



**TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES**

# Literacy Strategies: Q&A with Expert Jennifer Serravallo

By Jennifer Gunn

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The [state of literacy](#) in the U.S. is undoubtedly alarming with over 36 million adults unable to read, write, or do math above a third-grade level. But with the advent and expansion of technology, literacy instruction is certainly evolving. Literacy expert [Jennifer Serravallo](#) is the author of such bestsellers as [The Reading Strategies Book](#) and she helps educators navigate this challenging instructional landscape. I spoke with Serravallo about her work, her outlook on developing a love of reading in test-driven classrooms, and how to build lifelong readers.

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 Jennifer Serravallo bio pic.

## literacy instruction is resonating so well with educators?

There are a few things about the books that I think are resonating. First, teachers are busy and are being asked to do more than ever. The [Strategies Books](#) offer teachers meaningful lesson ideas, organized in a way that they are quick and easy to find, no matter what approach to literacy instruction they have going on in the classroom. So, I think they appreciate that the books are comprehensive, yet each lesson is pared down and gets to the point quickly.

Second, I think teachers realize that there is a wide range of learners with different needs in their classrooms, and differentiation can feel challenging (or in some cases impossible!). These books make differentiation do-able, and when teachers use the books in this way they remark that giving each of their children the strategies they need most helps improve engagement and progress – which is exciting for everyone!

Finally, the books are beautiful. The colors, the fonts, the visuals — they are actually fun to hold in your hands and look through. Since [Reading Strategies](#) came out in 2015, I have noticed that many more education books are utilizing gorgeous designs. I love cooking and have a cookbook collection, and I have to be honest — the books that I cook from the most are the ones that are beautifully designed with color images, pages that aren't crowded with text, and are enjoyable to use. Cookbooks were the inspiration for the organization and design of the [Strategies books](#) and I think that is resonating with people!

## In our tech-driven society, do you think the literacy needs and struggles of young learners have evolved?

At the top of my to-be-read pile is Maryanne Wolf's new book [Reader, Come Home](#) in which she discusses research around how our reading brains have been impacted by immersion in a digital world. I am interested to read it and learn more because I have noticed anecdotally that with a shift to more on-screen reading and access to more technology, there are different demands on readers. For me, the impact of digital reading is on my attention and stamina. For my daughter, it's on new demands around reading critically and evaluating sources. For some students I work with, I've noticed a tendency to read more quickly, and less carefully and deeply, when consuming texts digitally. All this to say, it's something I'm studying and thinking about, but I don't have fully formed ideas about it just yet.

## In our current test-driven school climate, how can teachers still foster a love of reading? Why is this important?

If we teach students to read and write well, they will do well on tests. Focusing extensively on test practice turns children off of reading and writing and narrows the purposes for why people read and write in the world. Test formats are constantly changing; the passing mark moves up and down. By teaching to the test, what are we gaining, really? We are teaching kids to conform to the whims of test makers, to learn formulas for scoring higher. I wish that everyone would trust that strong, clear, targeted instruction is enough. We should be focused on teaching children to be critical thinkers, make space for inquiry and allow students to ask and answer their own questions, and to support them as they read and write from a wide variety of genres and for a wide variety of purposes.

## If you could see one major shift in K-12 literacy education, what would you like to see?

I would like to see school and classroom libraries properly funded so that we can give students access to a rich collection of books that they can and will want to read. The books must represent the identities of the children in the classroom and the people in their immediate community, and offer children a glimpse into the rest of the world, helping them to understand people and communities that are different from their own. It seems so incredibly basic, but it is rare for me to find a school where every classroom library and school library is adequate. This is a major equity issue and one we must address.



I would advise them to keep an open mind and to seek out regular opportunities to outgrow themselves. There is no shortage of opportunities for any budget: free (Twitter, podcasts), low cost (professional books, some conferences like [EdCamps](#)) as well as online courses, in-person workshops, and professional conferences. I am part of professional organizations like the [International Literacy Association](#) (ILA) and the [National Council of Teachers of English](#) (NCTE), attend [national and state conferences](#), read several dozen professional books a year, and listen to podcasts focused on education. I am constantly learning and this helps me to be a better teacher and leader, but also keeps me interested and challenged.

## What have you been working on recently?

This past fall, my book [Understanding Texts & Readers](#) was released. What I do in this book is connect comprehension goals to text levels and reader responses in an attempt to demystify what it means to understand. I use text levels as a way to understand reader response “look fors” to help make text complexity simpler to understand so that teachers can better match children to texts and appropriate strategies.

In early February, my new book [A Teacher’s Guide to Reading Conferences](#) will be released. I believe conferring is the heartbeat of the literacy block, and this is a book to help teachers make the best use of that time by offering students goal-focused strategies and meaningful feedback. It’s a highly practical, slim book with nine videos online to complement what’s discussed. I’m really excited for people to see it and use it!

And, in May and June, my new *Complete Comprehension* assessment and teaching resources will be launched. There is a nonfiction and fiction version, each with 28 children’s trade books for students to read and respond to, rubrics to help teachers evaluate student response and over 100 lessons to allow teachers to instruct in response to what they learn from the students’ responses.



## If our readers would like to catch up with you, where can they find you in 2019?

You can learn when I’ll be in your area by going to my [website](#). Through state conferences and workshops I’ll be in Illinois, Wisconsin, Toronto, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Virginia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Pennsylvania, Washington DC, Minnesota, and Texas in the next year.

*Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, a teaching coach, and high school educator in New York City. She is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation and regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation.*

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