The 10 Steps to Teaching and Learning Independence

When we follow these routines day after day, our students can use their energy to grow as readers and learners rather than to figure out what we expect them to do. And we, in turn, can focus our energy on teaching, not managing, our independent readers.

—Kathy Collins
Our core beliefs create a strong base for student achievement. The 10 Steps to Teaching and Learning Independence are another crucial element of our core beliefs and the success of implementing Daily 5.

Early in our careers when we taught a behavior to our class, whether how to walk down the hall correctly or how to do Read to Someone independently, we assumed that once shown how to do something, children would do it successfully ever after. If we provided practice time, we often made the first few practices too long or did not repeat the practice sessions often enough to ensure success for all. Thanks to Michael Grinder’s influence, we were able to realize why many of our students were not able to successfully demonstrate the behaviors we taught. Grinder explains that the brain receives input through three different memory systems: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (1995). When information is stored in more than one of these systems, the memory is improved. Memory stored in the kinesthetic system evokes the longest-lasting memory. To activate this system, teachers can provide kinesthetic learning experiences so children hear and feel the behaviors expected of them. Over time, this movement is stored in muscle memory and becomes part of students’ default behaviors.

Based on Grinder’s research and our backgrounds and training in special education, we were able to, in essence, task-analyze the independent behaviors we were asking of students. This task analysis allowed us to formulate ten steps to improve muscle memory, build independence, and increase stamina. These 10 Steps to Teaching and Learning Independence are a unique and essential element that sets Daily 5 apart from the traditional workshop model as well as from other management systems:

Step 1. Identify What Is to Be Taught
Step 2. Set a Purpose and Create a Sense of Urgency
Step 3. Record Desired Behaviors on an I-Chart
Step 4. Model Most-Desirable Behaviors
Step 5. Model Least-Desirable Behaviors, Then Most-Desirable
Step 6. Place Students Around the Room
Step 7. Practice and Build Stamina
Step 8. Stay Out of the Way
Step 9. Use a Quiet Signal to Bring Students Back to the Gathering Space
Step 10. Conduct a Group Check-In; Ask, “How Did It Go?”
Step 1. Identify What Is to Be Taught

It may seem simple, but articulating exactly what is going to be taught is an important step to creating independent learners. Children and adults alike are better able to attend and focus when they know exactly what it is they will learn.

When identifying for the class what is to be taught as we launch each of the Daily 5 choices, we follow a simple pattern. This involves creating an I-chart (just like a T-chart, except that we make the T into an I, which stands for independence). This I-chart can be created on a piece of paper on the chart rack or easel or on an interactive whiteboard. Any medium will do so long as the chart is not erased; this chart will become an anchor to our learning and we will refer to it, add to it, and revise it all year long.

At the top of the I-chart we simply identify what is to be taught by writing the Daily 5 choice we are introducing (example: Read to Self). We add more text to the I-chart as described in the next two steps.

Step 2. Set a Purpose and Create a Sense of Urgency

Most of us have a deep need to know why we have to do something. Whether audibly or not, we often find ourselves asking, “What’s in it for me?” For that reason we always clearly articulate and post why we do things in the classroom. Setting a purpose and creating a sense of urgency establishes a culture in which every moment of learning and practicing counts.

To create the sense of urgency with the I-chart, we follow the same pattern for the introduction of each of the Daily 5. At the top of the chart, on either side of the title, we record that the reasons we do Read to Self are that it is the best way to become a better reader and it is fun.

We’ll never forget the time two administrators who were visiting our classroom experienced firsthand the sense of urgency our students felt working on the Daily 5. We were sitting on the floor with a small group of children. The rest of the class was scattered about the room independently working on their Daily 5 choices. The room had the lovely hum that is produced when children are comfortable, happy, and actively engaged in what they are doing. The two male administrators’ deep voices resonated above the hum as they discussed their observations. Jenna, a fairly quiet child who uses her words sparingly, walked up to the men, tugged the pant leg
of one, and said in no uncertain terms, “Mister, can you take it outside? You are too noisy. I am working on Read to Self. I really need to practice to be a better reader.”

He glanced at her with a bemused expression on his face, held his hands up in front of him as if to say “I give!” and backed quietly out of the room. Jenna walked back to the corner of the couch she had previously occupied and continued reading.

Jenna felt the sense of urgency we want to instill in every child—the feeling that reading is so important, they can’t and won’t let anything get in the way.

Step 3. Record Desired Behaviors on an I-Chart

Recording on an I-chart behaviors that are most crucial to student success is the next of the 10 Steps to Independence.

When we wrote the first edition of The Daily 5, we suggested brainstorming with the class the most desirable behaviors when launching each of the Daily 5. We hope you will recognize that because of our ongoing learning, this is one of the many changes we have made to our Daily 5 system.

We found that when students brainstormed the most desirable behaviors for the I-chart, the length of the lesson became longer than recommended by the brain-compatible learning guidelines we had adopted (see “Brain Research,” page 28). In particular, when young students brainstormed ideas, their list often contained a menagerie of extra suggestions for the I-chart, and the required conversations about each brainstormed idea simply took too much time.

Rather than have students brainstorm what it feels like, sounds like, and looks like to be independent as we used to do, we now merely record the desirable behaviors on the I-chart in front of the students and briefly explain each one. When introducing Read to Self, these are the five desirable behaviors we explain:

- Read the whole time
- Stay in one spot
- Get started right away
- Work quietly
- Build stamina
We’d like to draw your attention to the way in which these desired behaviors are written. Notice they are recorded in terms of the behavior we want to elicit from students. All too often it is easy to slip into the pattern of telling children what not to do: Don’t walk around; don’t talk to others. Michael Grinder found in his work with at-risk students that many children act upon what they hear at the end of a sentence or statement: walk around, talk to others. By subtly shifting our words to state the exact desired behaviors, children learn exactly what the behaviors look like, thus setting them up for success.

For young children with little stamina, we don’t add all of the desired behaviors to the chart the first day. Instead, we name the first two desirable behaviors and write them directly on the I-chart. For example, on the first day of launching Read to Self, we write “Read the whole time” and “Stay in one spot” on the I-chart (see Figure 3.1). We add the other behaviors with each new practice session.

Figure 3.1
When introducing desired behaviors to younger students, we list and explain only the first two behaviors on the first day.
Older students, or students with previous experience in the Daily 5, may be able to draw from past experience and generate all desired behaviors or have enough sitting stamina for us to add all the desired behaviors to the I-chart on the first day. As with everything related to the Daily 5, we let the students who are present in front of us guide our teaching, based upon their experience, stamina, needs, and behaviors.

**Step 4. Model Most-Desirable Behaviors**

Modeling takes the two-dimensional recorded behaviors from the I-chart and presents them three-dimensionally, allowing the behaviors to come alive for many of our students.

Again Michael Grinder points out that the visual input of seeing correct behaviors modeled for the whole class and the kinesthetic input for those doing the modeling is the beginning of the process of creating children’s muscle memories.

Modeling is a concept every teacher is familiar with, but often it may not receive the priority or time it deserves. Regardless of the skill being taught, we always have students model what it looks like when done properly.

We choose one or a few students at a time to model the behaviors listed on the I-chart correctly (see Figure 3.2). We stand next to the chart, direct-
ing the class’s attention toward the student or students who are modeling, and point out each of the behaviors listed on the “Students” side of the chart. We ask the class if they notice the modeler demonstrating the desired behavior. We then follow up with an imperative whole-group question related to the behaviors being modeled: “Boys and girls, if _____ continues to do these things, will he [or she] become a better reader [or writer]?” Of course the answer is yes!

### Step 5. Model Least-Desirable Behaviors, Then Most-Desirable Behaviors Again

Step 5 is a powerful way to communicate expectations to children. Like step 4, it allows them the opportunity to see and feel, not just hear, the expectations. Even though it may feel counterintuitive to building independence, we ask a student in the class to come to the front of the group and model the I-chart behaviors the incorrect way—in other words, model the undesirable behaviors (see Figure 3.3). At times we invite a student who frequently exhibits off-task behaviors to model undesirable behaviors in front of the class. Since off-task behavior can at times be a call for attention, this strategy provides the attention desired by the student and allows us the opportunity to begin shaping his or her behaviors.

![Figure 3.3](Photo courtesy of Gelfand-Piper Photography.)
As a student models undesirable behaviors (doing anything but what is on the I-chart), we once again draw the class’s attention to the chart. We point out each item and ask the whole group if the modeler is showing the desired behaviors. (Of course not!) We then quickly follow up with this question: “Boys and girls, if ______ continues to do these things, will he [or she] become a better reader [or writer]?” (Again the answer is a resounding no!)

Next comes an essential component in beginning to redefine the students’ muscle memory. After the student demonstrates the least-desirable behaviors and we remind students that those behaviors will never help them become better readers, we ask the student to flip into modeling the appropriate behaviors that are listed on the I-chart (see Figure 3.4). This step provides students the opportunity for their muscles to begin learning the correct actions of the behaviors, leading to a new normal for their muscle memory.

Figure 3.4
The same student models desirable behaviors after modeling undesirable behaviors.
As soon as the student flips into modeling correctly, we refer to the I-chart again, pointing out all the correct behaviors being modeled (see Figure 3.5). Many students enjoy the positive attention, and they also show themselves and the class that their bodies are capable of performing the desirable behaviors.

We end step 5 by asking, “Class, if _____ continues to show these behaviors, will he [or she] become a better reader [or writer]?” The answer, of course, is yes!

Correct/incorrect/correct model interaction, originally taught to us by Michael Grinder, is typically done with all ages. The exception is for kindergartners at the beginning of their first school year. These young learners need time to find out what school is all about, and showing them incorrect behaviors can be confusing.

Through modeling, not only have we provided an opportunity for children to feel the correct behaviors as compared with the incorrect but also children have become confident in their ability to participate in the Daily 5 with appropriate behaviors. By making what’s expected and what is unacceptable three-dimensional, students have a much clearer vision of what they are to do as well as what they should not be doing. The latter
can often be even more important, because it clarifies and further delin-
eates the boundaries of acceptability within the classroom. When problems
occur (and they will), gentle reminders affirm the students by letting them
know they are capable.

After working with an autism specialist in our school, we learned that
correct/incorrect/correct model interaction, as a three-dimensional repre-
sentation of behaviors, is a highly effective way to communicate expecta-
tions for many children on the autism spectrum. It helps take away the
notion, for example, of “I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to put the book
on my head.”

Step 5 is integral when helping students of all ages learn to be independent.

Step 6. Place Students Around the Room

Once students have seen correct and incorrect models through step 5, it is
time to transfer the three-dimensional look of the behaviors to each child
by having them all practice within the classroom setting. Often observers
in our room ask us how our children find places to work without being
told—with no racing for spots and without using teacher-created charts to
equally share what may be considered coveted spots, such as couches,
rocking chairs, large floor pillows, the classroom loft, and so on. With step
6 we teach children to respectfully and independently choose areas to work
in the room.

Beginning with the students sitting on the floor in the gathering space,
we clearly communicate, “You are going to sit in different spots during the
practice sessions for the next few days. This will help you learn which
places you and others around you can work independently.”

We then stand by the book box, or classroom library, area and quickly
call over groups of five or six students. Each of the students in the first
group picks up his or her book box—a container of some kind that holds
students’ good-fit books. Book boxes allow students to remain seated
around the room and not have to break their stamina by getting up to find
more books. We then point to an area of the room where he or she should
sit during this practice session, again reiterating, “You sit in this spot this
time. Think to yourself while sitting there, Is this a place where I and oth-
ers can be successful?” Figure 3.6 shows students scattered around the
classroom to work independently.

Often students who are either of a “that’s not fair” mind-set or really
want to sit at what they currently perceive as a coveted spot need a bit of
reassuring that all students will have the opportunity to sit in all work areas in the room so they can learn the best places for their success.

As soon as we’ve sent off the first five or six students to their work places, we continue calling students to the book box area in groups and place them swiftly around the room. Taking too long to place students can end in a chaotic disaster, as those first placed will run out of stamina prior to the placement of the last students. Therefore, we leave the children with the shortest stamina in the gathering place and call them last. Since stamina in the beginning of the year is short, directing groups of students quickly instead of one-on-one helps expedite the placement process.

Step 7. Practice and Build Stamina

Once students are placed around the room we step out of the way and allow them all to practice and build their stamina. You may remember that in the first edition of *The Daily 5* we had indicated that the first practice session should last three minutes. However, we never let a timer or clock manage children’s practice time. We suggested three minutes simply to remind us that in the beginning we should anticipate that all practice sessions will be short. The first practice might in fact last only thirty seconds in kindergarten or as long as five minutes in grade four. We understand
that, no matter how long or short the practice periods may be, when students exhaust their stamina it’s an indication that they have given us all they can.

Richard, a colleague of ours who teaches seventh grade, told us about one wrong assumption he used to make every fall. He assumed that because his students were older, they would be able to start the first practice session with fifteen minutes or so. In reality, when coming back from summer vacation, all of us—students and teachers alike—struggle with shortened stamina! Richard found that his seventh-grade students often would have only four or five minutes of stamina during those first few practice sessions.

Building stamina looks different in each room every year. Some classes increase their stamina rapidly, whereas others may build their stamina by only ten to thirty seconds each day. We always let our students’ behavior set the pace, and we remind ourselves that a new group of students will not necessarily build stamina like our previous class did.

As our children practice, we keep track of how long their stamina lasted while exhibiting the most-desirable behaviors. We do this so that as a class we can chart stamina progress (see Figure 3.7, “Stamina Chart,” which is also in Appendix A). This is an effective way to visually display the stamina growth and can help many students make sense of the concept of building stamina.

At this point it is important to note that step 7, which we’ve just described, and step 8, the topic of the next section, take place simultaneously.

**Figure 3.7**

We use this stamina chart to show students that their stamina grows with practice.
Step 8. Stay Out of the Way

Once children begin practicing, we stay out of the way until someone stops participating in any one of the charted expectations; this is what we refer to as reaching the end of their stamina, or breaking their stamina. Even though we stay out of the way, we surreptitiously watch for any sign that their stamina has been exhausted (Figure 3.8).

Many years ago, when we were first developing the Daily 5, we didn’t stay out of the way as our children were practicing. We participated in the dance we thought all good teachers did: weaving around the room, whispering what a wonderful job they were doing as readers, praising them for staying focused, quietly applauding their on-task behavior. Our students built their stamina rapidly. However, the first time we attempted to assess an individual child while the rest of the students read to themselves, the class behavior fell apart. Children got up and walked around, went to the bathroom, got drinks, chatted with their friends, and came to us to ask what they should do next. We realized their on-task behavior had been anchored to us. We had unwittingly taught them to rely on our reinforcement and stimulus as extrinsic motivation to keep them on task. They were not the least bit independent. We had clearly missed the target of creating intrinsic, independent learners. It was a difficult lesson to learn but made a huge impact on our teaching.

During the launching period of each Daily 5 choice, as our students are practicing, we no longer move among the group. Instead, we quietly stay...
in one spot, not moving. Our stillness removes the external stimulus for children. This lack of movement from us allows children to focus on practicing the desired behaviors and attending to the task at hand rather than be distracted by us and rely on our constant positive reinforcement to help them build stamina. That said, even though we stay out of the way, we are aware of behaviors happening in the room.

It is important to note that staying out of the way takes place only during the launch period of each Daily 5. Once all of Daily 5 is up and running, we use the time that students are working independently to meet with individuals or small groups.

During this launch phase, as we stay out of the way, we are very aware of all that is going on in the room. This is the time we watch for the “barometer students,” otherwise known as the children who dictate the “weather” of the classroom (see Figure 3.9). A barometer student will be the first person to run out of stamina.

Figure 3.9
The “barometer student” is the first student who runs out of stamina during the practice session.
Running out of stamina may be shown by a student getting a drink, talking to someone else, or looking around and starting to move toward us to ask or report something. As we stay out of the way, we listen and watch for the first sign of off-task behavior. Yet it is important to be aware during this time that we do not make direct eye contact or use our ever powerful “teacher eye.” You know, the look that can put a child back on task from across the room. You may notice in your own classrooms that some students rely on being certain you are watching them, obtaining extrinsic motivation from nothing more than a look from the teacher. Avoiding direct eye contact during the launching phase is as important as physically staying out of the way so children can practice and build their stamina independently.

When watching for barometer children, it can be challenging to decipher whether a child has really reached the end of his or her stamina or is merely “resetting.” To make the distinction, don’t rush too quickly into stopping the class when a child looks as though he or she has run out of stamina. Dylan, a highly kinesthetic student in our room one year, was notorious for resetting himself. He would put down his book, stand up and stretch, look around, then settle back in with his reading, never bothering another student. He just needed to give his brain a break by resetting.

Staying out of the way while students practice assures that stamina for desirable behaviors is being built independently.

Step 9. Use a Quiet Signal to Bring Students Back to the Gathering Place

When we notice a child has exhausted his or her stamina, the remainder of the students often will follow suit. Therefore, as soon as one student shows through behavior that his or her stamina is gone, we make the quiet signal we’ve established in our rooms and say, “Please put your book boxes away and come join us in the gathering place.” Even though it may seem unproductive, we stop children right away because we know they have used all the stamina they have. If we allow them to continue, inevitably we will move into managing the barometer children, defeated the purpose of learning to be independent. We also don’t want students to practice incorrectly, as it is very difficult to change undesirable behaviors once they’re ingrained.

The way we get children’s attention can make or break the tone of a classroom. Since the interruption of a loud voice can easily trigger an escalation of the entire room’s noise level, we use the power of a calm and
respectful signal and teach children early on how to respond quickly when they hear it. In our classrooms, the signal is the ringing of a set of chimes. The balanced melody is different enough to grab the attention of our highly kinesthetic children, but not obtrusive enough to upset our auditory students. Other forms of a quiet signal may be the first few measures of quiet music playing, a gentle tone from an instrument such as a xylophone, or even a rain stick. (See “Chimes—The Quiet Signal” in Chapter 4.) We do not make any vocal or visual statement of approval or disapproval when we use the signal. We aren’t judging the fact that students have worked as long as they can at this stage; we are simply signaling that we want the class to regroup so we can discuss our practice session.

On the way back to the gathering place after they hear the signal, all students put their book boxes away. Even though this takes time in the beginning of the year or launching phase, it helps students develop the good habit of cleaning up right away and will make transitions very smooth as the year progresses.

**Step 10. Conduct a Group Check-In; Ask, “How Did It Go?”**

Once students have joined us in the gathering space, we refer to the I-chart and ask students to reflect on their personal success with the behaviors listed.

Since our schools follow a standards-based grading system, we use a 1–4 check-in that we first saw used in Carlene Bickford’s classroom in Waterville, Maine.

1. Below Standard
2. Approaching Standard
3. Meeting Standard
4. Exceeding Standard

For Read to Self, our invitation to reflect sounds something like this: “Class, put your hand in front of you as you think carefully about how you did today.” Pointing to the first expectation, we say, “How did you do with Stay in One Spot?” The children put up the number of fingers that corresponds to the 1–4 check-in scale, indicating their perceived level of success (Figure 3.10).

We continue to review the expectations, one at a time, allowing students a brief moment to reflect and score themselves. “How did you do at
reading the whole time?” we ask. Then, “How did you do at getting started right away?” Based on their self-reflections of all the desired behaviors, students set a goal for the next practice. Sometimes we ask them to share their goal for the next round with an elbow buddy. Other times students share with the group, write their goals in a journal, or simply make an internal goal. For example, if a student was extremely quiet but did not read the whole time, she might set “read the whole time” as her goal. If a student read the whole time but could have done it with a quieter voice, he might establish “read quietly” as his focus for the next practice.

You may notice that auditory students—children who do a lot of talking out loud—along with the children who are extrinsically motivated, will
want to give you a verbal check-in: “I did it, I was a 3!” We remind them this is their time to think about what they did well and what area they need to improve upon rather than sharing it out loud. We assure these students that when they indicate their standard with their fingers, we are able to see what they are thinking.

Our youngest students who are still in the egocentric stage of development will likely show four fingers for every behavior. Many times, students who are seeking attention will show a number of fingers that does not reflect their actual behavior. In both cases, we ignore the inaccurate numbers. If the attention seeker continues to be inaccurate in subsequent practice session check-ins, we may pull him or her aside quietly for a discussion. For our youngest learners, the inaccurate self-scoring may continue until they move out of egocentrism. We have found that, more often than not, if students don’t get attention for it, the behavior extinguishes itself.

Once check-in is completed, teachers must make a decision about whether to move into another round of the Daily 5 right away. When working with very young students, we might decide that Daily 5 practice is done for the moment, and that we will revisit it again later. Older students may have enough stamina to whip through the 10 Steps again. Perhaps the class can add another behavior to the I-chart if necessary and complete another practice session in the hopes of increasing stamina.

Typically, we complete three to four practice sessions of Daily 5 each day during the first days of launching: once at the start of the day, then before recess, after lunch, and at the end of the day. Repeated practices the first days increase stamina more rapidly and solidify behaviors in students’ muscle memory. The most important thing to remember is to tailor all decisions to the particular class you have in front of you; base your decisions on your students’ individual needs, amount of stamina, and ability to focus.

Once independence is established and stamina is built, the purpose of check-in shifts from self-reflection to students articulating their individual goals and strategies as they choose their next Daily 5 activity. The time it takes for students to build stamina varies greatly depending on a number of factors, including whether they have used the Daily 5 in previous years and how much practice time they receive. We have found that getting Read to Self and Work on Writing up and running can take anywhere from five to ten days or more.

Reviewing the I-chart daily, modeling behaviors repeatedly, and gradually extending practice periods not only helps build student stamina but also establishes desired behaviors in students’ muscle memory, ensuring they become each child’s default Daily 5 behaviors.