Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers, and today I have a treat for you. I'm

someone I've known of for a long time in the online space. She's been operating her website, Mrs. Winter's Bliss, for some time. She was a classroom teacher for over 20 years where she was known among her staff as the Queen of Centers.

I know you'll figure that out in this episode, because she really gets into the weeds with me and talks about all the specific things that you should keep in mind when doing centers and how to manage them, so they go smoothly and you can meet with your small groups without interruptions. Let's get started!

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Christina!

Christina Winter: Hello, Anna! So good to be here!

Anna Geiger: Christina is a real-life friend of mine; we connected at The Reading League event in New York in October of 2023. It was wonderful. Christina has also been on the podcast previously, and I'll make sure to link to that in the show notes.

Maybe you could just give us a quick couple of sentences about who you are and what you do.

Christina Winter: I am a former first-grade teacher for over two decades, and I now am not teaching in the classroom, but I work with teachers, kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers, and you can find me at my home website, Mrs. Winter's Bliss.

Anna Geiger: Wonderful.

You have become an expert in centers, and that's what we're going to talk about today. But first, I'd like to just lay the foundation.

Interestingly, there are conversations in big Facebook groups that we don't need centers anymore, now that we're not doing guided reading, or that there's no need for small groups. Some people say they were really a waste of time, which I find really interesting and kind of sad, because we know that even if, as some teachers do, you teach a whole-group phonics lesson, you still need small groups after, because unless you have a really unusual situation, which I've never heard of, your whole class is not going to be at the same skill level. You have to fill gaps, and you should challenge some kids. If you're doing that, you need something for the rest of the class to do, which is where centers come in.

Then also, the method that I prefer, if your students are at different places in their foundational skills journey, that you differentiate from the beginning, and hopefully with other teachers so they don't have to spend a ton of time doing centers. Realistically, you probably would need at least 30 minutes of center time per day, if you're working to meet the needs of everyone in your class.

But there's another reason for centers too. Can you talk to us about that?

Christina Winter: I understand where people are coming from when you're in these groups and you hear it's a waste of time. It can be a waste of time, BUT if centers are done correctly, they are really effective and really engaging for students.

Let's take a minute to think about the "I do, we do, you do" model, that gradual release of responsibility. We know that our students need a lot of practice, and those early learners, they need tons and tons of repetition, tons of practice, to reach automaticity, to reach fluency. Wiley Blevins reminds us that skills can take four to six weeks to get to mastery, and we need to be teaching for mastery.

But our curriculums are moving so quickly! So literacy centers are the time that our students really need to practice new skills, but practicing skills that we have explicitly taught.

We have to teach them and then work with them, again, that "I do" - I'm the teacher. I model it for you. "We do" - that's our guided practice. Then the "you do," where our students are actually practicing. We're releasing responsibility and giving them the opportunity to practice.

Wiley Blevins tells us that when students are engaged in authentic reading and writing activities, that is where learning is solidified. That's where our skills stick. For that, I really think that literacy centers are such an effective way for our students to really master skills as we teach them.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, so it's that automaticity piece.

I think one thing to remember about centers that I did not get as a teacher was that it should be things kids can do independently. You might not necessarily teach something and then right away, that type of activity goes to the center, because you haven't done it enough times with them.

For them to be able to do it independently, it's got to be something they know pretty well, which might feel like, "Well, what's the point then? It's a waste of time." But it's like you said; it's the automaticity piece. It's being able to do it very quickly so that their brains are freed up for that more complex work.

Christina Winter: Right.

Anna Geiger: What is your opinion about the best centers for a classroom that's aligned with the science of reading?

Christina Winter: I really share with teachers that Dr. Archer says, "Teach the stuff and cut the fluff." Right? I am Team No Fluff. We want to think about the core five, and that is writing, word study, independent reading, listening center, and then a partner center. That might be a partner game or a partner reading. I recommend just really sticking with those core five centers.

Then think about having consistent activities. We know, if we're thinking about 5, 6, and 7 year old students, it's a lot if you're continually changing out the centers like, "This week, we're going to do this Sight Word Bingo, and then next week, we're going to do this stamping activity," or something like that.

We want to be really, really consistent, because our students actually thrive when

there's consistency, when there's predictability. So rather than every week changing out all the different centers, maybe we're going to keep those centers for a month. Like you said, let it become familiar with students. We want to keep the same center for a month, but then switch out the skills, those skills that are the repetition, the practice of what you're actually teaching during your Tier 1 instruction with your students.

For example, you might have a roll and read fluency center, like fluency phrases. Say you're working on digraphs, so you're going to have roll and read fluency sentences that are digraphs. Students are going to do that the first week, and then the next week you might have other digraphs, or maybe you're moving into long vowels with silent E.

Again, they know exactly what to do because it's consistent. They're not having to learn a whole new center-type thing; they're just practicing a new skill, if that makes sense.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. When you talked about word work, that would be practicing phonics skills, correct?

Christina Winter: Yes.

Anna Geiger: Then tell me a little bit about how you would do a writing center. That's one I struggle with a little bit, because it seems like there needs to be more guidance for that one. How do you make that work?

Christina Winter: I like to do writing based on whatever skills we're working on.

When we did narrative writing in my class, when I taught narrative writing to my students during writing time, then we could do narrative writing prompts, or I had narrative menus or things like that so they could make a choice, but then write their own story. It was following up, again, on what we're teaching in our whole-group instruction.

Anna Geiger: Can you give us an example of a specific activity that would maybe NOT be the best choice for a center?

Christina Winter: Yeah. We do not want to just give our students busy work, like

coloring. We do not want students to be doing lots of cut and paste, where most of their time is doing those cutting and pasting and gluing activities. We also do not want to be doing activities where students really aren't getting any type of feedback, for example I've seen teachers have these clip cards where the kids have to clip on the medial vowel sound, or something like that. Well students could just be clipping and they have no idea if they're doing it correctly or incorrectly.

We want students to have a way to know if they're doing the skill correctly. Sometimes you can find puzzles, or something like that where it only connects if it's correct.

We also don't want to be giving students... I know teachers might do this, but we want to move away from that. We definitely don't want to be putting in a center something that you have not already taught your students or practiced with your students.

So I understand why people might be feeling like, "This is a waste of time." I know there's a lot of chatter when I'm in Facebook groups about, "Independent reading - that's such a waste of time. It's a waste of time."

It is not a waste of time if it's done correctly. You have to put in a lot of scaffolds. You have to put a lot of things in place so that you do it correctly. I talk about with teachers that it's really thinking it through before you jump right in. You really have to go slow to go fast with your students.

Anna Geiger: So I read something recently in "Powerful Writing Strategies for All Students" by Karen Harris, Steve Graham, Linda Mason, and Barbara Friedlander. They said, "Don't PEE. No PEE-ing in the classroom." What they meant was Post, Explain, Expect, which I was so guilty of that as a teacher, and as a mom too.

It's basically saying, "Here's what you do. Here's the poster. Here's what you do. Now go do it," without any of the "we do" in there. It's just telling them what to do with very little modeling, and then just expecting.

It's kind of like at home when I tell them to wash the bathroom counters, and they're like, "Okay," but I just put my hand over it and it doesn't feel clean. Well, I never showed them exactly how to do it. I just expect them to.

What would you say in terms of how long does it take to get them started, and do you

just have them do one particular kind of center to start and then gradually add more? How does that work?

Christina Winter: I call it "Teach, Model, and Practice," where I am super explicit like, "This is what we do. This is how we do it. Let's practice it." We go really slow to go fast. If we want our students to do something, we have to be super clear on what exactly we want to do.

I know for teachers sometimes that feels like, "I don't have time for that, because I have all these other things I have to do," but really, if you take a step back, move out of the emotional piece, and if you really think about it, it's your job to think about what your ultimate goal for literacy centers is. Yes, we want to give our students the opportunity for practice; it's important. But it's also really, really important, like you were saying earlier, that we have the time to meet in our targeted small groups, to really help our students in that small group.

If we have constant interruptions, if kids are off-task, if kids aren't engaged in meaningful learning opportunities, we're wasting their time, for sure. We know every minute counts for every kid, every single day, so we really have to set them up for success, and we really have to go slow rolling out our centers.

For me, it took a month. The first week of school, I probably didn't even start talking about centers, because there's so much going on the first week of school, but by the second week of school, I'd have my center chart up on the wall. I'd have all my center cards flipped over. I would say to the students, "Friends, we are going to do this thing called literacy centers. I'm going to teach you how we do it. When we flip all these cards over, then we get to start."

Each day during what would be our literacy center block time, what I would've allotted in my daily schedule, I would say, "Okay. Today, I'm going to talk to you about independent reading. What is independent reading?" I would talk to them about, "How do you find personal space? How do you find a book? Where do you keep your book box?" We go through ALL the things.

I have a membership, Leaders of Literacy, and I actually have checklists of all the things that you need to actually teach. It sounds simple, but it's not. Our kids come with all these varied experiences and all the things. Again, if we have clear expectations, if we want the minutes to count, then we have to really, really be explicit in teaching them every single step of how to be successful.

So it does take a month, but pays off if we put that time out and we practice every day.

Then the next day, we might say, "Okay, yesterday we learned about independent reading, and this is what it looks like. Remind me." We might even talk about what happens when you're not independently reading and all of that. Then we might be ready to move and add on another center, and practice that together. I might show them a writing prompt and talk about what writers do when they're at the writing center. Then we can even practice, and everybody's doing the same thing so we can give feedback.

Another thing I really, really love to do, and the kids loved it, they ate it up, is I would take my iPad at the time, or your iPhone, or whatever, and I would record them as we were practicing. Then I would pop the video up on the smart board, and we would talk about all of the things that we saw that were proof that our kids were actually doing what they were supposed to be doing - that they were engaged, that they were on task, that they were learning and working, and things like that.

So yes, it's a slow, slow process, but it's so worth it.

Anna Geiger: Does that mean that you wait to do your small group instruction till that month is over and you've really trained them to do their independent work?

Christina Winter: Yes, I definitely have to wait. Now, as teachers, we are very creative, so we will find ways to sneak it in, because at the beginning of the year we have a lot of that beginning-of-the-year testing and assessments and all of that. So either I would find times, little pockets throughout the day, or I would just have to be really, really creative. Sometimes I would have to do some seatwork instead of all that literacy center training, because we have to get those assessments done. It's really, really important. But we can't just throw the kids out there and set these bad habits for them for the rest of the year.

Anna Geiger: That's a really good point, that if you rush into literacy centers without explaining, you could start bad habits that are hard to undo. It may be at the beginning of the year when you need to pull individuals or whatever, that they're doing something that's less... It's not what we want to see long term, maybe even some coloring or something, but just knowing that there's a purpose to it.

Also, as you're training them to use the centers over that month, or however long it

takes, you can give them meaningful stuff. You're right there to give feedback, so it's not wasted time. You're doubling it up, but it'll be more focused time, more targeted time, as soon as you're able to start your small groups and your center time.

Christina Winter: Right, and after all that, like I was saying, about how I flip the cards over one by one as we're talking about the centers, then I put the kids' names up there, so it's a big thing. It's like the grand opening, right? The kids are so invested and so excited, and it's like, "We are starting! Show me now how you are going to do it when I call your group. You're going to walk over to your center." Then we all watch group number one as they get their clipboard and they get their paper, and we're like, "Wow, look how they're getting started right away! Look how they're finding their own personal space!" and all of that.

During that first week, usually that first round of rotations, I try not to pull small groups because I really want to rotate through the classroom. I really want to be there, not to tell them what to do, but to elicit from them like, "What are you going to do? I see you're almost finished sorting your words on your word activity here. What are you going to do when you're finished?" I let them tell me. "Oh, I see you're having trouble logging into the computer. What could we do?" I look for things like that and give them that feedback.

I think it really, really makes a difference if we can kind of make ourself available, because once that week is over, I'm not available anymore, and they know that's part of the thing. There are only certain reasons, if there's an emergency, that they can come interrupt the teacher. They know.

Anna Geiger: When I think about organizing centers, I've seen it done in different ways. Some have been where the kids have a folder with a list of all the centers that they're supposed to accomplish during the week, and they just check them off when they're done. They have a lot of choice about what they do when, and you've got more of a rotation.

Can you talk to me about what you think is best and why, or if there are different options, and how it would work?

Christina Winter: For myself, with first graders and kindergartners, and I even think maybe beginning second graders, I really think that they need that scaffold of structure, "I am going here. I'm going to do this." I think that is helpful for them. Now kids do like choice, but we need to give them a limited choice.

Earlier when I was talking to you about narrative prompts, I would have a menu or something where there would be pictures, and they could write different stories, like a fall story about going apple picking or about riding their bike, or just some topics that they could write about. So they could have a choice, but the choice wasn't, "Am I going to go do writing?" or "Am I going to go do reading?"

Can you imagine if you're six years old and you go to the writing center, and your teacher's like, "Oh, write a song, write a book, write a menu, write a..." That's way overwhelming to a child. We really just need to give them what I say is a limited choice.

So yes, I believe that we should be assigning our students the center that they're going to go to, and then offer them some choices once they get there.

Anna Geiger: But a small amount?

Christina Winter: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: The tricky part, I think, for teachers is figuring out the pairing thing. If I have two students for partner reading, one of the recommendations for partner reading that I see often is to basically figure out... Order your students by skill level in terms of maybe words per minute or something like that, and then break your list apart. If you had a class of 30, it'd be child 1 paired with child 16, child 2 with child 17. So you're not pairing super low and super high, but you're not also pairing the very high together or the very low together.

But if you were to do it that way, that gets tricky, because they're going to be pulled for small group at different times. How do you make sure that they get their buddy reading done, and that their partner's available? I guess that is my question.

Christina Winter: I have tried both ways when I'm grouping students. I've tried doing heterogeneous and homogenous grouping. I think each year, I kind of look at my students and what's working and what's not.

Personally, I really like when my students are grouped at the same level. In first grade, there can be confusion. There's a lot going on. I had 24 students, and there are six different center groups going on, because I like to have four kids in a group, so that's

six groups going on in my classroom.

If I'm pulling kids to the table, we don't want kids to feel like they're missing out, or let's say they go get a partner, and then their partner gets pulled to the table. That's frustrating. I'm always thinking about, again, we want all the minutes to count.

I definitely had buddy reading at a different part of my day during my whole-group instruction, where I'd pair my kids like that. I think that's spectacular. But as far as partner reading or partner games, if they're kind of in a similar skill level, I think that works also.

I think it also works because some of your centers are going to be differentiated. If you're doing word study, even though in your Tier 1 instruction you're working on long vowels, some of your kids aren't doing that. You want to have a situation where red group is going to pull their word study work. They're all doing the same activity, but maybe just different skills, so they can pull and actually practice the skills that you are teaching with them at the small group table.

Then that would be less confusion, because if everybody in your group is pulling from the same folder, other kids aren't like, "Oh, no. I'm in the blue folder. I'm in the green folder." All of that. Keep it simple for them.

It's also protecting their self-esteem. We know that when they feel successful, they're really more willing to take risk and work harder also.

That is what I like, but I really want to mention that we have to make sure that our groups are flexible. As kids progress or have different needs, we're not just like, "Oh, no, you're in this group. You can't leave the group." Make the groups flexible, whether it be through some kind of diagnostic assessment or just assessment of what you're seeing with your students. Just kind of keep that flexible grouping going.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and I'll just put a plug in there for Tier 2 instruction within the MTSS model. That's how kids can catch up, right? Not only are you giving them that instruction in your small groups, but the kids who need extra support might be getting it from another teacher, and that's especially how they might make faster gains and be able to move into a different group.

Back to what you talked about colored folders. So would you say that if... Let's say you call your low group your green group. Of course, you wouldn't say low to the kids. Would you say to make their center activities differentiated by color so they know what they need, like the green folder is where their stuff is, or were you saying not to do that?

Christina Winter: Yes. I would definitely do that.

Anna Geiger: Okay. Yeah, I agree too. It makes it much easier for everybody, and just to-

Christina Winter: Yeah. Well, again, it's practicing skills for automaticity. It's not like, if green group was still working on CVC words, but then in your scope and sequence, what you're working with your whole group is long vowels, well, my friends in CVC, they need practice on that. They don't need practice on a skill that they're not quite ready for yet.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that makes sense.

Christina Winter: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Do you have any troubleshooting things for managing students at centers? In all the years that you did them, can you think of common issues and how you would solve them? Things that teachers might expect to have problems with?

Christina Winter: Well, I think, as mentioned earlier, we really want to be proactive rather than reactive. Really thinking it through, and again, going slow, explicitly teaching things. I mean, I taught my kids how to use a glue stick. It seems funny, but I never had kids drying out their glue sticks! We really want to teach those exact center procedures and routines.

Talk to them about, "What is your personal space? What does that look like? What do you do when you're stuck? Is it okay to interrupt the teacher?" Our kids are really, really capable, but we just really, really have to teach them, and then we also have to reinforce it.

This is one of my secret strategies that really, really works. I did something in my class called Star Students. I would have a Post-it or a little notepad, however you want to do it, and I would tell my students, "I am always looking for Star Students." And so, as I'm at the reading table, as my kids are out working, and I'm working with my small group, maybe during transition as another group is coming, or maybe just what I can see at the corner of my eye, I would be able to note down who's doing what.

For instance, say Ella, she got started right away. Zachary had a hard time figuring out how to get logged in on the computer, so he went over and asked his friend to help him get logged in, things like that. Then after centers, we would come back together at the end of centers, and we would talk about what happened during centers, like our closing time, and I would say, "Okay. Today, I want to tell you about the kids on my Star List."

It was just that reminder, that positive reinforcement reminder, of the expectations on what students should be doing, because they're six years old and they might forget, and they need a lot of repetitive practice hearing. But it was just a really, really positive way for students to be reminded all the time of what they were actually supposed to be doing.

Also, I know certain centers might be difficult for kids, and so I could positively reinforce them on the first day that that center is rolled out or something like that.

Anna Geiger: That is such a great idea. I can picture for a teacher, if I were doing that, I would probably have a list of all my students on a clipboard with a space next to them so I could keep track of every day, "Oh, these have already been the Star Students. Who else?" I want to look for things they're doing right.

Christina Winter: Exactly. Definitely, and I think kids want to do well. They definitely want to do well, and it feels good for them to be recognized. So however you want to do that, if you want to do tickets or no tickets or just to cheer, it's up to you in your classroom, but it is really, really powerful.

Anna Geiger: We're getting into the weeds, which is wonderful, because I think that's what teachers want. They want to know the little specific things.

Let's talk a little bit more about specifics, and one would be, what do they do when they're done with their activity? Sometimes it might be, "Do this until time's up," or it might be like, "You do it, and it's finished." How does that work?

Christina Winter: Again, we want to be proactive, not reactive, so we're setting our students up for success. As I'm teaching my students, "Okay, this is a word-building activity that you're going to do at the center," I'm telling my students, as we are talking about it, before they even go to the center, "Friends, tell me something you would do if you finished early."

Six hands are raised, and they're like, "Mrs. Winter, we could turn it over and write a sentence with one of the words. We could think of other words that have that same spelling pattern. We could get the magnets out and build the words with the magnets. I could quiz a friend on my words."

They're thinking, and they come up with all these great ideas, but the thing is, is that they know it's not okay... We have established it is not okay that you just stop and you just lay on the carpet, or you come up to me with it, "Mrs. Winter, I'm done!" That's not okay. If you need to go back and finish other work at your table from earlier, or you want to go read a book, that's fine too, but you must be engaged in learning. There's never going to be an, "I'm done."

Another thing is, we want to be looking for centers that are a little more open-ended. If you're doing a writing center, we don't want just a writing center with a prompt where they fill in the missing words. We want something that can be more open-ended, lends itself to different, varied levels of students, and talk to them about, "If you've finished your writing, then you can add a picture. Maybe you want to label your picture or go back and read your work," and all of those kinds of things. It gives them the power to know that they can make a decision on what to do next.

Anna Geiger: Back to your independent reading center. What would be your expectations, or what do you think teachers should do for an independent reading center for kids in, let's say, K-1, who are still reading decodable text in their phonics lessons? How would that look?

Christina Winter: Yeah, that's really a really good question, and we definitely talk about that inside Leaders of Literacy. I actually was so inspired by Margaret Goldberg. She was on the Amplify podcast a while ago, and she was talking about this in the kindergarten teachers that she worked with.

I set up a system in my classroom where we equate it to healthy eating. Healthy eating means that we eat all of our nutritious things that grow our brain first, then we have dessert, right? So when we think about reading independently, we're going to read all

of the books that are growing our brains and helping us to become good readers, that would be your decodable books. Whether it be the books that you're working on in your small group or books they've already worked on or decodable sentences, all the things that they can read, books that they can read.

Then from there, Margaret was talking about this idea of book browsing. We want to be careful; we don't want to call it looking at the pictures. That's taboo, but we call it book browsing, because if your classroom has a classroom library and they have access, especially to those nonfiction books, they could still learn a tremendous amount by looking at the pictures.

Kids love dinosaurs or butterflies. They can still look at the pictures and get information. Maybe you have access to books that have no words in them, wordless books, like "Good Dog, Carl" and things like that. They could still have an opportunity, like as a dessert, to do some book browsing. Kids love, love, love to read books that you have previously read. If I read "Tacky the Penguin," they definitely want to book-browse that book. It might not be at their level, but I'm not going to say, "No, you can't read it."

But the majority of the time that they are doing their independent reading should be reading books that they can actually read, working on decoding, making those minutes count for our students. We have to remember, we're going to call those kids out during the Star Student time. We're going to say, "I noticed that Anna read three of her books from her book box. Then later, she found that book on butterflies, because Anna loves butterflies. Anna, tell us something you learned today when you were book browsing." Kids love it. They love it.

Anna Geiger: Thank you, that is so helpful.

So I'm thinking about in your small groups or your whole group, there may be a time then when you're reviewing books, and at some point, you might say something like, "Let's move this book into your center or independent reading books," however you do that. It might be in a folder, it might be in a gallon bag, could be in a magazine-type box where they have a place where they get their books from.

Then there's an expectation, whatever you decide that is. I don't know if you might say to read three, or read five, or read one of each, and then give them the freedom to... Again, like we said, you'd be practicing that a lot, so they would know this is the expectation, you do have to start with this, and you have to actually read it. In that first month, you're really going over that.

Christina Winter: Yeah. And the kids... I mean, that's part of the beginning when you're rolling out the new centers and you're talking to them about, "Why is it important for us to pick THESE books to read?" We want to become better readers. What happens when we can read? All of these amazing things happen. We can be successful. We can learn. We can do all these amazing things. There's all this buy-in from your students when you set them up to understand that.

Anna Geiger: What would you say to somebody who said, "Well, I don't have room for centers"? What can you do when you're limited on space?

Christina Winter: Get creative! You don't have to have a ton of space. You can just dedicate a certain area. I just really want to say to be consistent. If you have writing center activities, if you don't have a lot of space, put your writing center activities in one of those shower caddies, where the kids can grab it and they can take it to their table, or a clipboard, or wherever. Just really be consistent on where you put that, so the writing center would always be on that bottom shelf.

I used to use Ziploc gallon bags. You can just put some activities in that, clip it up to your whiteboard, and that would be where they could find it.

You just want to take all the confusion away, so if you are consistent and you put the things in the same place every time, there's never, "I can't find the... Where do I..." all the things. There's a procedure they know.

You can do that and be really thoughtful about the spaces in your classroom. I know that the computers are really exciting sometimes for kids, so we don't want to put certain centers where kids are facing the screen, and they can see what's happening on the screen, because they might get distracted because it almost looks like a video game. It's not a video game, but it's exciting to see, even when kids are wearing headphones.

Really be thoughtful in how you lay out your room. I like to put my writing center... If you do have a writing table, like a table, I like to put it facing the wall, because kids are not looking out into the classroom. They're looking at the wall, then the wall can have anchor charts and things like that also on the wall.

Just be really, really thoughtful, even thinking about the patterns of traffic in your classroom and spacing kids out. For example, sometimes we'd have a build-a-poetry

center or something like that, so thinking about where that would be where it would be out of the way of traffic and things like that too.

Anna Geiger: When you did centers, did you have... When you were finishing up your small group, did you have a warning time where you said, "Oh, time to transition or clean up," or anything like that?

Christina Winter: Absolutely. Again, because I'm super type A, I started off the year in first grade always very structured. I would do round one, where I'd work with a small group, the kids are doing center one, their station number one, and then I would ring a bell. I tell my kids, "Hands on your head! Look at me!" Then I would tell them, "Okay, friends, great job! Let's clean up and move on to center number two. If you forget where you're going, go up to the center chart."

It's really, really structured at the beginning, but then soon I would just ring a bell and they would move. It's like this release of responsibility, giving it over to them. By mid-year to the third quarter of the year, I would start putting one of those timer clocks where it kind of counts down the minutes. Have you seen those?

Anna Geiger: Mm-hmm.

Christina Winter: I would just mark it with highlighter tape and say, "This is where center one is going to be finished. This is an approximation. Let's talk about the word approximation. If you have a few more words to write in your story, do you have to move exactly when the..." Kids are so literal, right, so we talked about, "You don't have to move exactly there. Finish up that last sentence, and then you're ready to move."

By the end of the year, it wasn't like I was telling them anything to do other than, "We're going to get started," and "We're going to clean up and meet at the carpet." Generally, I do a lot of singing, so when it was time to clean up, I would just start singing a song, and we would just clean up and move on over to the carpet.

Yeah, definitely, I think especially for K-1, being really, really structured at the beginning, and letting them feel success and guided, and then releasing the responsibility to them as they become more capable.

Anna Geiger: We've been talking a lot about K-1, but I recently had a question from

someone about second grade centers. Much of this just transfers over, right?

The independent reading time might not be decodable texts; it might be some other books that they're working on, but there's an expectation that we're not just grabbing new books every day, that we're working on books and then when we're done, then we can choose new books.

The partner reading, that's easy to do with partner plays, reader's theater, or it could be some passages from ReadWorks. There are lots of options there.

Listening to reading, they can still do that, although I know one thing I've read is that if you want them to actually build fluency, they need to be reading along, like actually reading with the recording. That would be something to practice with second graders, for example.

Certainly, you could do writing for second grade.

Then word work, that's easy, right? You can just use the phonics games and things like that.

So this is very applicable up through the primary grades, and certainly you could think of it in a different way if you need to do it for older students too. But this is not just for K-1, just to be clear about that.

We're winding down now, but I know some people would say, I get this email a lot, "How do I store all of your resources? How do I organize them?" Do you have any tips for organization of center material?

Christina Winter: Well, my number one tip is don't put it in a pile.

Anna Geiger: Guilty.

Christina Winter: I am guilty of that too, right? You're so busy, you're a teacher, and

you're like, "Oh, I'll just put it on this little counter right over here." Then you have a mountain of things to file, and then you're like, "Oh, it's so overwhelming. I'm just going to throw it away."

I just think that you find a system. I personally like to organize my centers by center type, so if they were roll a fluency phrase, I would just put them in order as skills progressed.

Anna Geiger: In like a filing cabinet or something?

Christina Winter: In like a filing cabinet, yes.

But some people like to do it seasonally. That works too. Just figure out a system, and then keep up with it. You can also teach parent volunteers. If you're lucky to have a teaching assistant as you're changing out new centers, you can teach them, "This is my system. Could you help put this away?" during those times, those minutes that they have. Just really keep up with it.

Anna Geiger: That would be kind of similar to the idea of taking a month, possibly, to teach students how to use centers. That's the time that you spend thinking of a system, and then following through on it, and it will save you so many headaches and time in the future. You don't have to reprint, refind... I won't even go into that, all the things I lost as a teacher because I didn't have a system, so it's worth figuring that out.

I know, maybe in the show notes, I'll look around and see what I can find. People have different ideas, using those big plastic tubs from craft stores with the lid that pops up, also magazine-type racks. I'll see what I can find for people to see, something that might help them.

This has been fabulous. You've answered so many of my picky questions, which I really appreciate.

Can you talk to us really briefly about the center resources on your site? I'll definitely link to all your posts about centers, but also, your membership and how that works.

Christina Winter: Awesome. Yes, if you go over to Mrs. Winter's Bliss and you just use the search bar and type in "literacy centers," I'm sure you will get at least ten blog posts that touch on a lot of these things, maybe a little deeper.

I also have a membership called Leaders of Literacy, and it's a community for kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers. I have a whole video course that walks them through step-by-step what are the good centers, how to plan for centers, how to prep your centers quickly, how to organize, how to get your groups, how to launch those step-by-step with checklists of all the things that you need to teach, model, and practice with your students. That's all there.

But the members also love that they get meaningful center activities that are already created, and I'm really mindful. We don't want teachers on Sunday afternoon cutting out snowballs and... We want them to be effective but also low-prep, because teachers have so much to do. We have created really meaningful activities that are as low-prep as possible, not fluffy, but meaningful for students. We open the membership three to four times a year because we like to really welcome a new cohort of teachers in, making sure we can support them with everything they have. I can provide a link, and you can share that also if anyone is interested.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you so much, Christina. This was fabulous!

Christina Winter: Yes, thank you!

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode160. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching

episode of Triple R Teaching.