BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 5

by Richard Sinay

Genre: Language Arts

Key Takeaways

• Sinay argues that the central purpose of high-school English is to improve students' reading and writing literacy—not simply to teach literary analysis or cultivate a love of canonical literature.

• Teachers should model reading by reading during class, reading aloud expressively, and sharing their own responses to books, so students see reading as an ordinary and enjoyable habit.

• Independent reading should be built into English courses and supported with a classroom library, student choice, appropriate guidance, and meaningful recognition for completed books.

• Reading materials should challenge students without overwhelming them. Sinay emphasizes matching books to students' reading abilities and, where possible, their cultural interests and experiences.

• Vocabulary is best taught through the sentences and authentic texts in which words appear, rather than relying mainly on disconnected weekly word lists and memorization quizzes.

• Grammar, mechanics, and usage should be taught in the context of students' own writing, with instruction tied to the specific skills their drafts and writing genres require.

• Schools should provide targeted reading support for students who are behind grade level, including reading specialists, reading labs, and, where eligible, Title I programs.

• Reading should extend beyond English class: content-area teachers can give students regular time to read within their subjects and explicitly teach textbook strategies such as SQ3R, mapping, and annotation.

• Teachers should check comprehension at several levels—from recalling facts and making inferences to evaluating ideas and applying them—and assess reading growth rather than assume it occurs.

• Sinay calls for teacher preparation that gives English educators stronger grounding in reading, composition, grammar, and literature, so they can support literacy development across a wider range of students.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is aimed primarily at high-school English teachers, department chairs, literacy specialists, and school leaders looking for practical ways to make reading a routine part of students' education. It will be especially relevant to educators who want to reconsider independent reading, read-alouds, text selection, contextual vocabulary teaching, writing-focused grammar instruction, and collaboration across subject areas. Teacher-education programs and district teams may also find Sinay's argument useful when reviewing how educators are prepared to teach reading and writing. Readers should approach the book as an experienced teacher's strongly argued perspective, grounded in personal classroom stories and specific proposals rather than as a systematic research review; some of its broad claims and statistics would benefit from independent verification. Compared with books focused on literary interpretation or narrowly targeted reading interventions, Sinay's emphasis is on changing the everyday culture of secondary school: teachers model reading, students read widely at appropriate levels, and every discipline helps build literacy. Its most useful contribution is the practical question it repeatedly asks educators to consider: are classroom choices helping students become more capable, confident readers?

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: English Teachers Should Be Reading Teachers

Sinay challenges the division between English teachers, who often see themselves primarily as literature specialists, and reading teachers, who are associated with students needing remediation. In his view, every student is still developing as a reader. An English teacher

should therefore focus on helping students read and write more effectively, rather than expecting every teenager to become a literary enthusiast or treating difficult texts as automatic routes to literacy. The chapter draws on Sinay's experience as both a reading and English teacher and on his family's experience with reading from early childhood. He describes reading aloud to his children, keeping books available, and encouraging independent reading, which he associates with their academic success. He recommends acting as a reading coach: model reading, encourage daily practice, use vocabulary in context, and select texts that are accessible yet challenging.

Chapter 2: How I Was Educated in High School 1962–1966

Sinay recalls a high-school education built around extensive literature reading. He lists dozens of works assigned across four years, from Homer, Shakespeare, and Dickens to Steinbeck, Orwell, and Austen, and describes this volume as far beyond what many contemporary average-level students could comfortably manage. He also recalls reading independently, including numerous Steinbeck novels during a poorly organized chemistry class taught by an English teacher. The author presents his own experience as evidence that sustained exposure to books can help develop language even when a student's early home environment offered few reading models. He also acknowledges that many assigned classics were difficult for him and argues that sheer exposure is not enough: students need texts they can engage with. His practical conclusion is to make reading central while choosing material that supports gradual growth rather than simply reproducing a literature-heavy curriculum.

Chapter 3: Causes of the Decline of Literacy

Sinay attributes declining literacy, in his experience, to reduced time spent reading and to a range of competing activities. He points to television, phones, social media, online interaction, and video games as distractions that can displace sustained reading, while noting that technology could also support learning if used differently. He additionally criticizes the emphasis on standardized testing, which he believes can crowd out enjoyable and substantial reading. The chapter illustrates his concerns with classroom observations: students who avoided reading assigned novels, including honors students who cheated on quizzes, and athletes or other students who expected future college admission without consistent academic work. Sinay uses these examples to argue for helping students rebuild reading habits rather than simply assigning increasingly difficult texts. His central prescription is more purposeful reading throughout schooling, with technology used as a tool rather than a substitute for it.

Chapter 4: The Goal of Teaching English Is Improving Literacy

Sinay frames literacy improvement as the primary goal of English instruction and contends that reading is its most important engine. He argues that writing matters too: students should write about what they read, organize their ideas, and learn grammar and usage as part of communicating. He specifically calls attention to common usage distinctions such as "their,"

“there,” and “they’re,” which he believes schools should teach explicitly. Drawing on decades of teaching in high school and college, Sinay describes students who struggled with demanding books and with college-level work. He questions the assumption that assigning a canonical text automatically improves literacy, especially when students cannot read it independently. Rather than assigning blame across schools, families, and institutions, he urges English teachers to become reading advocates who provide appropriate texts, support students’ growth, and make reading a regular practice.

Chapter 5: Reading Aloud to Students

Sinay argues that reading aloud can benefit high-school students, including those who have rarely experienced it. Drawing on Jim Trelease’s The Read-Aloud Handbook, he describes how listening to books can expand vocabulary, strengthen comprehension, introduce unfamiliar words, and build attention for longer reading. He also emphasizes the emotional association: expressive, enjoyable read-alouds can help students connect books with pleasure rather than only with assignments. He illustrates the method with Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle,” as well as passages from The Scarlet Letter. Sinay recommends reading at a measured pace, using expressive voices, and discussing students’ questions after a story. The aim is not to replace students’ own reading but to make language vivid, model fluent reading, and give students a more inviting way into challenging texts.

Chapter 6: Reading Along with Students

This chapter turns the teacher’s example into a practical classroom routine. Sinay identifies several ways to read with students: participate in sustained silent reading, read assigned books aloud, help perform plays, and read nonfiction essays aloud. In each case, students see that the teacher is a reader, not merely someone who assigns books and evaluates responses. A consistent silent-reading period, with the teacher reading too, is presented as a particularly visible model. Sinay describes reading The Scarlet Letter aloud to help students hear Hawthorne’s sentence rhythms and following up with discussion and at-home reading. He also favors dramatic readings of plays and nonfiction read-alouds that build students’ background knowledge. The teacher’s presence, enthusiasm, and reflections can make reading more engaging; the chapter’s practical lesson is to participate in the reading rather than treating it as an activity students do alone.

Chapter 7: The Independent Reading Program

Sinay presents independent reading as a structured way to build the daily reading habit. He recommends creating a classroom library, letting students choose books with teacher guidance, and recognizing their effort through course points or extra credit. He describes interviewing students about books they have finished to confirm that they read them, and he recalls how a teacher’s “Wake Up and Read!” list helped him discover authors he could enjoy

and understand. A successful program, he argues, depends on matching students with books at an appropriate level. He suggests assessing reading abilities, labeling books by difficulty, and encouraging students to move upward gradually rather than pushing them into frustrating texts. The chapter also calls for English departments to coordinate the program across grade levels, combine it with in-class silent reading, and make reading part of students' school and home lives. Sinay reports that his own students' reading and test performance improved, though these are his professional observations rather than a controlled evaluation.

Chapter 8: The Importance of Readability and Cultural Suitability

Sinay describes literacy growth as gradual and argues that students need books that stretch their abilities without overwhelming them. He distinguishes among independent reading, which students can manage comfortably; instructional reading, which provides a productive challenge; and frustration-level reading, which is too difficult for successful engagement. He criticizes assigning books without considering students' reading levels and recommends assessing both students and texts before making selections. He also argues for cultural suitability: students may be more engaged by characters, settings, and authors that connect with their experiences. He gives examples of matching texts to the cultural makeup of a class and objects to a uniform curriculum that assumes one set of classics will work for everyone. His actionable proposal is to consider both readability and student interests when choosing required and independent reading, while still helping students progress toward more complex material.

Chapter 9: Title I Reading Programs

Sinay urges qualifying districts to use Title I funding to support students who enter secondary school substantially below grade level. He envisions a reading specialist and a dedicated reading lab where students can receive focused practice in reading, vocabulary, and comprehension. He argues that students with significant literacy gaps need more than ordinary grade-level English classes and may benefit from additional reading courses and lower-level classes that meet them closer to their current abilities. The chapter draws heavily on Sinay's experience in districts where he says reading support was available in some schools but not others. He describes the consequences of eliminating reading classes and the difficulty of trying to build support without adequate funding. He also calls for schools to measure growth and to treat reading intervention as a serious investment in students' ability to participate in regular classes and complete school successfully.

Chapter 10: The School-Wide Reading Program

Sinay proposes a daily, school-wide reading period—about twenty minutes—in which students and staff stop other activities and read. In his suggested homeroom model, students arrive with a book, check in with a teacher, and continue reading consistently. He recommends that schools make books available and consider small incentives to help

students establish the routine. He emphasizes that a reading program should be sustained and evaluated rather than launched briefly and forgotten. Schools could use beginning- and end-of-program measures to examine whether students' reading skills have changed. If a single school-wide period is impractical, he proposes distributing reading time across classes, with students reading material related to each subject. Both approaches aim to make reading a shared institutional priority rather than a responsibility left solely to English teachers.

Chapter 11: The Context Vocabulary Program

Sinay criticizes the familiar weekly routine of presenting a list of words, assigning practice, and testing definitions in isolation. He argues that students may memorize words temporarily without learning how they function in meaningful language, and that lists may not match either the students' level or their assigned reading. Citing the National Reading Panel and vocabulary researcher Timothy Rasinski, he advocates teaching vocabulary through authentic texts and the sentences in which words appear. In practice, teachers should select difficult or important words from a class reading, introduce them in context, and revisit them as students encounter them in the text. Sinay recommends coordinating vocabulary across grade levels and integrating it with comprehension work. He links contextual vocabulary instruction to independent reading: repeated exposure and attention to surrounding clues help students infer meaning and gradually add words to their working vocabulary.

Chapter 12: Writing, Grammar, and Usage

Sinay argues that students are often unclear about what English class is meant to teach, and he insists that writing, grammar, and usage must be part of literacy instruction. Rather than teaching grammar as a collection of detached rules, he recommends addressing it within students' drafts, especially during editing and revision. This lets students see how sentence choices and conventions affect their own communication. He offers concrete examples: combining simple sentences into compound sentences, adding commas and conjunctions, distinguishing "their," "there," and "they're," and strengthening writing with adjectives, adverbs, dependent clauses, or transitions. Lessons can be aligned with the genre students are writing—for instance, quotation marks in narratives or transitions in arguments. Sinay also stresses the influence of reading: students absorb patterns from the books they encounter and can apply those patterns in their own writing.

Chapter 13: Literature and Literacy Issues

Using The Scarlet Letter as a central example, Sinay questions whether difficult canonical literature is always appropriate for high-school students. He recalls reading the novel aloud and finding that his students struggled with Hawthorne's language, then asks whether a text is actually improving literacy if students cannot follow its vocabulary, syntax, historical setting, or themes. He makes similar concerns about texts such as Walden and argues that teenagers may lack the background and life experience needed for some forms of literary analysis.

Sinay does not reject literature altogether; he argues that it should be readable, engaging, and sufficiently challenging without becoming discouraging. He presents To Kill a Mockingbird as an example of a book he considers more accessible and relatable for many tenth-graders, while noting that historical context still matters. The chapter also questions the classroom time spent on long, complex works and on movie adaptations, urging teachers to keep literacy development—not simply coverage or analysis—at the center.

Chapter 14: Content Area Reading Development

Sinay argues that students need explicit instruction in how to read textbooks, not just assignments to read them. He encourages content-area teachers to learn strategies such as SQ3R—Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review—and chapter mapping, which organizes main ideas in a compact visual outline. He also recommends teaching students to mark texts and write marginal notes, suggesting that schools provide practice materials or books students can annotate. The chapter connects reading instruction with study skills and preparation for college. Sinay argues that sustained concentration, regular homework, and effective textbook study are learned through practice, and that many students who plan to attend college have not developed these habits. He proposes teaching reading and study strategies as part of secondary instruction rather than assuming students will acquire them on their own. His examples contrast students who routinely studied with those who struggled to complete assigned reading.

Chapter 15: Reading Across the Curriculum

Sinay extends his call for reading beyond English class, recommending that students have regular time to explore subjects through books, articles, and other relevant reading. He describes an economics teacher whose students read The Wall Street Journal and began asking questions that had not arisen in ordinary lessons. He suggests comparable reading in subjects such as French, science, history, music, art, and mathematics, so students build knowledge while practicing literacy. The chapter also calls for content-area teachers to teach textbook strategies, including SQ3R, mapping, and annotation, and to coordinate expectations with colleges. Sinay argues that daily study habits and the ability to concentrate are essential to college readiness. His broad proposal is that every subject should contribute to students' literacy and background knowledge, rather than treating reading as the English department's exclusive task.

Chapter 16: Improving Comprehension

Sinay recommends asking purposeful questions about every reading so teachers can check understanding and help students correct mistaken impressions. He describes literal questions, which test recall of facts; interpretive or inferential questions, which ask students to use textual clues and background knowledge; evaluative questions, which invite judgments about a text or character; and creative or applied questions, which ask students to transfer

ideas to new situations. The chapter connects comprehension with vocabulary: words students cannot understand can obstruct their understanding of a passage, so vocabulary should be taught in the context of the assigned reading. Sinay also argues for assessing students' reading skills at the beginning and end of a course to determine whether instruction is working. Questions and assessments, in this account, should support learning and reveal growth—not merely serve as tests of whether students have completed an assignment.

Chapter 17: Literature and Improving Literacy

Sinay revisits the tension between teaching literary heritage and improving students' practical reading abilities. He describes the pressure to cover chronological surveys of American and British literature, often within a crowded school year, and recalls explaining to students that knowing major authors is part of cultural literacy. At the same time, he questions whether difficult works such as The Scarlet Letter, The Crucible, The Great Gatsby, and Great Expectations improve literacy for students who cannot read them comfortably. He distinguishes cultural knowledge of authors and literary history from growth in reading and writing skills. Sinay argues that students need wide reading at an instructional level and that challenging works should not leave them frustrated or disengaged. He sees To Kill a Mockingbird as a more accessible choice for many students, provided teachers establish relevant historical context. The chapter's central question for curriculum designers is whether a given literary work is helping students become better readers or mainly familiarizing them with a canon.

Chapter 18: English Teachers Should Know Reading

The final chapter argues that teaching literature does not automatically prepare someone to teach reading. Sinay contrasts the work of reading teachers—assessing reading growth, teaching vocabulary in context, addressing comprehension, and evaluating readability—with what he sees as gaps in many English teachers' preparation. He recommends frequent comprehension checks, appropriate text selection, reading aloud, and assessment of students' skills and progress. Sinay calls for teacher education that combines reading, writing, grammar, and literature instead of focusing overwhelmingly on literary study. He argues that English teachers need enough reading knowledge to support students with varied abilities, while students with substantial reading deficits may need specialist instruction and reading labs. He concludes that schools should prepare teachers to help students acquire language throughout their education, not assume that exposure to canonical literature alone will do the work.

Notable Quotes

> *""“Teaching English is not about making students love literature; rather, it is about making them want to read.”""*

""“The English teacher should be a reading cheerleader, encouraging their students to read, read, and read.”""

""“The student gains literacy one step at a time, like climbing a step ladder.”""

""“Words have meaning when they are used in a sentence, not sitting isolated on a shelf waiting for a meaning.”""

""“The core philosophy of reading aloud to students is to keep it pleasurable, expressive, and consistent.”""

""“Improving literacy means ensuring that students are gaining language through reading.”""

Full Summary

Sinay’s central claim is that English teachers should think of themselves as reading teachers, not as literature professors transplanted into high-school classrooms. Many choose the profession because they love literature, then mistake their own enthusiasm for proof that teaching students to interpret Shakespeare or dissect a novel will make them literate. Sinay, who holds graduate degrees in both reading and English, says he saw students first as readers: How well could they read, and what would help them improve? The purpose of English, he argues, is to strengthen students’ reading and writing, not to turn them into lovers of the literary canon. Reading is the essential route to literacy; what students absorb from books eventually informs what they can express in writing. His own family illustrates the force of reading habits. Sinay and his wife read to their children from infancy, filled their rooms with books, and returned repeatedly to favorites such as Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs. When his son was discouraged from reading in kindergarten, Sinay thought of Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird, whose teacher objects to her having learned to read at home. In second grade, the boy embraced a school reading contest and won after devouring hundreds of pages; later, in his sixth-grade graduation speech, he urged the school never to discourage reading. Sinay connects his children’s academic success, and his grandchildren’s, to a household where reading was ordinary. Teachers, he says, should model that habit and encourage students to read regularly. He also rejects the familiar weekly routine of memorizing twenty vocabulary words and taking quizzes: words are learned more meaningfully in the sentences where they occur, as readers use context to infer their meanings. Texts should be approachable yet challenging, allowing language to grow gradually rather than overwhelming students. Sinay’s high-school education at La Habra High School, from 1962 to 1966, offered a striking contrast to what he later saw in classrooms. An average student, placed according to reading scores rather than enrolled in honors courses, was assigned thirty-two literary works. His freshman year included Homer’s

Iliad and Odyssey, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, and Steinbeck’s The Pearl. Later came Silas Marner, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, Huckleberry Finn, Moby-Dick, The Great Gatsby, Macbeth, Beowulf, Nineteen Eighty-Four, and Paradise Lost, among others. Students regarded this volume of reading as normal, though Sinay now believes much of it was far beyond teenagers’ abilities. He also read on his own. In a chemistry class taught by an English teacher who admitted knowing nothing about chemistry, students worked through the textbook with a capable sophomore while the teacher read his own book; Sinay used the spare time to get through twelve Steinbeck novels. After graduating, he read about fifty novels over the summer before college. Though his early home life had offered few books, sustained reading gave him a way to catch up and develop his command of language. Reflecting on why literacy declined, Sinay first blamed television, which competed with reading for young people’s time. He later saw cell phones, texting, computers, social media, video games, and online conversation intensify the distraction. Students might use technology to access information, he says, but often spend more time socializing than reading. He also objects to the priority given to sports when families assume athletic ability will secure college opportunities; one parent told him academics mattered less, yet the student ultimately went to community college because no four-year institution would risk admitting someone who had not applied himself. In his own honors classes, some juniors stole Huckleberry Finn quizzes to earn perfect scores without reading the novel. When Sinay asked whether they expected to attend college, they all raised their hands; he challenged them to explain how they would manage college without reading. The episode strained relations, but reinforced his view that students’ habits were steering them away from literacy. He also blames standardized-test pressure, which, he argues, sacrifices meaningful reading rather than building it. For Sinay, improving literacy—not cultivating canonical taste—is the achievable goal of teaching English. He cites claims that half the country reads at a sixth-grade level and that the United States ranks fifty-first internationally in literacy, presenting these figures as signs of a serious problem. Businesses and colleges, he observes, ask how graduates can arrive without basic reading and writing skills. He recalls that a large share of students in Pennsylvania could not pass a college-level course, while colleges increasingly needed remedial classes; California State University had stopped adding such courses despite students’ preparation gaps. His own experience with Huckleberry Finn showed him that assigning a celebrated book did not guarantee growth: only about 30 percent of his students read enough of it to judge it. A text may be great literature yet remain inaccessible to its students. English teachers must therefore promote reading that students can engage with, while also helping them write coherently and learn grammar and usage through their writing. Sinay insists that literacy develops step by step, through language students can take in and use. Reading aloud is one practical way to make reading both accessible and pleasurable. Drawing on Jim Trelease’s The Read-Aloud Handbook, Sinay argues that listening exposes students to vocabulary and sentence structures they may

not encounter in everyday conversation, expands listening vocabulary, and supports comprehension. Some students discover a word for the first time when they hear it spoken. More broadly, reading aloud associates books with enjoyment rather than mere schoolwork. Sinay gave characters distinct voices when reading Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle," making students laugh and listen closely. After "Sleepy Hollow," they debated the Headless Horseman's identity, felt sorry for Ichabod Crane, and returned to the story to consider the hints about Ichabod's later life. Sinay also read substantial portions of The Scarlet Letter, using an exaggerated, evil voice for Roger Chillingworth and enjoying Hawthorne's language. Reading should be unhurried, expressive, and steady, he says, giving listeners time to imagine scenes and characters. Sustained listening also trains attention, a capacity students need for longer reading and college study. In class, the teacher's example matters because students notice what teachers do, not only what they say. Sinay describes several ways to read alongside them. During a daily silent-reading period, the teacher should actually read a book, rather than use the time for other work, and occasionally share what makes it interesting. When a required novel is taught, the teacher can read selected chapters aloud while students take the next chapters home, hearing the language modeled and then attempting it themselves. Sinay did this with The Scarlet Letter, whose rhythms and long sentences he felt required careful pacing. Plays offer another shared experience: students can take parts, while the teacher participates too, or the class can listen to professional performances of more complicated works. Finally, teachers should read nonfiction aloud as well as fiction. Informational reading supplies background knowledge that helps students understand stories and encourages them to think critically. Through these shared acts of reading, students see their teacher as a reader and encounter varied forms of language in use. Independent reading extends the shared reading modeled in class by giving students regular opportunities to choose books for themselves. Dana Gioia's report for the National Endowment for the Arts notes that a daily reading habit is strongly associated with stronger reading skills and higher academic achievement, while poor reading skills correlate with weaker financial prospects. Sinay argues that schools squander this opportunity when English departments fail to create a program that encourages and recognizes reading beyond assigned course texts. A classroom library can begin modestly and grow over time; when Sinay taught reading, he bought books for students who had little reading material at home and encouraged them to borrow books for class and home use. His own independent reading grew from a teacher's "Wake Up and Read!" list of roughly a hundred classic titles. Many proved too difficult, linguistically and historically, but Steinbeck and Hemingway offered styles he could follow, and he read as much of their work as he could find. That experience convinced him that students need both choice and guidance: they should be encouraged to discover writers and subjects that interest them, rather than be left alone with books they cannot manage. As a teacher, he built a library of about two hundred novels and invited students to choose from it. He set up quarterly reading,

awarded points or extra credit, and interviewed students about their books to verify that they had finished and understood them. A student who completed only part of a book could still receive some credit for the effort; a quick reader could move on to another title. For the program to work, teachers need to know both the student's reading ability and the difficulty of the books available. Sinay used the San Diego Quick Assessment with his students, drawing on his experience administering reading assessments to thousands of community-college students. For a department-wide program, he suggests using measures such as the Nelson-Denny Reading Test to help match students to books. The department can rate its collection as easy, medium, or challenging, then have grade-level teams build and maintain the program together. A student's choice should be approved when it is several grade levels beyond what that student can read comfortably; the purpose is to nudge readers upward, not set them up for failure. Sinay also notes that California's language-arts standards called for students to read a million words over four years of high school, a goal an organized independent-reading program could help make attainable. Matching a book to a student involves more than selecting an appropriate grade level. Sinay distinguishes independent reading, which is comfortable and readily understood, from instructional reading, which stretches the student productively, and frustration reading, which is so difficult that vocabulary and comprehension become barriers. Instructional-level books offer the strongest opportunity to encounter and learn new words. Assigning a book far above a student's ability, he argues, often produces withdrawal rather than growth. He contrasts Hawthorne's difficult language in The Scarlet Letter with Steinbeck's East of Eden as a more accessible choice, and insists that students should be challenged without being overwhelmed. Cultural suitability matters as well. If a class is largely Hispanic, Sinay recommends including books with Hispanic characters and points to Steinbeck's novels as works many Hispanic readers can relate to. In predominantly Black classes, he argues, students should encounter writing by Black authors, while teachers should still consider the linguistic accessibility of individual works. The point is not to replace one rigid list with another, but to move away from a one-size-fits-all curriculum that ignores students' experiences and reading abilities. Students are more likely to engage with books they can understand and connect with. For students who are substantially behind, Sinay calls on districts to provide targeted reading support through Title I. A qualifying school can apply for federal funds to hire a full-time reading teacher and establish a reading lab for students two or more grade levels below their expected level. Ninth-graders entering at a seventh-grade reading level, for example, could qualify for assistance. In the lab, students can read quietly, listen to stories, and build vocabulary and comprehension, increasing their chances of succeeding in regular classes. Sinay worked in a successful Title I program at Fullerton, Buena Park, and Troy high schools, and contrasts those schools with the district where he spent much of his career, which did not apply for funding despite qualifying. He also describes how eliminating junior-high reading classes left incoming students with even lower scores. For students unable to manage

grade-level texts, he argues, lower-level English courses and dedicated reading classes offer a more useful path than placing them in courses well beyond their abilities. Sinay also wants reading to be a school-wide responsibility, not an activity confined to English class or remedial programs. One proposal is a daily twenty-minute reading period, possibly in homeroom, where students bring a book, check in with a teacher, and read. Teachers can use certificates, candy, or other prizes to recognize participation. To establish whether the program is helping, schools should measure reading before and after it, using assessments such as the California Test of Basic Skills. If a school cannot arrange a common reading period, Sinay proposes setting aside the first fifteen minutes of every class for relevant reading. French students might read about French culture; science students might learn about scientists such as Marie Curie, Carl Sagan, Charles Darwin, or Isaac Newton. He recalls a teacher who had students read the Wall Street Journal in economics; their questions brought up issues she had not previously addressed. Reading across subjects, he argues, can expand knowledge as well as literacy. Vocabulary instruction, too, should grow out of what students actually read. Sinay criticizes the familiar weekly routine of assigning twenty words, giving a practice quiz on Wednesday and a graded test on Friday, and asking students to match words with definitions. Such work can reward short-term memorization, but words are more likely to become part of a student's language when encountered in meaningful sentences. The National Reading Panel's 2000 report supports learning vocabulary through rich contexts in authentic texts. Sinay recommends selecting difficult or important words from the assigned reading and teaching their meanings as students meet them. In a class reading Romeo and Juliet, for instance, vocabulary should come from the play, with quizzes or tests tied to its acts. He saw students initially surprised by this approach because they were accustomed to isolated lists, but he believed that working out a word from its context strengthens both vocabulary and comprehension. Grammar, mechanics, and usage should likewise be taught in connection with students' writing rather than as detached exercises. Sinay traces this approach to the growth of composition teaching in the 1980s, citing Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California. During editing, students can combine two simple sentences into a compound sentence, learning both conjunctions and comma use. They can check their drafts for errors involving "their," "there," and "they're," or add adverbs and adjectives to make sentences more precise. Teachers can also ask students to identify dependent clauses in their own work and help them add one where it fits. Instruction can be shaped by the genre: narratives provide a natural occasion to teach quotation marks, while argumentative writing calls for transitional words. Students can study grammar and punctuation in professional writing as models, too. Sinay recalls his four-year-old daughter using commas and quotation marks correctly because, as she explained, "that's the way it is when I read it." When teachers choose skills in response to problems in students' drafts, instruction becomes directly useful to the writing they are trying to improve. The tension between literary study and literacy becomes especially clear

in Sinay’s account of teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter. He first encountered the novel as a high-school junior, found it fascinating, but did not understand it. Years later, he read the entire book aloud to his own junior class, trying to convey the clarity and animation he admired in Hawthorne’s prose. When he finished, he called it one of the most beautifully written books he had ever read. His students, however, had been lost in its language. The experience sharpened his central question: are English teachers teaching literature, or helping students become more literate? If the language of a book stands several grade levels above students’ abilities, Sinay argues, assigning it may expose them to a celebrated work without improving their command of language. He disputes the claim that difficulty alone develops readers. Students can be challenged without being overwhelmed; otherwise, they may disengage rather than grow. He points to Henry David Thoreau’s Walden as a text students found neither enjoyable nor readable, and says The Scarlet Letter was too demanding for an average junior class. Literary works also presume knowledge of the era that produced them. Before reading The Crucible, students need context about Salem, the Puritans, and their beliefs; Huckleberry Finn requires an understanding of the antebellum South and slavery. Without that background, a work’s meaning can remain obscure. Sinay questions the expectation that teenagers can analyze complex works as adults do, noting that one literature professor told him a reader may need to be forty or older to bring enough life experience to difficult books. In his view, literary analysis can consume a course without advancing students’ reading. He recalls English teachers devoting an entire semester to Hamlet and asks whether students’ literacy actually improves through prolonged study of Shakespeare’s early seventeenth-century language. Literature has a place in school, he says, when students can engage with it and when it offers a reasonable linguistic challenge. To Kill a Mockingbird, for example, can be readable and relatable for tenth graders, provided they receive the background knowledge needed to understand Southern society in the 1940s. Sinay admits that he sometimes showed films connected with assigned books, as other teachers did, but argues that films do not replace the literacy gains that come from reading. His exception was Groundhog Day, which he used with seniors as a prompt to consider purpose and choices; students wrote an essay arguing a thesis about the film. Reading development, Sinay insists, cannot belong to the English classroom alone. Students must also learn how to read the textbooks they encounter in science, history, and other subjects. Content-area reading has its own demands, and teachers need preparation in how to teach it. One familiar method is SQ3R: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. But merely knowing its name is not enough; teachers who have never used the process may struggle to teach it effectively. Another useful tool is mapping, a form of outlining that condenses a chapter and makes its main ideas visible in an organized structure. Sinay also wants students to practice marking books as college readers do. Since school textbooks generally cannot be written in, students could be given one content-area book to annotate each year, or practice with copied chapters. These methods are part of a larger

preparation for the reading and concentration college demands. Sinay argues that study skills are rarely taught systematically in high school. One principal tried to establish a freshman study-skills course, but assigned it to business teachers who had no background in teaching those skills, and the effort failed. English teachers trained in reading could teach students how to study textbooks, use memory strategies, and organize what they learn. Sinay contrasts students who routinely avoid assigned reading with his own children, who studied for hours each evening in high school and felt that this work prepared them for demanding colleges. His point is not that every student has the same circumstances, but that college readiness requires sustained attention and regular practice. He proposes making reading part of every subject. In one economics class, students read the Wall Street Journal for fifteen minutes a day and began asking questions their teacher had not previously addressed. A French class could read about French history, cuisine, art, and notable people; science students might explore the lives and work of scientists. Music and art classes, too, could include reading about influential artists and composers alongside practical work. Sinay likens this freedom to Google's practice of giving employees time to pursue projects that interest them: students, too, should have room to investigate questions within the subjects they study. Such reading would expand both their knowledge and their literacy. Across the curriculum, teachers should teach students to use texts actively, rather than expecting reading ability to appear on its own. Sinay recalls advocating for daily reading time in every class because students often have little opportunity to read at school. He also emphasizes communication between high schools and colleges about the preparation students need. His experience teaching at both levels convinced him that many students who say they plan to attend college have not developed the habits of reading and study that college requires. To strengthen comprehension, teachers should ask questions that move beyond a single kind of answer. Literal questions check whether students understand facts: who the main character is, or when a story takes place. Interpretive questions ask them to infer motives and meanings from textual clues, combining what the author implies with the reader's background knowledge. Evaluative questions require judgments about a character or a book, while creative or applied questions invite students to transfer what they have read to a new situation—for instance, imagining how a story would change if it took place in the year 3000. Questions after chapters, poems, and other readings can expose misunderstandings and deepen understanding. Sinay also connects comprehension to vocabulary: students are more likely to understand a text when they understand its words. Reading growth, he says, should be measured at the beginning and end of a course so teachers can see whether their instruction is working. Sinay acknowledges that literature can provide cultural literacy: students learn the names and works of writers such as Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson. When a student asked why the class had to read such works, he explained that knowing a nation's major authors is part of being educated, and that literature also conveys social history. He draws on E. D. Hirsch's argument

in Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know about the value of shared cultural knowledge. Yet he distinguishes that knowledge from the more fundamental ability to read effectively. A freshman asked to read Great Expectations may recognize Dickens while struggling to follow his language. In Sinay's experience, students often gained awareness of important authors without gaining the reading fluency they needed. He suggests that students can acquire more of this literary history in college, while high-school English gives greater attention to reading and writing at accessible, appropriately challenging levels. The final argument turns to teachers' preparation. Sinay says that knowing literature does not automatically equip an English teacher to assess reading ability, select texts by readability, teach comprehension, or support students who are behind. Reading specialists can design focused programs and reading labs; computer programs that merely keep students occupied are no substitute. Teachers should learn more about how language develops, and teacher education should include reading, composition, grammar, and literature rather than concentrating chiefly on literary study. Sinay's enduring measure of English teaching is not how much difficult literature a class has covered, but whether students leave more capable of reading, writing, and choosing to read throughout their lives.

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