



# How Do We Grow Super Readers? Choice, Cheerleaders, and Community

by LOIS BRIDGES

Alan Boyko asked a friend (as well as his contractor, his barber, and his Pilates instructor):  
*Can you read?*

Each person answered, somewhat surprised: *Of course I can read!*

Alan: *Do you read every word?*

Friend: *Of course, I read every word!*

Alan: *Then you're not a reader; I don't even see the words when I read.*

Alan Boyko, the past president of Scholastic Book Fairs, is a Super Reader. He flies through the pages and skips across paragraphs as he devours one book after another.

The vast majority of successful adults are competent readers. They “know” how to read. They engage in daily, pragmatic reading; for example, they may read the morning newspaper, peruse social media, and study a new recipe. They can read. But they don't read for pleasure. A much, much smaller number of adults are Super Readers who gallop through one book after another, hardly aware of individual words because they are in pursuit of the new *worlds* that each new book offers.

## What is a Super Reader?

- Super Readers can't identify their one favorite book; they have dozens of favorites.
- Super Readers never go anywhere without a book; they are surrounded by books in their homes; books are always close at hand. And if they aren't reading a text, they are listening to one—audio books on walks, in the car, on the treadmill. Books, in all forms, are their constant companions.
- Super Readers talk about books daily. They develop a network of trusted “book buddies,” who share book recommendations and reviews.

Super Readers are not aware of the physical act of reading; nor do they even see individual words as they become absorbed in the alluring world of a good book. Rather, they are engaged in continuous informed reading prediction. As powerful language users (reading is

language!), they can easily predict the text that will come next. Their eyes take in chunks of meaningful text (not individual words and certainly not letters and sounds), enabling their brains to bound across text. Super Readers are searching for the forest—not pausing to identify each of its trees.

Super Readers typically have multiple books going at the same time ... and they always have in mind their “next read.” Books are their Super Power.

What is the secret to helping all kids become Super Readers—and growing a nation of readers?

## Choice, Cheerleaders, and Community

Super Readers are typically born of three key components: Choice, Cheerleaders, and Community. Let’s explore each in turn:

### **Choice**

Reader’s choice is the spark that ignites the motivation to read. Indeed, children are twice as likely to read a book that they have chosen themselves. Students are thrilled when they get to choose their own books instead of being assigned reading.

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Research has revealed that self-selection is the hook that persuades both children and teens to read. Why?

- Self-selection turbo charges kids’ interest in their chosen books and, therefore, in their desire to read (Sewell, 2003; Gallagher, 2009; Pruzinsky, 2014).
- Self-selection fosters a greater investment in learning (Kragler, 2000; Routman, 2018).
- Self-selection means that kids can choose books that match their personal interests and satisfy their personal needs. What’s more, reading is social. When kids have personal choice, they can choose books that their friends or other trusted readers recommend (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006; Atwell, 2016, Harvey, et al).
- Self-selection for readers in English as a foreign language suggests that reading for an hour a day—English language books, of great personal interest, which they choose themselves—results in noteworthy progress in English language learning (Krashen & Mason, 2015).

Of course, students benefit from help in selecting books. Book selection is a learning process. Children grow into self-selection with guidance and thoughtful scaffolding from parents as well as teachers and librarians.

Global Teacher award-winning Nancie Atwell (2016) considers reader’s choice, time, and pleasure essential. In her classroom and school (Center for Teaching and Learning), choice is a given: “Kids choose what they read because children who choose books are more likely to grow up to become adults who read books. Students who read only a steady diet of assigned titles don’t get to answer, for themselves, the single most important question about book reading: Why does anyone want to?”

## Cheerleaders

No matter what our children are learning—learning to walk, play soccer, or drive a car—we are by their sides cheering them on, encouraging them to keep going, to keep practicing. We know that, with practice, they will hone their skills and become a confident walker, a stronger soccer player, or a safer, more adept driver. But kids also need encouragement to practice at every stage. They need to know that we care deeply about their success as joyful bipeds, enthusiastic soccer players, competent drivers—and Super Readers! We need to talk about their reading practice with joy and pride in much the same way we do everything else they are learning—from piano to ping pong, skiing to mastering a skill saw. Practice makes perfect and we, as cheerleaders—through book talks, read-alouds, conversations and conferences—can help make reading practice more enjoyable and effective for our young people.

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*The single most important condition for literacy learning is the presence of mentors who are joyfully literate people.*

—Shirley Brice Heath

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## Community

We need to immerse our children in an enriching ecosystem of [book abundance](#) from home to classroom to school—with outreach to the public library. Let's tap the riches of the community to support our children's reading lives! Classroom teachers, families, and school and public librarians must [work together](#) to make sure our children have 24/7 access to books that they choose and want to read.

## How Do We Grow a Nation of Super Readers?

Our goal is to grow passionate Super Readers on their way to developing a lifelong, sustainable reading habit. We need to draw together all the reading resources that the community has to offer and cheerlead our children on as they learn to craft their own joyful reading lives and read ... and read ... and read their way into Super Reading—a passion they will share with such Super Readers (and accomplished human beings!) as Barack Obama, Warren Buffet, Malala Yousafzai, Oprah Winfrey, and Malcolm Mitchell.

We know the benefits of reading: superior analytical thinking, an expanded vocabulary, social-emotional strength and resilience, with a greater ability to overcome adversity. And don't forget empathy! Super Readers are more likely to become civically engaged citizens who care about each other, our nation, and the world, and—as they build *castles of possibilities* for themselves—they create a better life for us all.

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*Reading is one of the greatest acts of civilization because it takes the free raw material of the mind and builds castles of possibilities.*

—Ben Okri, Nigerian Poet

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