BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 6

by Richard Sinay

Genre: Language Arts

Key Takeaways

• The central problem is not literature itself, but assigning literature whose language and cultural context put average and below-average students at the frustration level of reading.

• English classes should prioritize students' literacy in reading and writing rather than making them love literature or memorize literary terminology.

• Textbooks often constrain teachers to chronological surveys and selections that are too difficult or culturally remote for many students; a custom-designed reading program can better serve learners' needs.

• Students learn most effectively from texts at their instructional reading level: challenging enough to build vocabulary and comprehension, but accessible enough to sustain engagement.

• Cultural relevance matters because students are more likely to read when they recognize their communities, experiences, and identities in the books they encounter.

• Literacy develops incrementally through frequent reading. Sinay's Step Ladder Approach asks teachers to select accessible works that gradually increase in linguistic challenge.

• Reading stamina is an essential outcome of English instruction and a practical preparation for college, where students must sustain attention to substantial amounts of reading.

• English teachers should act as reading coaches and visible reading role models, offering time for independent reading, appropriate book choices, and encouragement.

• Teacher preparation should include practical instruction in teaching reading, writing, composition, grammar, usage, and literature—not only academic study of literary works.

• Sinay proposes two English-degree tracks: one preparing teachers for secondary English classrooms and another for students pursuing advanced literary study or college teaching.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is aimed chiefly at secondary English teachers who teach average and below-average readers, as well as literacy specialists, department chairs, teacher educators, and school leaders responsible for curriculum. Readers will find a sustained critique of textbook-driven literary surveys and a practical framework for choosing texts by reading level, cultural relevance, and their ability to encourage sustained reading. Sinay's classroom stories and teaching history make the argument especially relevant to educators reconsidering how canonical works are assigned and how independent reading can fit into English instruction. The book may also interest parents and education students who want to understand why students can leave English classes discouraged by reading. Compared with works focused primarily on literary interpretation or the defense of a traditional canon, Sinay's emphasis is on literacy development, accessibility, and reading habits—though his strong recommendations invite discussion about how to balance those goals with study of literary history and classic works. Its most useful contribution is a clear challenge to ask whether assigned reading helps the particular students in front of the teacher become more capable and confident readers.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: How Literature Textbooks Shape the Teaching of English

Sinay argues that textbooks turn English into a content-heavy survey course, especially in junior- and senior-year American and British literature. Their chronological organization encourages teachers to cover authors, eras, and historical background rather than focus on sustained reading and literacy growth. The book's selections may be linguistically difficult, culturally distant, or irrelevant to students, while the textbook's comprehension questions may

not adequately support understanding. Sinay also questions the irony that average students are bound to textbooks while honors and advanced students often receive individually designed reading programs. He recommends that teachers treat the textbook as a resource rather than as the curriculum's controlling authority. Instead of assigning texts simply because they appear in a survey, teachers should choose books appropriate to their students' reading abilities and interests, develop effective comprehension questions, and give students opportunities to read extensively. The ultimate test of a reading program, he suggests, should be whether students' literacy improves—not whether the class has covered a prescribed list of authors.

Chapter 2: How the English Degree Impacts Students at the Secondary Level

Sinay contends that many secondary English teachers enter the classroom with degrees centered on literary study, not on teaching English. Their college experience may cultivate a love of literature and literary analysis, but it can also lead them to imitate professors by lecturing about canonical works and expecting students to share their interests. This approach may suit advanced students better than the average classroom, where the priority should be developing reading and writing skills. Because English majors are often not taught how to teach literature, writing, grammar, reading, or usage, new teachers must improvise and learn on the job. Sinay describes how this can result in excessive time spent on one work, such as devoting a semester to a play, instead of exposing students to a broader range of reading. He calls for preparation that distinguishes academic expertise in literature from the practical skills needed to help secondary students become more literate.

Chapter 3: English Teachers Aren't Trained to Teach Any Aspect of English

This chapter examines three stages of teacher preparation—the English degree, education coursework, and student teaching—and argues that each commonly leaves major gaps. English departments typically emphasize literary periods, authors, and criticism without teaching future teachers how to teach a novel, poem, play, or short story. They may assign essays without explicitly teaching the writing process, and composition, grammar, and reading instruction can remain outside the major's focus. Sinay argues that education departments also often emphasize general courses rather than discipline-specific methods, while student teaching offers no guarantee of strong mentoring in reading, writing, or language instruction. He proposes preparation in composition pedagogy, rhetoric, grammar, reading processes, readability assessment, and the teaching of literary genres. The practical aim is for beginning English teachers to arrive in schools ready to teach the actual skills their students need instead of having to acquire them through trial and error.

Chapter 4: Is Literature the Vehicle to Better Literacy?

Drawing on his own high school experience, Sinay recalls being assigned many canonical works, including Homer, Shakespeare, Conrad, and Scott. The quantity of reading was substantial, but much of it was beyond students' reading abilities or lacked the historical background they needed to understand it. He uses examples such as Dickens and Hawthorne to argue that a book's prestige does not ensure that it is suitable for a particular grade or group of readers. Sinay does not reject literature as a means of developing literacy; he argues that the selection must be appropriate. He distinguishes advanced students, who may be ready for complex works, from average and below-average students, who need readable and engaging texts. A tailored program, he contends, can preserve literary study while choosing works that students can understand and connect with, thereby giving them more meaningful practice in reading.

Chapter 5: The Arguments Against British Literature

Sinay objects to teaching British literature to average students as a rigid chronological survey. Many students lack background knowledge of British history, social structures, and literary periods, so teachers may have to transform English class into a history course before students can follow the reading. Archaic language, unfamiliar customs, and class systems can create additional obstacles, leaving students to spend their effort decoding context rather than engaging with the text. His criticism is aimed at the survey model, not at all British writing. He proposes choosing works that students can read and understand, and teaching them with enough context to make the reading meaningful. A course that emphasizes accessible texts and sustained reading, he argues, better advances literacy and college readiness than a program focused mainly on identifying authors and literary eras.

Chapter 6: The Arguments Against Teaching Shakespeare

Sinay explains why Shakespeare can be unusually difficult for average and below-average readers. Semantic shifts mean familiar-looking words may have unfamiliar historical meanings; inverted syntax forces readers to rearrange sentences; archaic pronouns and verb forms slow comprehension; and compressed allusions, puns, and references to the Bible or classical mythology require background knowledge many students do not have. The challenge is not simply a matter of old vocabulary but of processing an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural system. Sinay describes how listening to strong performances helped him acclimate to Shakespeare after extensive exposure, but argues that ordinary high school students often lack the time and experience to do the same. He suggests showing scenes or productions before reading to help students understand plot and visualize action. Even with such supports, he questions whether assigning Shakespeare to struggling readers advances their literacy; in his view, the plays may be more appropriate for college study or for students already equipped to engage with them.

Chapter 7: The Arguments Against the Teaching of American Literature

Sinay supports teaching American literature but criticizes textbook-based surveys that select works without regard to students' linguistic abilities or cultural connections. He argues that demanding essays by writers such as Emerson and Thoreau may be too difficult for many students to read productively. A class can therefore spend substantial time covering literary history without giving students the accessible reading practice needed for literacy growth. He recommends building a varied program of novels, plays, short stories, poetry, and nonfiction chosen for the students in the classroom. For example, he points to writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Elizabeth Acevedo as possible connections for Hispanic students, while emphasizing that selection should depend on the actual class. Reading widely and regularly, both in class and independently, can also build stamina—a habit he sees as important preparation for college reading.

Chapter 8: Little Professors Come to High School Unprepared to Teach English

Sinay describes how English majors can become "little professors of literature": proficient at analyzing literary works but poorly prepared to teach reading, writing, grammar, mechanics, or usage. When they enter secondary schools, they may reproduce the content-oriented practices of their university instructors. This is especially problematic when students need practical literacy instruction more than extended discussion of authors and literary criticism. The chapter highlights composition as a particular gap. Sinay points to the CSU Expository Reading and Writing Course as a response to college students arriving without sufficient preparation in argumentative and analytical writing. He argues that the need for such remedial support exposes a failure to prepare secondary English teachers to teach composition. English departments and teacher-preparation programs, he proposes, should equip teachers to teach writing processes and measure student growth rather than relying on literature alone to do that work.

Chapter 9: Tossing Out Literature That is Frustration Level Reading

Sinay explains three reading levels: independent, where readers can enjoy a text with little difficulty; instructional, where appropriate challenge and support promote learning; and frustration, where weak word recognition and comprehension make reading exhausting and discouraging. He argues that students are too often assigned literature at the frustration level, especially when textbooks require average students to read works far above their abilities. When students must devote most of their effort to decoding words, they have little capacity left for comprehension or enjoyment. He advocates replacing the one-size-fits-all textbook with a custom program built around students' instructional reading levels and cultural interests. Teachers should select works students can engage with, provide support, and assess literacy growth over time. Sinay's example of students reading Steinbeck illustrates his claim that accessible, culturally resonant literature can prompt students to finish books and develop their reading skills more effectively than selections that alienate or overwhelm them.

Chapter 10: English Teachers Should Be Reading Teachers

Sinay argues that English teachers should see themselves as reading coaches, not only as literature specialists. Their mission should be to encourage reading and strengthen literacy, rather than assuming that literary analysis or difficult assigned texts will automatically improve students' abilities. He draws on his experience as both a reading specialist and an English teacher, including a school administrator's observation that his reading students showed notable improvement. He also describes how reading aloud to his own children and encouraging their independent reading helped cultivate habits that supported their academic success. The chapter offers practical guidance: model reading, set aside quiet reading time, encourage students to read every day, and help them interpret vocabulary in context instead of relying exclusively on isolated word lists. Teachers should choose material that is approachable but still offers a meaningful challenge. Sinay emphasizes that sustained, frequent reading builds vocabulary, comprehension, and stamina, and that English teachers can foster these capacities among all students—not only those formally identified as struggling readers.

Chapter 11: What Should Be the Goal of Teaching Literature?

Sinay asks teachers to clarify the purpose of literature instruction. He argues that the primary goal for average and below-average students should be advancing literacy, not making them love literature or master terminology. Literature can contribute to reading and writing development, he says, when students are interested enough to engage with it and when its language is within their reach. He contrasts custom-designed programs for advanced students with the textbook-driven experience often imposed on average students. If honors and Advanced Placement classes receive carefully selected reading lists, he asks, why should other students be confined to books that may be too difficult or culturally remote? His recommendation is to tailor reading to students' abilities and backgrounds so they are more likely to read consistently and grow as readers.

Chapter 12: The Classic Rigor Approach Versus The Step Ladder Approach

Sinay challenges the idea that assigning difficult classics is automatically rigorous or beneficial. He defines "dead" literature, in this context, as work that is linguistically and culturally irrelevant to the students being asked to read it—not as literature without artistic value. Students differ in reading ability, and a single canonical curriculum may leave average and below-average readers unsupported while advanced students receive more appropriate instruction. In contrast, the Step Ladder Approach starts with accessible, relevant texts and gradually increases their challenge. Sinay suggests that students who recognize familiar settings, social dynamics, and cultural experiences are more likely to engage with a book. He argues that frequent reading at a manageable level builds the skills and stamina students need for college better than forcing them to struggle through complex works before they are

ready. The approach does not rule out classics; it asks teachers to consider when and for whom they are suitable.

Chapter 13: How I Was Educated in High School 1962–1966

Sinay recounts the extensive reading assigned during his four years at La Habra High School, listing works from Homer, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Hawthorne, and many others. He remembers that many selections were difficult and that students often lacked the historical or cultural context needed to understand them. Some later works, including abridged versions and modern novels such as those by Steinbeck, felt more accessible. His account illustrates both the quantity of reading that can shape a student's experience and the limits of assigning difficult books without considering readability or background knowledge. The author also describes reading independently, including consuming Steinbeck novels during a poorly staffed chemistry class and reading widely before college. In retrospect, he sees this sustained reading as central to his own development, even though some school assignments were mismatched to his abilities. He uses his experience to argue that students can build literacy through extensive reading, but teachers must guide them toward books they can engage with and encourage reading beyond classroom assignments.

Chapter 14: The Importance of Readability and Cultural Suitability

Sinay presents readability and cultural suitability as two essential criteria for choosing classroom literature. A book may be admired, but if its vocabulary, syntax, or conceptual demands overwhelm students, it may not support their learning. He uses the opening passage of The Scarlet Letter as an example, discussing its long sentences and reported readability score to show how a text can be difficult because of sentence structure even when much of its vocabulary is recognizable. He recommends selecting texts near students' instructional reading levels and considering whether students can connect with their subject matter and characters. For a predominantly Hispanic class, he proposes writers such as John Steinbeck and Sandra Cisneros as possible choices. The practical implication is to know students' reading abilities, assess books before assigning them, and choose material that nudges students forward without pushing them into frustration. The goal is both engagement and measurable literacy growth.

Chapter 15: Why Literature is Frustration Level Reading

This chapter expands on the ways canonical literature can frustrate students: unfamiliar vocabulary, archaic expressions, complex syntax, and cultural references can make comprehension difficult. Sinay explains that reading aloud does not necessarily solve the problem; students may still lose track of meaning if they cannot understand the words. Pre-teaching useful vocabulary and providing context can help, but he argues that extensive support cannot always compensate for a text that is fundamentally too difficult for the class. Sinay distinguishes between the difficulty of a literary work and its value: the issue is not that

teachers should stop teaching literature, but that they should choose works suited to their students. He questions the claim that a frustrating text necessarily produces language growth, arguing instead that students learn most effectively when the reading is just above their current level. Teachers should assess readability, avoid overextending the time spent on a single work, and select texts that sustain engagement and provide repeated opportunities to read.

Chapter 16: Defending How Literature was Taught to My Average Students

Sinay recounts a student asking why the class had to study so much American literature, a question that forces him to explain the traditional justifications for the curriculum. He tells the class that literature can provide cultural literacy, historical perspective, vocabulary, critical-thinking practice, entertainment, and insight into human behavior. Examples such as The Scarlet Letter, A Christmas Carol, and To Kill a Mockingbird illustrate these proposed benefits. Yet the chapter is also a confession: Sinay says he defended a program even though he doubted that its textbook selections were actually improving his students' literacy. He recalls that students often could not identify the authors of works they had read, which weakened the claim that a chronological survey was reliably building cultural knowledge. The episode captures the book's larger tension: literature can have many educational purposes, but those aims do not justify assigning texts students cannot understand. Reading and writing development must remain central.

Chapter 17: Why an Independent Reading Program is Important

Sinay describes his independent reading program, which offered students a collection of more than 200 novels, book recommendations matched to reading ability, discussions after completion, and points or extra credit as incentives. He used the San Diego Quick Assessment to estimate students' reading levels and help them choose books they could finish and understand. The program's structure was intended to make independent reading achievable, motivating, and a regular part of class life. The chapter stresses that students should move gradually toward more challenging books rather than being expected to begin with works far beyond their skills. Sinay connects this practice to his own experience: he struggled with some classics but found that reading widely in an author such as Steinbeck helped him build language and reading habits. He recommends that English departments establish independent reading programs, track student participation and growth, and make reading a shared classroom routine.

Chapter 18: Why There Should Be Two Tracks for English Majors

Sinay argues that the traditional English major is oriented toward literary scholarship and does not adequately prepare graduates to teach secondary English. He proposes two distinct tracks: one for prospective secondary teachers and one for students pursuing advanced

literary study or college-level teaching. The teaching track should include courses in composition instruction, reading, grammar, usage, and the literature students are likely to encounter in school. For secondary teachers, Sinay recommends practical preparation in teaching writing, including argumentative composition and the writing process, as well as courses on grammar taught in connection with students' writing. He also suggests focused study of commonly taught Shakespeare plays and other school-level texts. The other track can retain its concentration on literary history and specialized scholarship. Separating these paths, he argues, would respect both forms of expertise while preparing teachers to meet classroom needs more effectively.

Notable Quotes

> *"“The goal is not to teach them literature like the professors who taught us, but rather to engage them with reading to advance their literacy through books that are linguistically accessible to them.”"*

> *"“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.”"*

> *"“The literature chosen should be linguistically appropriate for them.”"*

> *"“Literature is the problem, but it is also the solution.”"*

Full Summary

When Richard Sinay taught British and American literature from California's state-mandated Prentice-Hall textbooks, he found that their chronological surveys shaped English class into a course about literary history rather than literacy. The books marched from early periods to contemporary writing, introducing celebrated authors and the social issues they represented. But the survey format, he argues, became an albatross for both students and teachers. Average and below-average students were required to rely on textbooks, while honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate students often received individually designed programs. Sinay questions why those who most need to strengthen their reading are bound to a format the advanced students do not need.

The chronology also pushes teachers to “cover” historical periods and authors, turning junior-year American literature and senior-year British literature into content courses. Students may gain some cultural knowledge, but that is not the same as improving their ability to read. Meanwhile, the selections vary widely in difficulty and often feature archaic language. A junior may be reading below grade level, yet be assigned Emerson or Thoreau, whose writing may

sit well beyond the student's reach. The books can also feel culturally remote: students may not recognize their own lives or communities in the readings, and limited class time can prevent teachers from reaching the more contemporary selections. Sinay also objects to the textbooks' comprehension questions, which he considers too weak to deepen understanding; he argues that teachers should develop questions suited to the particular reading. Though schools value textbooks as visible proof that instruction is taking place, he says publishers' choices are not necessarily aligned with state tests, leaving teachers accountable for tested learning while restricted by material that may neither prepare students for the tests nor advance their literacy.

Sinay traces these practices partly to the education English teachers receive. Their college degrees are primarily degrees in literature: a bachelor's may require about forty-five units of literature coursework, with a master's adding roughly thirty more. Graduates emerge steeped in writers and literary periods, and often eager to pass their enthusiasm on to students. In the secondary classroom, however, that enthusiasm can become a performance modeled on college professors' lectures, even when the audience is made up of average students who do not share the teacher's interests. Sinay recalls teachers devoting an entire semester to a Shakespeare play, or spending months on The Crucible or The Scarlet Letter, as if more time with one work would make students understand it. He argues instead that literacy grows through exposure to many words and works; reading several books in a term offers more opportunity than lingering over just one.

The difficulty is that the English degree does not reliably teach its graduates how to teach the literature they know. Professors focus on literary history, analysis, and criticism, not on how to introduce a novel, play, poem, or short story to secondary students. They may assign papers without guiding students through the writing process, and Sinay says English majors are often left without preparation to teach composition, grammar, usage, mechanics, or reading. Education departments, meanwhile, generally emphasize broad courses about child and adolescent development rather than subject-specific methods for teaching English. Student teaching does not necessarily fill the gap: a mentor may be unqualified, and the student teacher often follows existing lesson plans without receiving practical instruction in teaching reading or writing. The result, in Sinay's view, is that new teachers learn on the job, improvising approaches to literature while overlooking other essential parts of English instruction.

Sinay's own experience as a student illustrates how much reading was once assigned, even to average classes. At La Habra High School from 1962 to 1966, he was required to read works including Ivanhoe, The Iliad and The Odyssey, The Heart of Darkness, Animal Farm, and Romeo and Juliet in his first year, followed by classics such as Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, The Scarlet Letter, and Paradise Lost. He remembers being overwhelmed by many of them. The underlying argument was that immersion in great literature would expand

vocabulary and deepen students' grasp of syntax. Yet Sinay asks whether works that students cannot readily understand actually achieve that purpose. The problem is not literature itself, but a mismatch between the texts and the readers.

He distinguishes among students' differing needs: advanced readers may handle complex works, while average students need accessible, engaging material and students reading well below grade level may need additional reading instruction. Even The Tale of Two Cities, often assigned early in high school, has a Lexile measure of 1150L and a twelfth-grade reading level; The Scarlet Letter is described as a fifteenth-grade-level work. Sinay argues that students who struggle to follow such language are unlikely to build literacy efficiently by being made to endure it. Literature can help students grow, he maintains, when it is both readable at an appropriate level and culturally relevant. A textbook, in his view, rarely provides that fit, so students need a program designed around the learners in front of the teacher.

He is particularly critical of the chronological survey of British literature for average seniors. Students may have little background knowledge of British history and may not know where Britain is, yet the course asks them to interpret writing shaped by unfamiliar historical conditions. Teachers can supply that context, Sinay acknowledges, but the effort can turn English into a history course and overload students who are already struggling with the text. There may also be little cultural connection between American students and the writers or societies presented. Names such as Chaucer and Shakespeare might remain, but Sinay doubts that students will remember a parade of authors or find meaning in literary eras such as the Puritan or Anglo-Saxon periods.

The social structures of British writing add another barrier. Without understanding the feudal order or Victorian class system, students may find the choices and conflicts in Austen or Thomas Hardy inexplicable. British expressions, archaic slang, and older syntax compound the distance. Students can end up translating sentences rather than attending to irony, subtext, or structure. Sinay does not advocate throwing all British literature away: he wants senior English to remain literature-based, but with selections chosen for readability and students' interest, rather than dictated by a survey textbook.

Shakespeare presents this language problem in its sharpest form. Sinay had extensive preparation himself, taking three Shakespeare courses and reading around twenty plays before teaching. As an undergraduate, he also listened to accomplished London and New York actors perform the plays, which helped him acclimate to early modern English and follow their stories. Average high school students, he argues, do not have comparable time to become accustomed to the language.

The obstacles include unfamiliar vocabulary and semantic shifts: "nice" could mean foolish or trivial, "awful" full of awe, and "silly" innocent. Shakespeare's inverted syntax, shaped in part by iambic pentameter, forces readers to rearrange sentences before they can picture the

action. Pronouns such as “thee” and “thou,” along with verb endings such as “-est” and “-eth,” can interrupt a struggling reader’s pace. Biblical and classical allusions may conjure nothing for students without that background, while puns and period slang can obscure humor that might otherwise draw teenagers in. Sinay suggests that showing a play before reading it may help students visualize what is happening, particularly when they have had little practice forming mental images through reading. He cites Hamlet’s Lexile rating of 1390L as evidence of the gap: for many average seniors, it can feel almost like a foreign language. Teaching Shakespeare may serve cultural knowledge, he allows, but he questions whether assigning it to students who cannot connect with its language or context advances their literacy.

Unlike his argument against assigning Shakespeare to average students, Sinay does not reject American literature itself. He objects to teaching it through a textbook and in chronological order, regardless of who is sitting in the classroom. A useful American literature program, he argues, should reflect the students’ cultural backgrounds and reading abilities. In a class with many Hispanic students, writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Richard Blanco may offer more meaningful points of connection than the textbook’s customary selections. Students are more likely to read when they recognize their communities and experiences in the works, and sustained reading—not simply exposure to canonical authors—is what builds literacy.

The textbook’s choices, Sinay contends, frequently work against that purpose. Essays by Emerson and Thoreau, for example, can be far beyond students’ reading levels, while a chronological survey turns English into a course about literary history rather than a program for developing reading and writing. Instead, teachers should assemble a range of novels, plays, short stories, poetry, and nonfiction, choosing works students can read and want to continue reading. Covering a work slowly for months does not produce literacy; reading widely does. A well-designed course should also build reading stamina, because students who have not practiced attending to substantial amounts of reading in high school may struggle with college workloads. Sinay recalls having read fifty novels before college, which helped him sustain attention to the reading required there. The practical goal, then, is to give students frequent opportunities to read, both in class and independently.

Sinay sees a deeper reason that teachers may favor literary surveys: English majors are trained to become “little professors of literature.” In college they read and analyze texts under professors who specialize in authors and historical periods. They may emerge knowing a great deal about literature, but not how to teach reading, writing, grammar, or composition to adolescents. Carrying the professor’s approach into high school, new teachers may lecture about literary works and their virtues, while students’ literacy needs remain secondary. Sinay argues that English teachers should be prepared to teach both literature and the practical skills students need to become more capable readers and writers.

The weakness of teacher preparation becomes especially visible in writing instruction. Sinay points to the California State University system's Expository Reading and Writing Course, or CSU ERWC, a collection of modules intended to prepare high school students for college-level nonfiction reading and analytical writing. The system developed it after encountering students who could not write argumentative essays in college, yet, Sinay observes, it had not adequately prepared secondary English teachers to teach composition in the first place. At his high school, he saw students writing literary analyses of poetry that did little to prepare them for the argumentative research papers required in college. English majors, he says, are rarely taught the writing process or how to teach it, leaving teachers to learn on the job and students to bear the consequences.

To select appropriate reading, Sinay distinguishes among three levels. Independent reading is the comfortable, enjoyable zone: students recognize about 95 to 100 percent of words and comprehend roughly 90 to 100 percent. It is well suited to recreational reading and building stamina. Instructional reading is the productive "sweet spot," with word accuracy around 90 to 94 percent and comprehension around 75 to 89 percent. Students encounter new vocabulary and more complex sentences, but can follow the text with some support. Frustration-level reading is the opposite: accuracy falls below 90 percent and comprehension below 70 percent. Students expend so much effort decoding words that they cannot retain what they read, and repeated difficulty can persuade them that they are simply bad readers.

Sinay argues that average students are too often assigned books at this last level. If they cannot define five or more words on a page, he says, the text may be beyond their reach. Thoreau and Emerson can pose that problem, as can many readings in survey textbooks. The results are not merely weak comprehension: students may disengage, decide English class is pointless, or abandon school. A custom-designed program should match texts to students' instructional levels and cultural interests. Sinay recalls placing Steinbeck novels in his classroom's independent-reading library for students, many of whom were Hispanic. They read the books, he says, and their language grew. Choosing recognizable characters and settings can provide the motivation that an unfamiliar, difficult text does not.

For Sinay, this means English teachers should think of themselves as reading teachers—not necessarily specialists who diagnose reading disabilities, but coaches who make reading central to the classroom. He draws on his experience holding both master's degrees, in reading and in English, to explain why he saw students first as readers whose skills could grow. At Valencia High School, a vice-principal told him that the only group improving its reading scores was the bottom quartile, the students in Sinay's reading program. His own family also illustrated the value of regular reading: he and his wife read aloud to their children from birth, kept books around them, and encouraged their independent reading. His son later defended reading in school after a kindergarten teacher had told him not to read during class; both children went on to excel in college.

The English teacher's task, Sinay maintains, is not to make every student love literature or master its terminology, but to advance literacy in reading and writing. Literature, broadly understood, includes nonfiction as well as fiction, and should be used as a means toward that goal. Students must be interested enough to engage, which is why cultural relevance matters alongside linguistic accessibility. Sinay contrasts the customized programs offered to honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate students with the one-size-fits-all textbook imposed on average and below-average classes. The latter students, who make up most of the school population, deserve thoughtfully selected works too.

Sinay calls his alternative the Step Ladder Approach, in contrast to the "classic rigor" approach that treats difficult canonical works as essential for everyone. He does not object to classics for advanced students who are prepared to read them; he opposes assigning culturally remote, linguistically inaccessible works to students who are not. Contemporary, relatable writing can make a cognitive connection through familiar settings, social dynamics, and language. By contrast, understanding a classic may require students to acquire extensive background knowledge about a different era before they can follow the story. For a diverse classroom, a curriculum dominated by canonical works can also suggest that students' own stories do not belong in the larger human narrative. Sinay has seen students regard the textbook as literature written by and for white people, with little relevance to their lives.

The alternative is neither easy reading forever nor a rejection of challenge. Texts should stretch students without defeating them, and each accessible work should prepare them for a somewhat more demanding one. Reading widely and often gives students the language and stamina to approach the demands of college. In Sinay's view, that gradual movement is a more credible preparation than forcing students to struggle through difficult classics merely for the sake of rigor.

Sinay measures the problem against his own schooling at La Habra High School from 1962 to 1966. Television was newly competing for students' attention, and he chose homework and books over watching it. Although he was in an average class, the school assigned thirty-two works across four years. Freshmen read Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey, Conrad's The Heart of Darkness and "The Secret Sharer," Scott's Ivanhoe, Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Steinbeck's The Pearl, Orwell's Animal Farm, and Pearl Buck's The Good Earth. Sophomores tackled Silas Marner, Julius Caesar, Our Town, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, and The Call of the Wild. Junior-year selections included The Scarlet Letter, The Great Gatsby, The Sun Also Rises, and abridged versions of Moby-Dick, Huckleberry Finn, The Red Badge of Courage, and The Bridge of San Luis Rey. Seniors faced Macbeth, The Canterbury Tales, Beowulf, Wuthering Heights, 1984, A Tale of Two Cities, Treasure Island, Paradise Lost, and Maugham's seven-hundred-page Of Human Bondage. Most of the early readings were beyond students' grade-level abilities; unfamiliar historical and cultural settings compounded the difficulty. Sinay recalls that The Pearl was

more manageable, while the original Scarlet Letter largely eluded the class.

Yet his own reading life also shows how sustained exposure can build literacy. In a poorly run chemistry class led by an English teacher who admitted he knew no chemistry, students worked through the textbook under the guidance of a capable sophomore. With time left over, Sinay read twelve Steinbeck novels, then about fifty novels over the summer before college. He had begun reading late and was trying to catch up, but books he could follow helped him grow. In school, by contrast, he often lacked the context needed to picture or understand what he was reading. His experience did not persuade him that every difficult book was beneficial; it showed him how much reading mattered when students could engage with it.

Readability and cultural suitability, Sinay argues, must be considered together. A program that fits advanced students is often designed for their abilities, while average and below-average students are left with a textbook that may not fit either their reading level or their background. A predominantly Hispanic class, for example, might be better served by a program featuring Steinbeck and Sandra Cisneros than by a standard survey. Students should encounter works that are accessible but still stretch them, and that reflect communities they recognize. Sinay says teachers should know students' reading levels and assess the difficulty of assigned books. He points to a passage from The Scarlet Letter that registers at a Flesch-Kincaid grade level of 15.8. Its sixty-six words are arranged in just two long sentences, averaging thirty-three words each; the challenge comes chiefly from the syntax and the way several ideas are joined, not simply from unusual vocabulary. For many eleventh graders reading below grade level, that kind of prose can turn a required novel into an obstacle. He contrasts it with Steinbeck's East of Eden, which he describes as roughly a ninth- or tenth-grade text.

The frustration is not caused by literature as a form, Sinay stresses, but by works whose vocabulary, syntax, or cultural distance exceed students' capacity. When students encounter five or more unfamiliar words on a page, he regards the book as beyond their comfortable reading range. Archaic language makes the difficulty worse, and long, intricate sentences can leave students unable to keep track of meaning. Reading a novel aloud does not necessarily solve the problem: listeners can still lose the thread when the words are unfamiliar. Sinay loved The Scarlet Letter himself, but came to recognize that its language was too demanding for many of his average English students. He had been required to teach state-mandated American and British literature, and often felt caught between the curriculum and what he knew about reading. Assigning demanding classics simply because they are classics, he argues, can teach students to associate reading with confusion and failure rather than growth.

A student's question forced Sinay to confront that contradiction. During a junior American literature unit on Poe, Hawthorne, and Washington Irving, a bright student asked why the class had to "study all this stuff." Sinay gave a long defense of chronological literature study, even though he privately doubted that the textbook readings were improving his students'

language. He explained that literature introduces readers to a country's cultural history and its significant writers; that it can transport them to other times and places; and that stories entertain, build vocabulary, develop analysis, and explore human behavior. He invoked works such as A Christmas Carol and To Kill a Mockingbird to show how literature can illuminate character, compassion, and social life. He also argued that reading and writing belong together, since reading supplies language that students can later use. The student accepted his explanation. But Sinay admits that he had been acting as a salesman for a curriculum he did not fully believe in. His students often could not identify the authors they had read or distinguish American from British writers, making him question whether the promised cultural literacy mattered to them as much as he claimed.

The independent reading program he developed offered a more practical route. Sinay kept a library of more than two hundred novels, helped students choose books they could finish, and checked their reading with questions about the stories. To estimate their reading abilities, he used the San Diego Quick Assessment, a tool he had administered to thousands of students while working in a college reading lab. He awarded points according to the challenge of each book, giving students a way to improve their grades through outside reading. The goal was not to keep them forever with easy books, but to help them move upward gradually. As a teenager, he had been handed a list of about a hundred classics under the command "Wake Up and Read!" Many were too difficult for him, linguistically and historically. When he found Steinbeck, he read as much of his work as he could and made faster progress. In his classes, frequent independent reading was accompanied by reading in class and teacher read-alouds. Sinay says that students in his reading program showed substantial improvement on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, especially those in the school's bottom quartile.

To better prepare teachers to do this work, Sinay proposes two distinct English-major tracks. Future secondary teachers should study how to teach composition, literature, grammar, and reading—not merely accumulate knowledge of literary periods. He recommends three or four courses in composition instruction, direct preparation in commonly taught plays such as Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Macbeth, and Julius Caesar, and grammar courses that teach how to address usage and mechanics within students' writing. The need is clear in the California State University system's Expository Reading and Writing Course, developed to prepare students for college nonfiction reading and analytical writing after colleges encountered students unable to write argumentative essays. Sinay sees the remedial need as a consequence of failing to train English majors to teach composition in the first place. A separate track should serve those intending to teach college literature, while community-college instructors would benefit from graduate study in composition. Secondary classrooms, he believes, need teachers prepared to build students' reading and writing abilities, so students can move steadily from books they can manage toward more demanding work and enter college ready to read.

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