were beyond their reading level. Once students make that decision, it can be challenging to change their minds, but it is imperative to do so, particularly for disadvantaged students. *There is no other activity besides large quantities of outside reading that has been shown to be associated with low-privileged students who outscore high-privileged students on national skills assessments.* Through outside reading, students build vocabulary, learn knowledge, and increase their reading speed and comprehension abilities. And quantity matters. In one well-known study, fourth through sixth graders who read a lot significantly outscored non-avid readers (with the same decoding ability) on these four separate tests: word knowledge, verbal fluency, vocabulary, and general information. The two groups scored the same on tests of non-verbal intelligence, decoding, and spelling, which strongly suggests they had the same basic abilities to read – it was the amount of reading they did that mattered. As the researchers put it, “Reading makes you smarter.” Our A4L units can be initial steps in changing students’ minds about reading and showing them that they can experience deep, personal connections to written material. It is critical, however, that students don’t stop with the texts in the unit, but instead use them as a springboard to a rich life of reading outside the classroom.

**How to Support throughout the Unit:** There are two powerful motivators for outside reading that you can use throughout the unit: Curiosity and Personal Connections. Prior to the unit, confer with your school librarian about the reading levels in your class and the personal interests that your students have. Collect from the school library or your own classroom library as many first-person realistic books as possible that are good fits with those reading levels and interests. Unit 6 focuses primarily on non-fiction personal narratives, but for the purposes of outside reading, you can also make extensions to first-person realistic fiction, to widen the possibilities for your students’ reading. Create a spot in your classroom that can serve as the “Treasure Pile” for all of these books. After an initial discussion of a particular writing focus, send students whenever possible to the Treasure Pile the class. Your goal is to make students curious about these books and to convince them that certain books can hold great personal interest. You can achieve this goal by knowing your students well and by dropping hints such as, “Wow, what a great opening line. You know, Emilio, that sounds like a book you in particular would love since the boy is a skateboarder like you.” Be sure to have a system for students to check out these books and bring them home. Research shows that giving students access to books is vitally important, particularly in low-income areas.

**Resources for Matching Texts to Student Interests:** You may find it helpful to learn more about your students’ interests by giving them interest surveys to fill out. Templates for these surveys, as well as many other tips for increasing pleasure reading among elementary students, are available in Steven Layne’s book, *Igniting a Passion for Reading* (2009, Stenhouse Publishers). Another great resource is Donna Lyn Miller’s *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* (2009, John Wiley & Sons). Donna Lyn is a sixth grade teacher who writes passionately about her incoming sixth graders who have been turned off of reading in elementary school. She also describes how she uses students’ personal interests to change their minds about reading and turn them into book lovers who also succeed on standardized tests. Consider discussing with your colleagues how elementary schools might change some of their practices to decrease the need for these turn-arounds, and how A4L can be used as part of this change.

**Book Lists:** Your best resources for collecting first-person texts for outside reading with this unit are 1) your knowledge of your students' reading levels and interests and 2) your school librarian or media director's knowledge of the school's book collections. To get you started, here are some popular **first-person, realistic fiction or non-fiction** titles:

To give you an indication of reading level, each novel\* is listed with the level and points assigned to it by the Accelerated Reader formula and the Lexile formula. Accelerated Reader levels are given in grades and months, and the length of the book is reflected in the point value; the more points awarded, the longer the book. Lexile levels correspond to grade-level ranges in the table below, which has been updated to fit Common Core State Standards. Please keep in mind that these leveling systems do not include calculations based on the important roles that background knowledge and personal interest in a topic can play in enabling children to understand and enjoy a particular book, so these numbers are presented here as initial guidelines only.

### **Lexiles and Grade-Level Ranges**

| <b>Grade Level</b> | <b>Previous Lexile Range</b> | <b>New Lexile Range for Common Core State Standards</b> |
|--------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 2 - 3              | 450 - 725                    | 450 - 790   |
| 4 - 5              | 645 - 845                    | 770 - 980   |

### **Picture Books:**

*White Dynamite and Curly Kidd*, Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault, 1986, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

A cowboy tells his child how he overcomes fear during the rodeo in this picture book with a surprise ending.

AR Level: 1.6  
AR Points: 0.5  
Lexile: 360

*The Ghost-Eye Tree*, Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault, 1985, New York: Henry Holt.

Two children must face their fear as they go out to fetch milk on a dark and windy night.

AR Level: 2.3  
AR Points: 0.5  
Lexile: (Not available)

*Smoky Night*, Eve Bunting, 1994, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.

During the Los Angeles riots, a boy and his mother come to know their neighbor through the bond of their pet cats.

AR Level: 2.4  
AR Points: 0.5  
Lexile: 360

*Fly Away Home*, Eve Bunting, 1991, New York: Clarion.

A homeless boy describes how he and his father live in the airport while his father looks for work.

AR Level: 2.4  
AR Points: 0.5  
Lexile: 450

*All the Places to Love*, Patricia MacLachlan, 1994, New York: HarperCollins.

A farm boy describes his life and favorite places to his baby sister.

AR Level: 3.9

AR Points: 0.5

Lexile: 920

*The Rag Coat*, Lauren Mills, 1991, New York: Little, Brown and Company.

A young girl who cannot afford a coat is teased by her classmates until they learn to respect her.

AR Level: 3.9

AR Points: 0.5

Lexile: 630

### **Novels:**

*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, 1972, Judy Blume, New York: Dutton Children's Books.

A fourth-grade boy must deal with an annoying three-year-old brother in this humorous book.

AR Level: 3.3

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 470

*Mockingbird*, Kathryn Erskine, 2010, New York: Philomel Books.

A fifth-grade girl with Asperger's syndrome must deal with her brother's death from a school shooting.

AR Level: 3.6

AR Points: 5

Lexile: 630

*Because of Winn-Dixie*, Kate DiCamillo, 2001, Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

A motherless ten-year-old girl and her dog learn to make friends in a small Florida town.

AR Level: 3.9

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 610

*The Kid in the Red Jacket*, Barbara Park, 1987, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

A ten-year-old boy is not happy about moving from Arizona to Massachusetts in this humorous book.

AR Level: 3.9

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 640

*Rules*, Cynthia Lord, 2008, New York: Scholastic.

A twelve-year-old girl both loves and is frustrated by her younger autistic brother.

AR Level: 3.9

AR Points: 4

Lexile: 780

*Live From the Fifth Grade*, Colleen O'Shaughnessy McKenna, 1994, New York: Scholastic.

A boy who is the class clown must partner with the girl who is his enemy to solve a school mystery in this humorous book.

AR Level: 4.0

AR Points: 3

Lexile: (Not available)

*Fourth Grade Weirdo*, Martha Freeman, 1999, New York: Holiday House.

An oddball fourth-grade boy and his two friends must catch a thief.

AR Level: 4.0

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 660

*Almost Starring Skinny-Bones*, Barbara Park, 1988, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

A twelve-year-old boy who longs for celebrity gets a chance to be an acting star...but it's not what he expects.

AR Level: 4.0

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 620

*Skinnybones*, Barbara Park, 1982, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

This funny book describes the misadventures of the smallest player on the baseball team.

AR Level: 4.1

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 590

*Project Mulberry*, Linda Sue Park, 2005, New York: Clarion.

Two children try to win the state fair by raising silkworms in this book that gently touches on prejudice.

AR Level: 4.3

AR Points: 6

Lexile: 690

*The Hank Zipzer Series*, including:

*Niagara Falls, or Does It?* Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver, 2003, New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

*Help! Somebody Get Me Out of Fourth Grade!* Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver, 2004, New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

*The Life of Me (Enter at Your Own Risk)*, Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver, 2008, New York: Penguin.

A boy with dyslexia and a knack for trouble has many humorous misadventures.

AR Level: 4.3-4.9

AR Points: 3-5

Lexile: 610-780

*Summer of the Gypsy Moths*, Sara Pennypacker, 2012, New York: Balzer + Bray.

Two children decide to keep it a secret when the elderly woman taking care of them passes away.

AR Level: 4.4

AR Points: 8

Lexile: 670

*Rosy Cole's Memoir Explosion: A Heartbreaking Story about Losing Friends, Annoying Family, and Ruining Romance*, Sheila Greenwald, 2006, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

A girl turns a school assignment into a memoir that embarrasses her family and friends.

AR Level: 4.5

AR Points: 1

Lexile: 720

*Worth*, A. LaFaye, 2004, New York: Aladdin.

A boy living on a late-nineteenth century farm is faced with jealousy over a foster child brought in to help with the chores.

AR Level: 4.5

AR Points: 4

Lexile: 830

*Heads or Tails: Stories from the Sixth Grade*, Jack Gantos, 1994, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Filled with eccentric characters, this book describes a boy's life in Fort Lauderdale, Florida during the late 1960's.

AR Level: 4.6

AR Points: 6

Lexile: 750

*The Seven Wonders of Sassafras Springs*, Betty G. Birney, 2005, New York: Aladdin.

A farm boy who longs for a trip to Colorado makes a bet with his father and finds seven "wonders" in his own community.

AR Level: 4.8

AR Points: 5

Lexile: 790

*Jack Adrift: Fourth Grade Without a Clue*, Jack Gantos, 2003, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

A humorous book about a young boy trying to navigate fourth grade in a new school.

AR Level: 4.9

AR Points: 6

Lexile: 730

*Bud, Not Buddy*, Christopher Paul Curtis, 1999, New York: Random House.

A young African-American boy escapes from a cruel foster home and sets out to find his real father during the Depression.

AR Level: 5.0

AR Points: 8

Lexile: 950

*A Long Way from Chicago*, Richard Peck, 2000, New York: Puffin.

Two children spend August with their highly eccentric and amusing grandmother in a small Illinois town.

AR Level: 5.0

AR Points: 5

Lexile: 750

*My Side of the Mountain*, Jean Craighead George, 1959, New York: Puffin Books.

A twelve-year-old boy from New York City runs away to live on an abandoned farm in the wilderness of the Catskill Mountains.

AR Level: 5.2

AR Points: 6

Lexile: 810

*Sing a Song of Tuna Fish: A Memoir of My Fifth-Grade Year*, 2004 Esme Raji Codell. New York: Hyperion.

An author tells stories from her fifth-grade life in a Chicago neighborhood and school during the 1970's.

AR Level: 5.4

AR Points: 3

Lexile: 960

*Dead End in Norvelt*, Jack Gantos, 2011, New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux.

When a twelve-year-old boy in a small town starts helping to write the local obituaries, he discovers something strange is going on.

AR Level: 5.7

AR Points: 12

Lexile: 920

*Millicent Min, Girl Genius*, Lisa Yee, 2003, New York: Arthur A. Levine.

A girl with a genius IQ tries to hide her intelligence and cope with middle school problems in this humorous book.

AR Level: 5.8

AR Points: 8

Lexile: 800

*The View from Saturday*, E. L. Konigsburg, 1996, New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Four members of a sixth-grade math team tell their stories about life during the Academic Bowl competition.

AR Level: 5.9

AR Points: 7

Lexile: 870

### **Short Stories**

*When I Was Your Age: Original Stories About Growing Up*, Amy Erlich (Ed.), 1996, Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Award-winning authors tell engrossing stories about their childhood.

AR Level: 5.6

AR Points: 5

Lexile: (Not available)

*When I Was Your Age, Volume Two: Original Stories About Growing Up*, Amy Erlich (Ed.), 1999, Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

More award-winning authors tell stories about their childhood.

AR Level: 5.9

AR Points: 6

Lexile: (Not available)

### **Research References on the Benefits of Outside Reading:**

Cunningham, C., & Stanovich, K. (2003). Reading can make you smarter. *Principal*, 34-39. Retrieved from: <http://gse.berkeley.edu/faculty/aecunningham/aecunningham.html>

Guthrie, J. T., Schafer, W. D., & Huang, C. (2001) Benefits of opportunity to read and balanced instruction on the NAEP. *Journal of Educational Research*, 94(3), 145-162.

Stanovich, K. E., & Cunningham, A. E. (1992). Studying the consequences of literacy within a literate society: The cognitive consequences of print exposure. *Memory & Cognition*, 20 (1), 51-68.