# The Tools of Engagement

A carpenter will tell you that the tool makes the job. As we have seen in numerous classrooms, hands-on tools really help generate students' enthusiasm. Now, in this chapter, we'll share some other great tools, and look at how these tools and techniques bring about engagement and can be used with any text, in any genre, at any level. The lesson design introduced in Chapters 1 and 2 provides the structure, but now let's focus on key areas of the engagement model of reading development (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000):
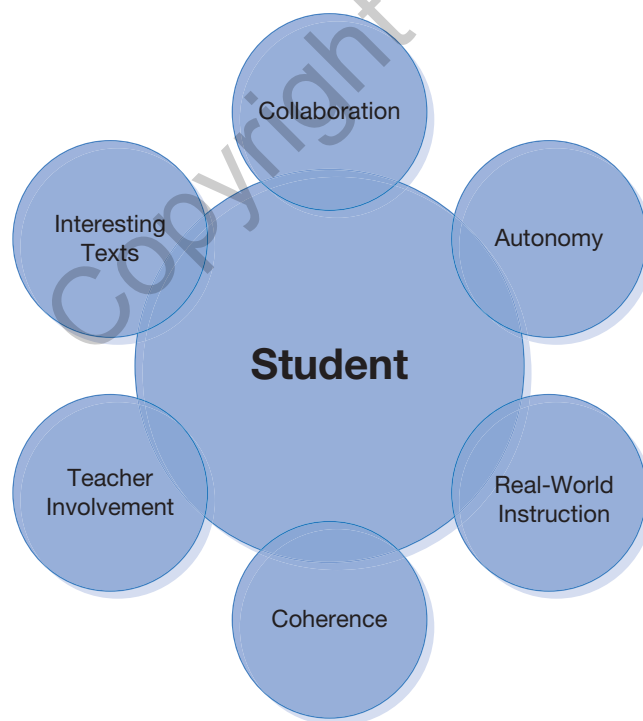
Key Areas of the Engagement Model of Reading Development

Think back to the lesson phases in Chapter 2, and consider how the facets of the graphic came into play:

1. Interesting Texts

2. Collaboration

3. Autonomy

4. Real-World Instruction

5. Coherence

6. Teacher Involvement

Interesting Texts

Engagement is higher when people come to the table around a really interesting text. And that starts with you, the teacher, being interested in the text you are bringing to your students. In Chapter 4, you will find interesting texts that we have used with our students. Think of them as your starter texts—proven to be interesting, discussion-worthy examples of great writing for children.

Collaboration

We like to jump-start collaboration from the top of the session. Collaboration challenges group members to think and explain their thinking, support each other's ideas, and listen actively, as well as other behaviors we model and practice.

The first tool we'll look at is questioning, a form of feedback that gets students to rethink their position or opinion. For example, whenever we ask students, "What leads you to think that?" we are actually providing them with feedback to reconsider their evidence or thinking. Here are some other effective questions (Science Channel, 2012):

◗ What if?

◗ Why not?

◗ Who's with me?

It is the question that lights the spark (Science Channel, 2012). When a teacher properly arranges the conditions of intellectual interaction, students "can investigate the hidden processes of their own and others' thinking and thus avoid being docile" (Stauffer, 1969, p. 39).

Now let's look at another tool for fueling students' conversation. It's just a simple table, right? But when it is used as the centerpiece of discourse, it goes from six boxes to a playing field for the developing mind. It helps center the collaborative task and talk of students.

Add categories across the top row, and suddenly you've got complexity. Notice that the outside columns invite students to record what they are sure of, and the middle column, by contrast, what they are not so sure of.

Caring	Not Sure	Selfish

With the right evidence, most people can decide if someone is caring or selfish. For example, in "The Little Captive" from *Wide-Awake Stories* (author unknown), a young girl, Bessie, brings home a bird to keep it safe. It appears that she is a caring individual. But in repeated readings or with a particular focus on the girl's actions as possibly being selfish, the evidence takes on a new perspective. Although Bessie does rescue the bird, when her mother asks her to release the little bird, she cannot let the bird go, and the bird cannot leave Bessie. Are her caring behaviors really an illusion of selfishness? When we reconsider the girl's actions and the title, it makes for an interesting discussion. This chart also allows for uncertainty as we work, think, and discuss the text. The "not sure" area means we are on the lookout for further information.

For additional practice with this tool, refer to the sample lesson in the "Phase 2: Discussing" section of Chapter 2.

Autonomy

While using the lessons, we have seen some students use the boxes in interesting ways. A hidden feature we once did not recognize is the line. Providing students with *autonomy* over the discussion prior to the reading allows them to show how their thinking is moving or leaning. For example, while reading "The Little Captive," a student places a character on the line between the "caring" and "not sure" columns when a single piece of evidence conflicts with previous text evidence. (See also Michaela's comments in Chapter 2.) Students use the line to indicate that they do not have enough evidence to make a firm commitment to their opinion. When students are left to discuss a text on their own, the task proves to be more engaging.

Educators discuss the concept of interactive reading, but we encourage truly interactive hands-on engagement. Ultimately, we are physical creatures; therefore, it makes sense to consider an approach to comprehension "known as indexing, which uses manipulatives that draw on the physical base of knowledge and

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thinking" (Gunning, 2011, p. 192). You will see why the veteran carpenter will always remind you that the tool makes the job. One way to understand the tool is to understand its purpose. So let's look at the tools that create engagement.

Real-World Instruction

"So what?"

When Cris Tovani, the author of *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading?* (2004), retells the story of Erin, who challenged her with a big "So what?," you immediately see your own Erin—the student who is not engaged. We sometimes get an Erin in our classes because the reading or the reading work is not real. It is a call for a reality check.

Real-world instruction starts with real books or texts that students can find in their classroom. These books are already in your classrooms because readers have found them to be real. We have found that students write down or ask about these books after meeting and reading just a sample of the text. These books have real issues that all kids deal with as they are growing up in this world. Students crave the opportunities to read about and discuss issues that matter to them. For example, they care about

◗ Friendship

◗ Loss

◗ Change

◗ Right and wrong

The small group needs to be brought together for a compelling reason. It should be worth the group members' time. Students rebel from what Guthrie and Davis (2003) call formal nonpersonal response situations. Students feel cheated if they read and respond in a formulaic way. Discourse is dynamic when it isn't micromanaged. The real world doesn't micromanage conversations.

We have found a natural flow to our work in small groups with students. We encourage you to do the same. One way to keep instruction real is to follow the readers. Our lessons give you suggestions on starting and stopping points for your readers during the lesson sequence, but you should always be ready for a change in direction. What feels more authentic is to go where students take the thinking. That is what makes it real. When you tap into honesty, fear, and love, you tap into areas that are rich discussion topics. Be ready and be real. Your readers deserve to read real books, with real topics and teachers who are real.

Coherence

Tools like semantic word maps, inquiry questions, and big ideas draw students into the reading process. They also set up a line of *coherence* from the opening thinking to thinking that changes during reading, and over time. As you will see in the lesson planners (Chapter 4), many begin by having the students manipulate pieces of paper to support their thinking. These visuals enable students to capture their ideas as they discuss, debate, revise, and review their thinking.

Whether you use sticky notes, index cards, or a digital tool, the beauty is that these tools begin in Phase 1: Engaging (see Chapter 2), but can of course extend into all the phases. Here are some other engaging tools to try:

Planning for Engagement	• Expository Expectation Map • Important Versus Interesting • Ranking Characters • Ranking the Table of Contents • Semantic Word Ranking • Sketch-to-Stretch • Staircase Label • Vocabulary Karaoke
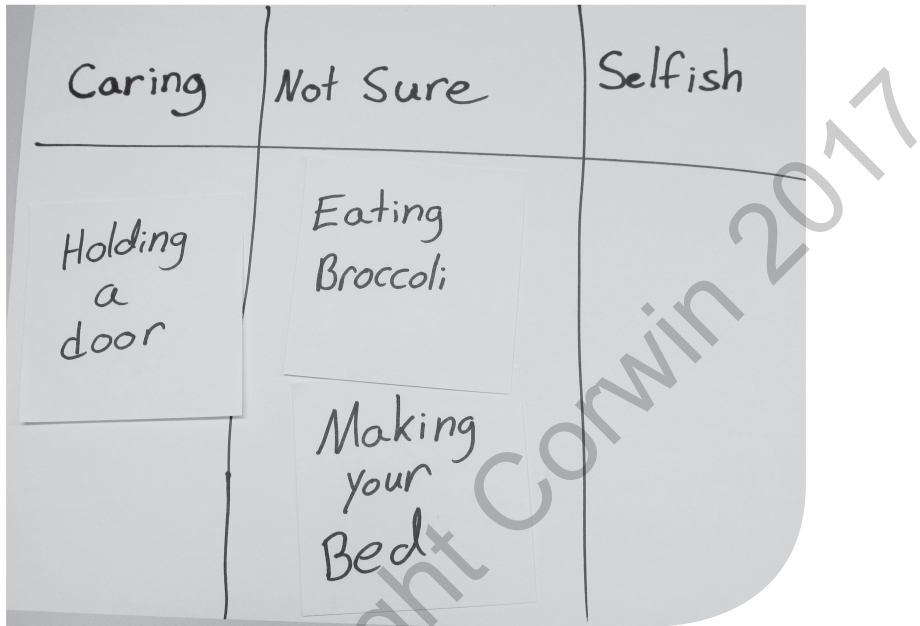
Expository Expectation Map

With the expository expectation map, students are given the topic of the informational text they will be reading and are asked to generate thoughts and ideas that they think they will read about and/or already know about the topic. For example, before reading about squirrels, students can use this chart to map what they expect to learn about squirrels. What do both squirrels and people do? You can use the following chart and list of actions:

swim   fly   sleep   play   fight   work   sing   talk

Squirrels	Both	Humans

The conversation about whether or not squirrels talk is interesting to listen to when your students start the discussion. Think about it.

Important Versus Interesting

As a reader, you are in a constant battle with information overload. You have to decide what is important or what is just interesting. For example, reality television is interesting but not really important. Suppose you ask a question on important issues, characters, and elements before, during, and after you read. You set up an ongoing discussion about the importance of information as you navigate a text. Then, ultimately, you decide how important the entire piece is for you as a reader and as a person.

For example, consider the following items:

library   recess   cafeteria   friends   spiders   water fountain

Try to rank them along a scale of important to interesting. (This conversation changes as you work your way through a text with these elements.)

Important   Interesting


You can also run it as a three-column chart.

Important Versus Interesting: A Three-Column Chart

Important	Not Sure	Interesting

Focusing a powerful question around a simple three-column chart makes the students' thinking visible. It is effective in focusing their thinking before, during, and after the reading. It can also be used time and time again. You just change what elements are important and interesting as your group works together in a text. It creates a focus and a follow-through idea for the group, can be used with both fiction and informational texts, and allows students to weed through the massive amount of information taken in so that they can frame their thinking. Freeing yourself from trying to remember everything in a book allows for better understanding and responding. The simple chart helps students think about what information is worth holding onto. The magic is not in the labeling but rather in the defending and rationalizing. The chart also remains in the group throughout the lesson so the students can analyze and synthesize the information as they read. Besides, it is always a compelling debate trying to get students to agree on what is important or what is interesting.

Ranking Characters

Another way to use manipulatives to engage students is to write character names on sticky notes and ask students to think about which characters will be more important than others. For example, using the characters *mother*, *father*, *uncle*, *teacher*, *classmate*, and *yourself* from *The Chalk Box Kid* (Bulla, 1987), students can rank who is more important. As students read, they decide if they want to switch the ranking of the characters (most important on the top). The word *important* can also be changed to *helpful*, *kind*, or another term, but this word can act as a "catch-all" for any book.

Important	Mother	Father	Uncle

Teacher	Classmate	Yourself
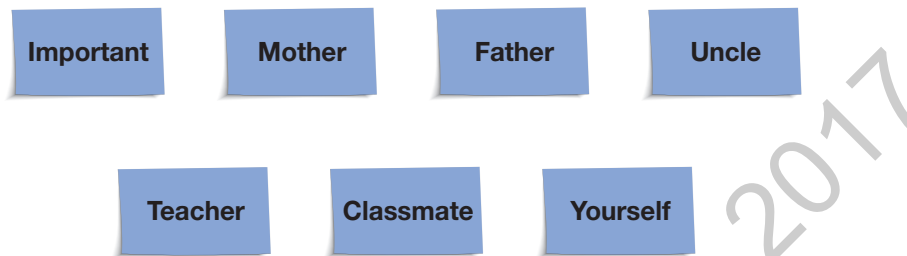
Ranking the Table of Contents

Another engaging launch technique is to rank the table of contents by chapter importance as if you were the author. Thinking about how the author might rank or order a text's chapter titles makes for an interesting conversation. Providing the titles starts students on interesting discussions. It also prepares them for follow-up thinking as they delve into a chapter.

Try organizing the chapters in a text about Eleanor Roosevelt (Davis, 1998). What would you put first? What would you put last? Why?

Working for Peace

Helping Her Husband

Famous Leader

First Lady

Important Dates in Eleanor Roosevelt's Life

Going to School

Order:

Semantic Word Ranking

If you choose a few key words from the text and a question that promotes speculation and arouses curiosity, you can get students thinking and predicting, and set the purpose for reading. For example, try ranking the following words and decide how they might be used in a text (try to formulate your prediction in the order of these words):

sleep   vitamins   metabolism   recharge   hormone   energy   conserve

The goal is to organize the words according to a meaning you attach to them. Can you organize these words and paint a positive picture? Can you organize them and

paint a negative picture? As they reconvene or discuss, student groups can reorganize their words as they receive new information or come across it in the text.

Sketch-to-Stretch

Given a limited amount of information (possibly the opening paragraph of the text being used, a few key words, or the title), students make a sketch of what they are visualizing. As they continue to read, they make additions and revisions to—or *stretch*—the sketch (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). Students are engaged in the strategy of synthesizing, integrating new information with previous knowledge. The sketch starts the engagement because it levels the playing field. Students can sketch their thinking, which will lead beautifully into their small-group discussions. For example, visualize a scene where the following words are at play:

wastebasket   motorcycle   crumbs   bellboy   mouse hole

A student visualizes a prediction based on key words before reading
(Text: *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* [Cleary, 1965]).

Staircase Label

Much like the ranking of characters, the staircase label stimulates and engages the reader to synthesize the information read in order to move characters along a visual staircase. Anchor words at the top and bottom of the staircase allow students to move their characters up and down—based on the new information they receive as they read. The students have to think about the degree to which each label applies to the character.

This staircase provides a visual that represents students' thinking around the quality (not quantity) of their evidence. For example, "She is nice because she helped her friend

pick up her room, but he is higher on the staircase because he helped someone find his missing dog and looked all day long in the freezing cold!" You can change the extremes (sad/happy, careless/careful, etc.).

Nice

Not Nice
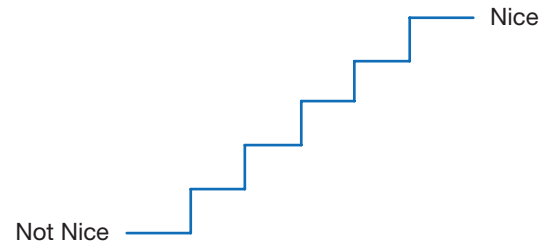
Students engage on the staircase to argue the degrees of difference as they continue to read and talk over time. For example, while reading *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843), think about what you know about Ebenezer Scrooge and how he moves up the stairs across the story.

Vocabulary Karaoke

One fun team-building game is called PowerPoint Karaoke. In the game, a team is challenged to explain to a group a series of PowerPoint slides—one the group members have never seen. In Vocabulary Karaoke, PowerPoint Karaoke meets "Story Impression" (McGinley & Denner, 1987). For this engaging activity, you provide students with key words in the order they appear in a text and see if students have an impression of how the text will unfold. They can work together to tell you their version when you give them the autonomy to work on this prior to learning. It also creates a way for readers to visualize their thinking as they progress through the text. Quickly tell how these unfold:

dribble　　party　　pizza　　goldfish　　winner

Teacher Involvement

These techniques will empower you to engage your readers. But all of them require *teacher involvement*, the fifth and final component of Guthrie's engagement model of reading development. An involved teacher is an engaging teacher. A teacher who is involved both physically and mentally will be a reading role model. Involvement entails both sitting with and challenging a small group of students to push their thinking by staying focused on the topic on the table. These are the tools to maintain engagement. All of them help create

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an air of uncertainty to begin the lesson. A "student's uncertainty arouses curiosity, which is a mental state vital to learning" (Hammond & Nessel, 2011, p. 63). This is the learning that launches the group on its quest for finding meaning and reducing uncertainty.

Now it's your turn to try out the lessons! Turn to the next chapter and let the games begin.