



Compelling Characters

Teacher's Guide

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Reading with *Just Imagine!*

Children's earliest literacy experiences often involve fiction stories. As children learn to read on their own, narrative stories continue to make up a large part of their reading material. (This is changing; many nonfiction reading series have been introduced to allow more variety and choice in reading material for early readers.) The switch from learning to read to reading to learn remains a hurdle for many readers. Nonfiction makes up the bulk of what people need to read every day, yet many students, even proficient readers, often lack the skills necessary to understand and retain what they have read. Struggling readers face an even greater challenge.

Just Imagine! can help. This program was designed for the struggling upper-middle and high-school reader. It bridges the gap between narrative fictional tales and nonfiction articles and texts. The paperback books are chock-full of articles that interest young adolescents. The stories read like narratives, with the familiar pattern of beginning-middle-end. But the content is often nonfiction or based on actual events. Students gain concrete knowledge, garner reading success, and practice critical-thinking skills.

The format is handy and fun—the books look almost like comic books, not reading primers. Dynamic illustrations add to the comic book feel and appeal to visual learners. The combination of low reading level and high interest topics encourages reading—and reading success. The short line length and slightly

enlarged type makes it easy for the eye to follow the lines of print. The brevity of the stories allows students to feel a sense of accomplishment when they finish reading a complete story in a short time.

The *Just Imagine!* books contain many nonfiction stories. Others are fictionalized historical accounts. Some stories are identified as urban legends or ghost stories. Whatever the genre of a particular story, readers are encouraged to think about what they are reading. The activities that accompany the books build and reinforce vocabulary, practice reading-comprehension skills, and challenge students to think critically. Do students find a particular explanation of a strange event believable? Why or why not? What connections do they see between two stories? How would they react if they were a character facing a fantastic event? Such questions engage readers in the stories and invest them in the reading process. They also teach students that all readers, even those with reading fluency problems, bring something to reading; their ideas count. Giving students the sense that they are entitled to be readers is a great gift, one that *Just Imagine!* can help offer.

Nonfiction Reading Strategies

These reading strategies are useful for any kind of reading material. For able, fluent readers, some of these skills may be second nature. For others, the skills need to be broken down and introduced or retaught. With practice, the skills will become a natural, integral part of the reading process.

• **Activate background knowledge**

Making an initial connection to a text can mean the difference between reading and not reading. If you know nothing about a topic and have no interest in it, why would you want to read about it? The key to this prereading step lies in helping students see that they have some background knowledge about many things. For example, even a difficult science article about DNA can seem accessible if students realize that they have watched television shows about crime scenes and DNA evidence. Tapping into students' investment in a reading motivates them to read.

One way to activate background knowledge is to scan tables of contents of books and magazines. A key phrase may hook a student. A chapter title might remind a student of an earlier class. Any back-cover or jacket blurbs can also draw students in and spark a connection. In books such as *Just Imagine!* an introduction gives a brief overview of the content. Students may find something there that strikes a chord. A class discussion in which other students share background knowledge can empower a less confident reader to recognize what she or he brings to the reading.

• **Visualize**

Picturing scenes of a story is like watching a movie—something teens love to do. Visualizing what you read is not just pleasurable, it is also useful. It gives your brain another way, in addition to decoding and analyzing printed text, to capture an idea.

Teaching students to visualize using fiction is not difficult. You may read aloud a passage that has plenty of sensory imagery, and ask a student to draw or describe the scene he or she sees in the mind's eye.

Visualizing nonfiction texts is more challenging, depending on the type of text. For nonfiction narratives, the process is like that for fiction. If there are illustrations, as in *Just Imagine!* these help keep an image in front of the reader, not just in his or her head.

For nonnarrative texts, visual aids can help. If such graphics exist in the text, students can be reminded to look at them first, before reading the passage, again while reading, and once more after reading. Students may want to make a graph, a pie chart, a Venn diagram, or chart of their choice to organize what they are reading. This is not just a mental process, of course, but also a physical one.

• **Ask questions**

Confident readers ask themselves questions, make predictions, and revise ideas as they read. Struggling readers can learn to do this by practicing. Guided reading questions can help at the start, training students to recognize the kinds of things they need to notice in the reading.

Nonfiction Reading Strategies, continued

Asking students to jot questions that arise at specified points in the reading is another step. Asking students to keep a journal of questions, predictions, and answers while reading can help them see how active reading works. Eventually, students will learn to ask the questions themselves, mentally, while reading.

• Monitor comprehension

Some struggling readers may not recognize reading as a process. They may believe that proficient readers just sit down, open a book, read it through once in a smooth progression, and understand what they have read. Giving readers the freedom to stop and think, and to reread when necessary, develops the idea of reading as a process and increases the likelihood that they will understand and retain what they have read.

Teaching students to monitor comprehension means allowing them to think. At first, asking them to stop and regroup at a certain point in the reading can be helpful. If there is anything that does not make sense to them, they should feel free to reread a section.

• Review

Readers retain more information when they write about it. Writing notes, writing a summary, making an outline, or using another graphic organizer can help students analyze, synthesize, and think critically about the meaning of what they have read. Blank graphic organizers are included for use with any writing assignment.

• Think critically

Students sometimes believe that anything in print is true or good or worthwhile. Of course, this is not the case. Students can be encouraged to think about any text by asking questions about what lies behind the text, such as

Why did the author write about this topic?

Why did the author choose this word over another?

What opinion does the author have of this topic?

What is fact in the reading, and what is opinion?

What devices does the author use to make her or his point, and why?

Students can make their own connections to the text by asking themselves questions such as

What would I do in that situation?

What do I think of the choice/decision a character made? Why?

How am I similar to or different from a person in the text?

How did the setting—the time and place—of the text affect the people in it?

Has anything like what happened in the text ever happened to me?

Have I read or heard anything about the topic that does not agree with what this text says?

Crimebusters

Most people want to live in peace, safe from danger and harm. That is why laws were invented. Different groups may have different laws, but every group has laws. Laws have changed over time, but the idea of law goes back to the dawn of history.

Sadly, outlaws have been around just as long. Some people refuse to live by the rules. They don't care about what's right. They give way to greed and hate. They try to take what isn't theirs, and they don't care whom they hurt in doing so.

Detectives and police officers work to protect us from such criminals. They are crimebusters. This book tells the story of six great crimebusters from different times in history. Some have used force to fight force. Some have used their brains to solve dark mysteries and track down criminals. Some of these crimebusters lived and worked in the United States. Some worked in other countries. All are real.

Crime can touch anyone, but there is no need to give in to fear. Reading about these great crimebusters may give you hope and show you ways to watch out for yourself. Perhaps these true stories can help you take control of your own life.

Think about Vidocq and his detective force. Then write your own definitions for the vocabulary words below. Use clues from the story or a dictionary for help.

1. escape
2. sentence
3. fugitive
4. detective
5. gloomy
6. countess
7. pistol
8. convicts
9. deeds
10. memoirs



What do you remember about Vidocq's mysterious life of crimebusting? Answer the following questions to find out.

1. What did Vidocq do while he was in prison? Why did he do this?
2. What amazing thing did Vidocq do while sentenced to the Galley—twice?
3. What steps led to Vidocq becoming a detective?
4. How were Vidocq and his helpers able to move freely among criminals?
5. What evidence did Vidocq find that cleared Isabelle d'Arcy's husband of her murder?
6. Why did some people think Vidocq's *The Memoirs* was fiction?

Just Imagine!

Imagine that you are an adult member of Vidocq's detective agency. You are disguised as a high school student. But someone suspects you. List some things you might do or say to convince that person that you really are a teenager. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.