



TEACH *for* ATTENTION!

A Tool Belt of Strategies for Engaging
Students with Attention Challenges



Ezra Werb, M.Ed.

PRAISE FOR **TEACH** for **ATTENTION!**

“This book is witty and spot on, perfect for the busy yet thoughtful teacher who needs effective strategies to engage that struggling K–8 student with attentional issues. If this book is in your hands, you’ll realize that Ezra’s tool belt is theoretically grounded, based on real-life vignettes, and readily applicable. Pick and choose or read straight through. You’ll easily access creative approaches that will effortlessly make a real difference in your classroom.”

—**Marcy Dann, M.A.**, board certified educational therapist

“Ezra Werb’s unique ability to make analogies from our adult lives to our students’ lives are what make this groundbreaking book a must read for all teachers.”

—**Christine Offutt**, education specialist, Mission Hills, CA

“*Teach for Attention!* is a superb read for K–8 educators of all experience levels. As a seasoned resource specialist, Ezra reminds us of the effective tools that are readily available within our reach outside of the usual choices, preferential seating, and mini breaks for our students. His frankness about speed bumps includes relatable situations while offering genuine tested solutions through various anecdotes. Furthermore, his inclusion of tech tools to help truncate and/or facilitate student work is veritably handy. This is an essential book that all educators can refer to time and again to help the kids who struggle in academic settings.”

—**Valerie Sun, Ed.D.**, EmpowerED Consulting

“With humor and great intellect, Ezra Werb has woven together a book that helps teachers, parents, and educators better understand students with attention challenges. His book is fun to read, offers different points of view, and contains concrete do’s and don’ts that can easily be implemented.”

—**Michelle Podemski**, third-grade teacher, Los Angeles, CA

“This book on how to promote kids’ attention in learning is filled with practical and simple strategies based on what we know about the ADHD learner. Ezra’s approach is positive and reflects a deep understanding that students’ interests, talents, and styles provide the best cues to engagement. My favorite chapters are on finding and incorporating students’ interests and employing strategies that allow movement. Using case studies and guest speakers in each chapter makes the reading both enjoyable and accessible. I highly recommend this book to everyone who cares about student engagement and enjoyment in learning.”

—**Susan Baum, Ph.D.**, author of *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled* and director of the 2e Center at Bridges Academy

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad, the two best teachers I've ever known

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INTRODUCTION

Set the Stage to Get Engaged

It's three o'clock, and I didn't think I was going to make it.

The bell has rung, and the students are out the door. Sweet relief. All I want to do now is get in my car, throw on some *Hamilton*, and beat the traffic home. Oh wait, I almost forgot. It's Tuesday. We have our weekly after-school teachers' meeting.

I consider pulling the fire alarm.

Using better judgment, I end up sitting in the library on one of those stiff, plastic chairs while my school's technology specialist tells me how to properly input my progress reports into the new, very expensive, and very complicated online system. I know this is important, but I'd give anything at this moment to be home, relaxing on the couch or hanging out with my family and friends or prepping dinner.

Getting hungry now. Hmm, which frozen Indian meal to make tonight, the chicken masala or the lentils?

I know I should be paying attention to the tech specialist. Progress reports are really important. The parents are going to scrutinize them like tax returns. I'll have to make sure they're written perfectly.

Suddenly I'm fidgeting. Playing a light but steady drum rhythm with my pencil.

Wait, what did the tech guy just say about saving to the cloud? The reports are due Friday? I haven't even started! Oh man, I'm gonna have to write them at home. Homework is the worst.

I check the clock.

It's 4:15! I'm exhausted. No more gas in the tank. My head is so heavy, I can barely keep it propped up. I must look like a broken marionette. I really should be more awake. More engaged. Paying attention.

But sometimes, it's just really difficult.

It's difficult to sit in a room and sustain my attention on someone talking for longer than five minutes, especially when I have things I'd rather be doing, when I'm tired, when I'm hungry, when I'm fidgety, when all I want to do is jailbreak this place and escape to home.

I don't blame the tech specialist or my administrators. They're doing their best. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes, trying to teach me something at this moment.

Thank goodness this is only once a week for an hour.

And that's when it hits me.

My students with attention challenges experience this every day. They have to be in meetings for five hours a day, five days a week, thirty-six weeks a year! And *I'm* the one who is trying to engage *them*.

Sustaining engagement can be stressful for both the teacher and students.

The Challenge of Engagement

In 2016, it was estimated that 8.4 percent of US children ages two to seventeen had an ADHD diagnosis—about 5.4 million kids.¹ This is a staggering statistic that indicates a very high probability that you

have at least one diagnosed student in your class, if not more. This is not counting students who are showing clear signs of attention challenges but who are not diagnosed.

We see the impact of this in our schools, with about 30 percent of students with an ADHD diagnosis failing classes and/or repeating grades. Many of these students don't make it to the end of high school, since 35 percent of diagnosed children drop out at some point.² These students are falling through the cracks of our educational system, and it all starts with their engagement. If students are not mentally connected to the material, the teacher, or the classroom, they are going to have an extremely difficult time performing academic tasks or learning new information that is even the least complex. Their low self-confidence will grow increasingly lower until they simply give up.

And then there are the rest of your students. Maybe they're not showing significant signs of attention difficulties, but you might notice a few students that seem a bit distracted. That one girl who seems to check out mentally when writing projects are assigned. Or that boy who is obsessed with playing a full air guitar routine with his pencil during math. Some kids simply don't connect with certain material. Other kids might not be engaged because of social or emotional struggles or because something may be happening in their home. All kids are going to have difficulty focusing at some point during the day.

But it isn't always clear how to engage students with attention challenges. Compare this to other learning issues. When a student has dyslexia or a severe language comprehension issue, it's a bit easier for teachers to wrap their heads around the situation. For example, a teacher knows that phonics and fluency support are the standard interventions for a reading issue. I'm not saying it's easy, but

at least we have a roadmap. By comparison, students with attention challenges have a broad range of symptoms that cover all sorts of different areas of academic performance. When it comes to engaging students with attention issues, there is no primary solution.

So, what can we do? How do we support students in our classrooms who struggle with attention challenges?

Teaching for Attention—An Origin Story

In my thirteen years of supporting struggling students, my experiences have been diverse. I began my career doing behavior intervention with students on the autism spectrum as well as students with ADHD, helping them learn in typical classrooms and integrate socially with their peers. I then earned my special education credentials and worked as a resource specialist teacher in low-income neighborhoods of the Los Angeles Unified School District, supporting students with dyslexia, language comprehension issues, high-functioning autism, and ADHD.

In my experience, it's extremely tough to connect students with attention challenges to academic material, both in classrooms and in one-to-one settings. Like you, perhaps, I searched for strategies online and in ADHD resource books. I found many good, common sense, researched ideas: Give frequent breaks. Shorten assignments. Allow extra time for quizzes and tests. Show videos when possible. Give preferred seating. Offer choices. Repeat important information. Provide visual and verbal cues. Use positive behavior support.

I certainly use these basic supports and refer to them in this book. However, what I found time and time again was that they weren't enough. They helped in the moment but failed to result in long-term gains in engagement.

It wasn't until I earned my master's in educational therapy that I started to fully understand the implications of attention challenges on the academic lives of students and on their self-confidence. I learned to change my perspective from seeing these students as a collective group needing a strict, uniform set of supports to applying one of the principles of my educational therapy program:

My mission was to focus on what these students *could* do. I began to assemble a tool belt of strategies that would build off students' strengths and make students feel confident.

that every student has his or her own unique set of challenges and, more importantly, each has a unique profile of strengths and interests you can leverage to help improve his or her weaker skills.

As I provided academic support in typical classrooms and also conducted educational therapy sessions with students after school, my mission was to focus on what these students *could* do. I began to assemble a tool belt of strategies and supports that would build off of every student's strengths and engage each individual on a level that made that student feel confident.

If that sounds like it would take a lot of time, it did. But that doesn't mean it has to take a lot of time for you. That's what this book is for. These pages catalog all the different ways I've tried and succeeded (well, *mostly* succeeded) to engage my students—the “tools of engagement” in my tool belt—including how to harness students' interests and strengths, use technology effectively, make reading tasks feel manageable, integrate physical activity, and reinforce self-management, among many others.

In my various teaching roles, I've used all my studies, training, research, and creativity, and have tried every idea under the sun to capture students' attention. Some have worked. Some have failed.

Miserably. *Teach for Attention!* is the culmination of those efforts; I wrote it to help you learn from those successes and failures because I believe engaging kids—especially kids with attention challenges—is one of the most important things teachers can do in our highly distracting world.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is primarily for K–8 classroom teachers—or teachers of any sort, really—who want to increase their students’ engagement. These strategies will help you whether you teach in a general classroom or specialize in reading, language arts, math, science, Spanish, or any other special subject. None of them require you to be an actor or a comedian or have a talent for silly voices—this book is not about putting on a show to be more engaging (of course, if you are a performer, you should definitely use that!). My tool belt has tools anyone can use without having to change your personality or style.

The *Teach for Attention!* strategies will also be helpful for specialists outside the classroom who support students with attention challenges, whether you’re a tutor, educational therapist, speech therapist, occupational therapist, or in another role. Anyone who provides one-on-one support knows that even in calm, well-structured environments, it can still be extremely difficult to engage a student with your material.

Parents, too, may find ideas in this book that they can apply at home to help with the homework process.

And for the students, educators can use these strategies to help reach all those students discussed earlier—including those who are just having a tough time connecting *today* or those who struggle with a certain subject. But the students who will benefit the most are the ones with ADHD and related attention challenges.

An important point must be made here. Your students with attention deficits may also have concurrent learning and developmental challenges, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, language processing, dyscalculia, auditory or visual processing, spectrum disorders, anxiety disorders, executive function deficits, or serious behavioral challenges. Along with any of these, they may also be cognitively gifted and considered twice-exceptional; sometimes a student's cognitive gifts may result in less engagement because the student doesn't feel intellectually stimulated.

With some students, it can be extremely difficult to determine where an attention issue stops and where another deficit begins. If we suspect a student may

have a concurrent cognitive or developmental issue, we as teachers have to be vocal about it. Student success teams should meet with parents and discuss what supplemental supports a student

The strategies target students' confidence, anxiety, interest, self-awareness, sensory needs, and mental energy so students are more likely to engage with your lessons, no matter the subject.

might need: It could be a phonics program, a specialized math tutor after school, or an educational therapist to lower a student's anxiety about writing. A psychologist might also be brought in to conduct assessments and generate a cognitive profile for the student.

To be clear, my tool belt of strategies focuses on the components of attention, and the strategies are designed to be applied simply and with little preparation. In other words, they don't target specific academic muscles in the same way that a supplemental reading or writing program would, and they do not eliminate the need to deal with those other challenges. What the strategies do is target things like students' confidence, anxiety, interest, self-awareness, sensory

needs, and mental energy so that students are more likely to engage with your lessons and projects, no matter the subject.

Attention and Executive Functions: The Basics

To better understand the strategies in this book and, therefore, better employ them, it's helpful to have a basic grasp of how attention and executive functions work. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* divides the symptoms for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) into two categories—inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity—and lists the specific behaviors that correspond to each. Inattentive type is characterized by distraction and lack of focus, while students with hyperactive/impulsive type are the ones who seem energized and always on the go. Students may be diagnosed with the inattentive type, the hyperactive/impulsive type, or both, depending on their symptoms and if the symptoms appear in multiple environments.

Our attention components, as listed in the *DSM-5*, are affected greatly by our executive functions. Executive functions are how we manage ourselves and our cognitive resources in order to complete tasks and achieve goals. We're not necessarily conscious of most of these functions—like managing time, modulating mental energy, pacing ourselves, controlling impulses, switching focus, and planning ahead, just to name a few—but they are in constant use in our daily lives.

Though these functions are vast and complicated, for our purposes, we can organize them into two basic categories: our *input* abilities and our *production* (output) abilities. If students are having difficulties with input abilities, they struggle to absorb and understand material presented to them. In the classroom, that can look like this:

- appearing more interested in seemingly small stimuli around the room
- unable to stop playing with utensils at seat (rulers, pencils, sharpeners, and so on)
- asking questions about things from ten minutes ago
- unable to repeat information or directions just given
- difficulty connecting new information to what's already been taught
- seeming to be generally lost

These all are related to our ability to input information and sensory stimuli from the environment.

Then there are attention-related functions that affect our production—that is, our ability to transmit information from inside of us out to the world. Issues with work production often look like this:

- slow work production, not finishing work
- difficulty starting projects
- disorganized desks and folders
- drawing unrelated pictures on worksheets instead of working
- impulsive talking and calling out
- impulsive body movement

To help us relate to our students, consider how we all have strengths and weaknesses in these areas. For example, I consider myself a writer, and yet I have to take breaks every ten minutes when I'm writing. I have to stand up. Stretch. Walk around. Get something to eat. Send a text. Watch a stupid video of a parrot who can sing like Neil Diamond.

The takeaway is that I can produce writing, but mental energy breaks are a key part in making that happen. If I were forced to sit

and produce on command without the freedom to stand up, walk around, and do something stimulating other than writing, it would be incredibly frustrating for me. And I don't have significant attention issues. This helps me realize that many of our students with ADHD may experience something similar, only much more severely, when called upon to produce work. If I can relate to a student's challenges and frustrations, it may be easier for me to find the right support.

Consider your own production abilities:

- Can you do your taxes in one sitting or do you have to take lots of breaks? Perhaps breaks are crucial for you to sustain mental energy over a long period of time.
- Do you wash dishes right away or leave them in the sink for days? Maybe you tend to avoid tasks because you perceive them as too taxing in the moment or just not much fun.
- Do you send emails and texts impulsively without really thinking about your intended meaning? You may struggle with self-editing.
- Do you obsess about paying your bills on time while your bedroom is a total disaster area? Maybe you have difficulty monitoring how much of your mental energy to put into certain tasks.
- Can you stop yourself from talking during a meeting? It may be that when you have something to say, you just have to get it out or you feel like you'll burst.

Let's talk about input abilities. Sometimes, I mentally zone out while I'm driving. I'll be cruising down the 101 freeway, thinking about the season finale of the show I just binge-watched and how disappointing it was, but I'm so invested now that of course I'm going to watch the next season, but anyway, shouldn't I be spending more time exercising or something . . . wait, where am I? I'm three miles past my exit, that's where!

Ten minutes of driving on autopilot. Yikes!

It's extremely frustrating and unsettling to know that I zone out like this sometimes. I want to be fully present at all times, but it's something I have to actively practice. Thankfully, my cognitive functions are only mildly impacted.

I have students who probably have this very sort of "missing time" experience, but for them, it happens consistently throughout the day. I can imagine what that must feel like for some students in our classrooms; they may want to be listening, following the lesson, but their minds just keep wandering. How frustrating it must be for them to feel lost every few minutes.

- Do you ever zone out while you're reading a novel and have to reread the last page or two? It may be challenging to ingest so much written language at once.
- Are you able to get work done on your laptop in a coffee shop or are the conversations around you too distracting? You may have difficulty filtering out background stimuli to focus on what's important.
- How much time can you spend on social media at one time? Five minutes? Ten? An hour? Maybe with certain media, you can intake more information at once than with other types.
- If you've skipped a meal, do you find it hard to focus on things? Maybe your body and mind can't afford to miss breakfast, and if you're hungry it affects your ability to concentrate at work.

Again, we're trying to find entry points into understanding our students' experiences in classrooms. If we can relate to their experiences, we can be more accurate in finding solutions. And remember, all of our students have a range of strengths and deficits in the areas

of input and production. And so, all of our students potentially benefit from engagement strategies.

How to Use This Book

Teach for Attention! has seven chapters, each of which focuses on one major category of strategies for increasing engagement during everyday classroom activities. The chapters describe a common problem area experienced by students and teachers, explore why students may have this challenge, and lay out the specific strategies that target this issue. Think of these strategies as tools on your tool belt. Some of them may be familiar to you, and you may even be using them already, but you might find ideas or approaches that are new to you. To that end, “Attention Grabbers”—real-world anecdotes of memorable students I have worked with—support most of the strategies. These short vignettes paint a picture of how these tools actually work. The stories primarily cover reading, writing, and math, spanning kindergarten through middle school. They are the heart of this book, helping you recognize familiar scenarios and be able to apply the ideas in your own classroom. While the students and their stories are real, I have changed their names, and in a few cases, I have combined similar students to make the concepts more clear.

While some of the stories come from my experience working in classrooms as a support teacher or resource specialist, many of them take place in one-to-one educational therapy sessions. While this allows me certain luxuries a classroom teacher just doesn't have—time, quiet, controlled environments—the tools do not require that you spend lots of time sitting with various individual students every day (which you probably do anyway if a student needs significant help). They are supports you can inject into the flow of your classroom, targeting as many students as you want. With

each anecdote—even if it happens in a controlled setting—I offer suggestions for how to implement the associated strategy in your classroom.

Each chapter also features one “Guest Speaker,” an essay written by a general or special educator, an enrichment teacher, or an impacted student. These individuals share their own real-world stories of how different approaches resulted in better engagement. These help give different voices and perspectives on what attention support can look like in the classroom.

Finally, each chapter ends with “The Big Takeaway,” summing up the salient points of the chapter.

You can read this book straight through, or you can use it as a reference or handbook by checking out different chapters based on what you think might work for you in your situation at a given time. Try lots of the ideas, and if one or two don’t work well for you right away, try others. Having worked for years in schools of all kinds, I understand the absurd number of responsibilities and tasks teachers face on a daily basis. The ideas here can be done simply and with little preparation, which makes it easy to try them out. The strategies in this book do not require you to revamp your entire curriculum or change your whole style of teaching. Just pick tools that work for you, and use them.

An important key is playing offense, not defense, most of the time. That is, rather than using strategies after students have already failed, being proactive and building the strategies into the lessons or projects and/or making them part of the regular classroom workflow. It’s also crucial to recognize if there are specific times or subjects that are especially challenging for students to engage with. For example, for students who can’t attend to writing tasks, page 107 describes the benefits of using slide-making programs over word processing

programs. But don't just use PowerPoint as standby support in case someone struggles. Build it in as an option for the assignment from the start. And do it for any project at all times.

For students with less severe challenges, you may not necessarily have to play offense all the time. With these students, you may notice a bit of difficulty with a particular lesson or project. In that case, throw in one of the simpler strategies that may serve as a jump start.

You can use any of these strategies with any student who struggles to connect with classroom material or assignments. Some of the strategies are more intensive, some less so, but you can adjust all of them to fit the needs of a particular student.

Engaging with Success

My hope is that these strategies work for you and your students. But if they don't exactly suit your needs or click with you, take the spirit of these suggestions and come up with your own ideas. Use your creativity. After all, every day you're up at the front of the room performing the lessons you've created. Teaching is a creative profession by nature!

If we can put students in a position to experience some success in school and increase their self-confidence, it may be the most important component of their sustained engagement.

Perhaps even more important than creativity is empathy. Back in that teachers' meeting, I wanted to be attentive. I knew the material was important, but my brain just couldn't keep up. You don't have to sit in a lot of staff meetings to understand how hard it can be for students to stay engaged at school. You've lived it—we all have. When it comes to engagement, the kids are not the problem. The problem is that they're expected to sit inside

classrooms every day for hours on end and perform on command. For many of them, this is like putting a hummingbird in a cage.

These students have so much to offer, but they've likely experienced a lot of failure in the classroom. If we can put them in a position to experience some success in school and increase their self-confidence, it may be the most important component of their sustained engagement. And from there, the opportunities for their achievement continue to grow.

I would love to hear how these strategies have worked for you, especially if you have modified them or come up with your own versions. If you would like to share your own Attention Grabbers, or if you have questions, please email me through Free Spirit Publishing at help4kids@freespirit.com.

Time to get engaged!

Ezra Werb

A decorative header featuring a ruler at the top and bottom, with two hammers positioned in the center. The hammers are rendered in a light gray, semi-transparent style. The ruler has vertical tick marks. There are also four circular icons with diagonal lines, one in each corner of the header area.

CHAPTER 1

GET INTEREST RATES UP

How to Incorporate Students' Personal Interests

We plan great lessons. Let's not be humble.

They're well structured. They're interactive. They're sequenced clearly. The content is interesting. There's plenty of repetition and practice built in. Most of our students seem alert, engaged, and able to complete the related independent work.

But sometimes certain students just can't sustain engagement with our teaching. They miss key ideas. They're confused. When it's time for them to put what they've learned into practice, they show you that blank look, as if they've been somewhere else. It's like there's no one operating their input controls. It may be happening throughout the day, or perhaps at specific times or during certain subjects.

We can more easily reach these kids if we use their own interests in our lessons. Consider how we work with struggling readers. Of course, teaching phonics and practicing fluency is imperative for students with dyslexia, but to motivate these students to engage in an activity that causes them to struggle, teachers and parents give them books that include their personal interests or high-interest material—in other words, books that kids would choose for themselves. This may be a graphic novel of a popular animated series or a video game handbook, a movie-spinoff chapter book or a YA novel about zombies. It works because the familiarity with the material eases stress and increases motivation.

We can apply this same reasoning to the classroom in general. Psychologist Dr. Robert Brooks coined the phrase “islands of competence” for those areas where people with disabilities shine, where they show skill, where they possess knowledge. Let’s bring these islands into our classrooms. Students perk up when they already know something about what you’re teaching. It’s as if their personal interest makes them feel confident and helps fuel their mental energy, allowing their input abilities to work better.

To make use of students’ interests, first we must find out what their interests are.

Get to Know Students’ Interests

All of your students have interests. These are topics they know a lot about or activities in which they excel. If given the choice, they would spend most of their time just talking about these things. And because of that, it’s usually not difficult to find out what your students are into. Here are some ways you can do that.

- **Surveys.** On day one or day 100 (it’s never too late!), have students fill out a paper or an electronic survey. With kindergartners, you

can ask them verbally or have their parents fill out a survey. Ask about their favorites: movies, TV shows, books, graphic novels, hobbies, activities, and so on. Students will be impressed that a teacher wants to know how much they love playing Mario Kart Racing, how they know all of Taylor Swift's lyrics, or how they're obsessed with a smartphone's hidden features.

- **Chat with students at recess.** Spend a few minutes with kids at recess. Students and teachers tend to loosen up as soon as the bell rings and everyone goes outside. It's a whole different vibe out there. Even just chatting with kids for a few minutes can tell you so much about them. You can ask what TV shows they're watching these days, what video game they're currently playing, or what after-school activities they're doing. You can also talk with them at other less-formal times, like during hall passing, on the bus for a field trip, or while waiting for pick up after school.
- **Listen in.** If you just hang around while students eat their snacks or chat at the beginning of class, you'll inevitably hear what they're passionate about at the moment. This seems like common sense, but downtime discourse often revolves around their interests. Do a little eavesdropping and you'll know what new game app your students just can't live without.

With surveys, all that information is recorded. If you're gleaning information through informal chats, take notes so you won't forget. This is valuable data!

For various reasons, some students may not be very forthcoming about their personal interests, and it can be harder to learn about them. Some kids are just shy. Other kids lack confidence or don't think their interests are worth sharing. If they've been struggling in school and feeling beat-up by the experience, they may feel it's too

risky to share. But you can still discern their interests. If you're getting lots of "I don't knows" out of students you're trying to help, look for clues. They may have logos or images of characters on their clothing, lunchboxes, binders, or lockers. Maybe a student has an emoji keychain on his backpack. Try mentioning emojis in a lesson and see if his attention perks up. You can also talk to parents and guardians. No need to make a big deal out of it, but a quick email home asking what the student is into might turn up something helpful.

Let students be the experts and use the confidence that comes from expertise to increase their attention and understanding.

So what do you do with this CIA briefing on your students? That's the fun part: You let them teach you. Allow students to be the experts and use the confidence that comes from expertise to increase attention and understanding.

This doesn't mean building entire lessons around their personal interests, just adding some bits—like throwing some chocolate chips into your morning cereal. Not too many, but enough to give it a kick. Throwing some chocolate chips into your lessons is easy and fun and tastes good.

There are two main ways to incorporate these bits into the curriculum, and they correspond to our *input* and *production* functions. You can use student interests to help them absorb new information (input) and effectively output content (production).

Input: Incorporate Their Interests Into Lessons

Just to emphasize, you're not going to have students read Captain Underpants as an introduction to literary analysis. But there are countless ways you can use him and characters like him in

supporting roles in your lessons. You can always change the details of your discussions to add a bit of content your students care about, or use extra examples based on their entertainment loves. Here is an example.

ATTENTION GRABBER

Maleficent Math Problems

For students with input challenges, math word problems can induce nightmares—falling-off-a-building, stuck-in-a-maze caliber nightmares about quantities of things, and having to do something with those things, and just how many things do we have now?! It is very difficult for these students to input the language, input the numbers, and then process those two elements in conjunction to deduce what operation to use. And because it is so difficult for them, students often tune out immediately, their minds' way of giving up.

I once had a third-grade student, Veronica, in my resource group who was a huge fan of the Disney Channel movies, the *Descendants*; she had the books and accessories and all that. But she was having a real tough time making sense of word problems, and so she would stop listening whenever they came up. She wouldn't even attempt problems that had more than a few words in them.

Knowing she was such a fan of the magic-themed show, I rewrote a few of the problems incorporating some of the characters into them. Here's one of the original problems: "If Becky already has 12 flowers and her mother gives her $\frac{1}{3}$ as many, will she have enough total flowers to put into 18 vases?"

And here's how I rewrote it, incorporating characters from the Disney show: "Mal and Evie are preparing for a slumber party. Mal uses magic to create 12 cupcakes. Evie uses her magic to create $\frac{1}{3}$ as many. Together, will they have enough if 18 guests are coming over?"

Immediately, Veronica smiled and started telling me about the show. We started talking about the characters and how they use magic, and I allowed her a minute to tell me all about it. She was very expressive when it came to something she knew a lot about. Then, when I prompted her to read the problem, she was quicker and more energetic to do so. After reading it, she needed some reteaching for how to draw pictures to help her figure out the problem, but she got it. Once she was connected to the material, it was easier to reteach her the steps to solve it.

I realize that this is a small, simple adjustment. Perhaps it seems almost trite. But I've rarely seen teachers do it, and it's too easy *not* to try. Don't underestimate how effective even a slight change can make in reaching students. Throw in a problem with some characters they like, and they feel comfortable because with these characters, they're experts. Invite Peppa Pig and the PAW Patrol into your math lessons and watch your kindergartners' eyes light up.

Wikipedia. You may not want to use it for scholarly research, but it comes in handy for quick learning about your students' interests.

By the way, how did I know about Mal and Evie? Wikipedia. You may not want to use it for scholarly research, but it comes in handy for quick learning about your students' interests. Once I got the idea, I looked up the *Descendants* during a spare moment and scanned the characters section. It took about two minutes of grueling research.

Using students' interests can be an especially effective tool in English language arts. For example, when we teach story elements like character, conflict, plot, and setting, we pick a story the students are familiar with to dissect the pieces and highlight their meaning.

Sure, you could use your read-aloud book or maybe something they read last year. But for struggling readers, these references might not be as engaging as a movie they just saw over the weekend.

If you ask for volunteers to recap a new kid-trendy movie, students who never volunteer for anything involving language arts may suddenly want to tell you every plot detail of the movie. Now that they're engaged and confident, you can generalize the narrative elements to any story, and soon enough, to whatever book you're reading in class.

The technique of using movies works for older students as well. When teaching literature in middle school classrooms, explaining the concept of a story's theme can be tricky. It's not a moral or a message, necessarily; it's the idea and concept the story is centered around. Students with attention difficulties expend a lot of mental energy just to input all of the story information while reading, which makes the more abstract, higher-order thinking that much more challenging. Often, this is where they lose engagement with the material.

But it can be really effective to reference movies to engage students in the process of text analysis. For those into superheroes and comic books, discuss how the X-Men movies center around themes of conformity versus individuality as well as society's acceptance of people's differences. You could show your students how *Wonder Woman* is a meditation on war or how *Toy Story* is about identity and agency. I once had a student who loved *Rocky*, so we figured out that it's a movie about a working-class hero and the ambition to rise above one's social status.

Sports are another common student passion. Wherever you teach, you will almost certainly have sports fans among your students. Whether you're a fan or not, it's easy to catch up on big sports events or athletes and use that information to help kids digest lessons.

ATTENTION GRABBER**Proper and Common Nouns Are a Slam Dunk**

Anthony, a second grader with a terrific sense of humor, also had severe attention issues among other undiagnosed processing difficulties. As a result, he was barely hanging on in an academically rigorous private school. As a resource specialist, I spent time in his classroom supporting a few of the students with learning challenges, including Anthony, while the teacher taught lessons. During direct instruction, he struggled greatly with input; he could only attend to the classroom teacher for about a minute at a time, even when the lessons were simple.

He also happened to be a sports fan, and I knew what did hold his attention: a certain NBA team. He often wore a Golden State Warriors hat to school, which he begrudgingly took off every morning before he came into class.

Up front, the teacher was explaining the difference between common and proper nouns. She had some standard examples on the T-chart: girl, Sarah; state, California; planet, Jupiter. Straightforward stuff, but Anthony was clearly not absorbing any of it. I stepped up behind him, kneeled close, and whispered: "What about Stephen Curry?"

He instantly perked up. "You know who he is?" he asked.

"Of course I do. He's one of the best players in the NBA. And Stephen Curry is a proper noun. The common noun is *basketball player*."

"Ohhhhh," he said, the light bulb going *ping* over his head.

Now I had his attention. "What about the name of his team?" I asked.

"The Warriors," he said.

“Right. *Warriors* is the proper noun. Proper nouns are names. The common noun is *team*. It says what the proper noun is naming.”

This exchange seemed to jump-start his mind. Not only was he attentive and participating for the remainder of the lesson, he was able to independently complete the worksheet afterward, outputting information using the new skill he’d learned.

It worked because Anthony could be confident in his knowledge. And, of course, talking about his favorite sports team made him feel like he was relaxing at home on his couch watching a Warriors game. Feeling confident and relaxed can increase a student’s engagement to the point where it lasts through independent work time as well.

The whole intervention with Anthony took thirty seconds, and I thought of it on the spot—no prep necessary. You can drop references to specific students’ interests easily in one-to-one moments with students like Anthony, but you can use this tool just as easily in your lessons for the whole class; the proper names T-chart could have included “basketball team, Warriors.”

Of course, students’ interests go well beyond sports and entertainment, and you can tap into all sorts of student passions to help them digest lessons. Students have wide-ranging and often surprising hobbies, from gardening to baking, commercial airliners to online video gaming, horse care to skateboarding. I’ve known a male student who was into sewing and a female third grader who was into horror movies. It seems that *Magic: The Gathering* is still hanging around. Many kids enjoy athletic activities like martial arts, dance, and parkour.

Whatever hobbies students have, you can engage them by referencing these islands of competence during lessons. Even video games can be a legitimate way to engage students.

ATTENTION GRABBER**Stock Market for Gamers**

I was working after school with an eighth grader with ADHD who had written a short research paper about the 1929 stock market crash. Alexander did a bare-bones job of culling some information from the internet and weaving it into a summary. It was clear from his demeanor and tone he had zero interest in the stock market. What the heck did he care if it crashed 100 years ago, or whatever, and can't we just talk about the new *God of War* game? He was a huge online gamer and was extremely knowledgeable on the subject.

I asked him if he understood what the stock market is and what the crash really meant, and he quickly said he had no idea. As I began explaining how stocks are traded on the market, he made a connection to something he cared about. He told me about an online video game where players can buy and sell digital items to use within the game. He explained that it wasn't the game company that facilitated the trading but a third-party site where people would post their items for sale and buyers would come looking, like Craigslist. He went even further and spoke about how the prices of the items would fluctuate depending on the demand for them.

During this conversation, I could almost see the neurons firing in his brain. He was engaged because he had made a connection to something with which he was an expert, something that greatly interested him, and in the process, he had grasped a pretty complex concept. We proceeded to have an in-depth discussion about the market crash and consequences of it: What if everyone pulled their money out of the online gaming exchange? Would the digital items have any value?