

Academic Report

Integrating Extensive Reading into Self-Access Learning: Fostering Autonomy and Motivation

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of extensive reading (ER) within a self-access learning (SAL) environment at Tokai University, focusing on fostering learner autonomy and sustaining motivation through physical and online tools. Drawing on classroom experience, observations, and autonomy-supportive pedagogy, it examines how a well-designed ER program supported by tools such as MReader for progress tracking and goal setting can enhance language proficiency and promote self-directed learning. Key elements include goal setting, reflection, and peer sharing. The paper also considers the ER environment's impact on learners' affective engagement and their willingness to take ownership of learning beyond the classroom. Challenges such as varying engagement levels are addressed with practical strategies for scaffolding autonomy. This report combines teaching experience with relevant literature, offering insights for broader ER implementation in SAL contexts. These insights can inform the design of ER programs in SAL contexts, particularly where sustaining motivation beyond coursework is a challenge. Overall, the paper argues that when embedded meaningfully in SAL settings, ER not only improves language proficiency but also creates opportunities for reading to become a habit.

Keywords: Extensive reading, graded readers, learner community, self-access learning, motivation

1. Introduction

Extensive Reading (ER) provides learners with opportunities to develop their language skills through large amounts of enjoyable, level-appropriate reading, often using simplified texts such as graded readers to build overall language proficiency (Day & Bramford, 2002). Nation and Waring (2020) emphasize that this approach is particularly valuable in contexts where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited. However, sustaining these practices can be challenging, as many learners stop reading once external structures and support are removed. Studies show that motivation for ER is fragile and can be easily displaced by academic pressures or a lack of accountability (de Burgh-Hirabe, 2011). Without systems that encourage independent engagement, learners often struggle to maintain regular reading habits (Kirchhoff, 2013; Stoller, 1994). Self-access learning (SAL) environments can help bridge this gap by providing resources and structured support. Shibata (2016) argues that access to ER materials alone is insufficient; learners also need opportunities to set goals, monitor progress, and receive recognition for their efforts to foster autonomy and sustain motivation. A thoughtfully designed SAL

program can therefore play a key role in encouraging learners to take ownership of their reading and continue beyond classroom instruction.

The extensive reading program at Tokai University brings together physical and digital reading materials, and structured opportunities for peer interaction, all of which contribute to a sense of community around reading. It explores how learners can maintain reading habits after classroom instruction ends and what support mechanisms, such as reading contests, reading circles, and holiday programs, can help sustain motivation and autonomy. Drawing on practical experience, this paper reflects on how ER can be meaningfully embedded within an SAL context to promote long-term engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1 Motivation and engagement in ER programs

Developing learner autonomy is a central aim in language education and is closely tied to giving students meaningful choice and responsibility for their learning (Broady & Kenning, 1996; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). In the context of ER, autonomy emerges when learners select reading materials that match their interests and set realistic reading goals, which strengthens ownership and persistence (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). However, research indicates access to resources alone rarely sustains engagement once classroom structures end; motivation often declines when the course finishes and the learning community disperses (de Burgh-Hirabe, 2011; Shibata, 2016). Studies on learner autonomy and sustained engagement indicate the need for structured support systems, including guidance on book selection, goal setting, reflection, and opportunities for peer interaction, so learners can make informed choices and remain engaged beyond formal instruction (Broady & Kenning, 1996).

Motivation in ER is multifaceted, involving cognitive, emotional, and social aspects (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Intrinsic motives, such as curiosity, enjoyment, and interest in stories are powerful drivers, while extrinsic elements, like grades and recognition can help but rarely sustain long-term engagement on their own (Dörnyei, 2021; Grabe, 2009). Effective programs therefore pair autonomy-supportive practices with clear goals, regular encouragement, and timely feedback. Teacher support that reinforces progress toward goals and acknowledges effort has been shown to stabilize motivation and build confidence in self-access settings (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Kirchhoff, 2013; Leather & Uden, 2021; Stoller, 1994). These findings highlight the importance of combining intrinsic and extrinsic supports with structured guidance to maintain engagement beyond the classroom.

Finally, the benefits of extensive reading accrue gradually through sustained exposure to comprehensive texts over time. Graded readers providing level-appropriate input supports vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, and overall language proficiency (Day & Bamford, 2002; Grabe, 2009; Nation & Waring, 2020). Because these gains are incremental, programs should foster enjoyment while offering simple tracking and reflection tools to help learners notice progress (Davis, 1995). Online reading management systems that offer brief comprehension quizzes and progress indicators, such as MReader and Xreading, can support accountability and motivation without diminishing the pleasure of reading (Robb, 2015; Nation & Waring, 2020). However, motivation is not maintained by individual strategies alone; social and environmental

supports are equally important for fostering a sense of community and sustaining engagement beyond the classroom.

2.2 Social and environmental support in SAL contexts

The social aspect of self-access learning environments supports motivation by creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose. This sense of community is strengthened by teacher encouragement, recognition of effort, and peer interaction elements that Shibata (2016) identifies as essential for learner engagement. Physical design also contributes to engagement. Positioning reading materials in visible and accessible locations, such as mobile libraries in classrooms, encourages spontaneous interaction, and supports the development of reading habits. Beyond physical access, self-access centers and learning communities provide structured opportunities for reflection, guidance, and collaboration which McMurphy et al. (2010) argue are vital for maintaining engagement. Furthermore, research suggests that scaffolding combined with easy access to resources enables learners to develop sustainable reading habits and develop greater autonomy (Benson, 2012; Reinders, 2012; Shibata, 2016). Collectively, these findings underscore that social and environmental factors are not peripheral but central to the success of ER programs in self-access learning context.

Overall, previous research emphasizes that successful ER programs require more than access to graded readers; they must integrate structured goal-setting, feedback mechanisms, and social supports to sustain motivation and foster autonomy. Digital tools can complement these supports by providing progress indicators and accountability without undermining the enjoyment of reading (Nation & Waring, 2020; Robb, 2015). Building on these insights and earlier studies that mobile libraries significantly improve reading consistency and that MReader enhances motivation through visual progress indicators and tiered recognition (Cheetham et al., 2016, 2017), the following sections illustrates how these principles informed the design of Tokai University's ER program through classroom practices, digital resources, and self-access initiatives.

3. ER program description and implementation

This section provides an overview of Tokai University's ER program, explaining its structure, resources, and implementation strategies. The program was developed in response to research showing that accessibility, goal setting, and community support are essential for promoting autonomy. Tokai's ER program was designed around these three pillars: accessibility, consistency, and community. Drawing on these principles and institutional experience, the program combines physical and digital resources with classroom practices to make reading convenient, engaging, and consistent. The following subsections outline the program's organization, technical tools, classroom activities that aim to foster peer interaction and long-term reading habits.

3.1 Program structure and resources

The ER program provides resources across three contexts: classroom-based access, online tools, and self-access environments. Classroom resources include the mobile library, which brings graded readers directly into lessons. Online tools, such as MReader, support goal setting and progress tracking, whereas self-access centers provide flexible spaces for independent reading and community-building activities.

Over the past two decades, the university has gradually developed a strong ER program that emphasizes accessibility, consistency, and community engagement. Through ongoing innovation and active teacher involvement, the program has evolved to offer a wide range of reading resources supported by digital tools and classroom-based strategies. The university provides access to graded readers through three primary ways: the university main library, the self-access learning center, and the mobile library (see Figure 1). Instructors select one or more of these options to suit the needs of their classes.

Figure 1

Tokai University main library (left) and mobile library (right)



The mobile library has become a central component of the program because it brings the reading materials directly to the classroom. Research and institutional data indicate that students are more likely to read when books are physically accessible during class time (Cheetham et al., 2017). At the start of each semester, members of the Graded Reader Committee, assisted by students, prepare the mobile library. Teachers who wish to use the ER program sign up in advance, and the classroom teacher brings the mobile library to class. Each mobile library contains two baskets within a cart with approximately 360 books. These baskets are organized into three proficiency levels: basic (75 to 300 headwords), intermediate (300 to 800 headwords), and advanced (700 to 2,200 headwords). Basket levels within the mobile library are assigned based on the needs of the class.

In total, the mobile library holds approximately 19,500 books across more than 1,800 titles, organized into ten levels based on headword counts. Titles are sourced from a range of major publishers, including *Cambridge*, *National Geographic Learning*, *Oxford*, *Penguin*, *Pearson-Longman*, *Scholastic*, and *Seeds Learning*. A color-coded classification system standardizes proficiency levels across publishers and ensures students can easily select appropriate reading materials.

3.2 Online activities: digital tools and goal settings

A central feature of the university's ER program is MReader, an online platform that supports extensive reading by offering brief post-reading quizzes to track students' progress. It provides immediate feedback and incorporates visual incentives such as leaderboards, progress bars, and stamp collections, which enhance student engagement and motivation (Leather & Uden, 2021). Previous research found that quizzes provide

reassurance (i.e., “I really understood this book”), helping students feel confident about their reading progress without diminishing the pleasure aspect (Cheetham et al., 2016; Robb, 2015). MReader also facilitates weekly goal-setting and enables teachers to monitor both individual and group performance through detailed dashboards. This system not only promotes accountability but also allows educators to recognize top performers as well as students who demonstrate steady improvement or consistent effort (Leather & Uden, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020).

The university’s ER program emphasizes developing reading as a habit by establishing clear and achievable goals. Teachers are encouraged to introduce these goals through MReader at the beginning of the term, ensuring they align with students’ language proficiency levels. Consistent implementation is essential because regular exposure to reading materials, supported by in-class guidance, helps students develop sustained reading habits. While graded readers make up an average of 19 percent of all books borrowed from the university library, one study found that students using the mobile library achieved a weekly reading consistency rate of 59 percent, significantly higher than those who relied solely on the university library (Cheetham et al., 2017).

3.3 Classroom activities: peer engagement

The ER program fosters a classroom culture that promotes facilitation, peer interaction, and recognition. Many teachers allocate 15 to 20 minutes of class time a week for book selection and in-class reading. When the mobile library is brought in, students often assist in organizing and displaying the books. This setup encourages browsing and informal book discussions, as students are naturally inclined to recommend books to their peers. Each graded reader includes a five-star rating sheet with space for brief comments (Elliott & Cheetham, 2018), encouraging self-reflection and helping others choose books more effectively. To deepen engagement, teachers often require weekly mini-book reviews in pairs or small groups. These discussions encourage students to share insights, provide summaries, and offer feedback on what they have read, further reinforcing reading habits through social reinforcement. Instructors are advised to regularly acknowledge student efforts. Praise for milestones such as the most improved reader or most consistent reader helps maintain student motivation and fosters a community of supportive learners.

4. Promoting autonomy and sustaining motivation

This section focuses on activities beyond the classroom, including self-access initiatives and institution-wide programs that encourage independent reading and long-term engagement.

4.1 Self-access activities: transitioning to independent reading

One of the ongoing challenges in ER programs is sustaining student motivation beyond the classroom. While learners often engage with MReader as part of coursework, continuing these habits independently is more difficult. To address this, several strategies have been implemented to promote learner autonomy, extend motivation beyond coursework, and foster a sustained sense of community.

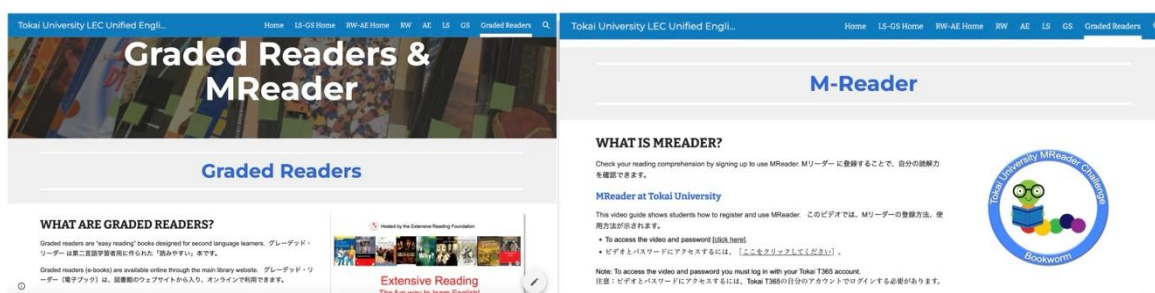
At the end of each semester, students are encouraged to transfer their MReader account to a self-access version, so they can continue using it independently. To facilitate this process, a message is posted in MReader, and teachers receive promotional materials

to guide students through the transition. On average, about 25 students (approximately 2% of the 1,245 MReader users per semester) transfer their accounts each semester to the self-access version. However, long-term engagement varies; while some maintain their routines, others lose motivation once the activity is no longer tied to specific goals (Grabe, 2009; Leather & Uden, 2021). It should be noted that the self-access reading program is open to all students, regardless of whether they have previously used graded readers in class. Some even resume reading after extended breaks, demonstrating the value of maintaining flexible access.

4.2 Online support for self-access

To support the transition to independent reading and sustain motivation beyond the classroom, a dedicated student website called E-Web was developed using Google Sites by members of the Language Education Center's ICT Committee. This committee consists of English language teachers who specialize in technology integration and are responsible for creating and maintaining online self-access materials for Tokai students. Within the site, there is a page specifically focused on extensive reading that contains bilingual explanations, instructional videos, contest updates, and useful links related to the graded reader library and MReader (see Figure 2). This online resource helps make ER more accessible and less intimidating, especially for students unfamiliar with the concept. In addition to the website, students produced two animated Whiteboard Videos using VideoScribe: one introducing the benefits of extensive reading and the other explaining how to use MReader. These short, visually engaging videos combine hand-drawn illustrations and text in an animated format to capture attention and make key concepts easy to understand. Their purpose is to raise awareness of the ER program and its digital tools and to encourage new users to participate.

Figure 2



Tokai University Language Education Center's E-Web site extensive reading page

4.3 Institution-wide initiative: The MReader Challenge

A successful tool for promoting sustained reading has been the MReader Challenge, an institution-wide initiative implemented across all participating Tokai campuses. The program invites all students to read graded readers and complete corresponding MReader quizzes. Initially, the challenge required participants to read 40 books or reach 100,000 words per semester. This word-count-based approach was chosen to accommodate different language proficiency levels. For students in basic proficiency-level required classes, the target is based on book count rather than word count to ensure accessibility. Using this criterion, participation increased from 30 to over 180 students in one semester,

demonstrating strong and growing interest in reading. However, many students stopped once they reached the minimum requirement. To encourage continued engagement, a tiered recognition system was introduced in 2017 (Elliott & Cheetham, 2018). The system includes six award levels, from Bronze to Diamond, based on book count or total word count:

Table 1

MReader Challenge Tiered Award Levels

Number of words read with MReader quizzes passed	Award level
40 books*	Bronze Bookworms
150,000 words	Silver Bookworms
250,000 words	Gold Bookworms
350,000 words	Emerald Bookworms
450,000 words	Ruby Bookworms
600,000+ words	Diamond Bookworms

Note. *40-book requirement applies only to students enrolled in basic proficiency-level required classes. Adapted from Cheetham et al. (2017).

The updated format promotes long-term engagement by celebrating diverse levels of achievements. Qualifying students receive a certificate, collectable pins, and celebratory lunch. This event is featured in the campus newspaper, highlighting student accomplishments and providing strong motivation.

Importantly, the Challenge emphasizes personal growth over competition. Students are encouraged to surpass their previous records and continue reading beyond the basic requirements. A key feature of the program is that the Challenge is calculated over one academic year, allowing students to accumulate their reading progress across both semesters. This also enables students to build on the previous year's award by reaching a higher level, reinforcing a sense of continuity and supporting long-term goal setting.

4.4 Participation trends and program impact

Participation data over the years reflects both the growth and challenges of sustaining engagement. Following the COVID-19 years, the program has had to rebuild and adapt, facing ongoing challenges due to curriculum changes and shifting student needs. Table 2 summarizes the number of registered MReader accounts, students who completed the Challenge, and those who achieved reading levels above the entry threshold:

Table 2
MReader Challenge Participation Summary

Academic year	Registered MReader accounts	Challenge completed	Challenge completed above entry level
Fall 2014	975	45	N/A
2015	2,065	79	N/A
2016	2,616	75	N/A
2017	2,823	135	21
2018	3,667	95	25
2019	4,943	145	25
2020-2021 (Covid-19 years no ER program)	N/A	N/A	N/A
2022*	2,313	78	24
2023*	1,482	52	8
2024*	1,529	54	6
Total	22,413	613	84

Note. *For 2022, 2023, and 2024, second-year required courses were removed due to a curriculum change. This reduction in required classes significantly impacted participation rates, as fewer students were enrolled in courses that included ER as part of the curriculum.

This personalized approach has cultivated a culture of reading persistence. A small group of highly committed students, affectionately referred to as “book eaters,” who have read over two million words within just three terms. These students initially used MReader as part of their coursework, then moved to self-access accounts, and continued their reading independently. Their progress shows how a well-supported ER program can encourage independent, lifelong reading. In addition, MReader’s international leaderboard recognizes top readers globally, offering further motivation by linking students’ efforts to a broader reading community (Robb, 2015; Nation & Waring, 2020; Leather & Uden, 2021). This feature provides visible milestones that inspire continued reading and reinforce a sense of progress beyond the classroom.

5. Extensive reading within a self-access center

To further promote extensive reading beyond the structured classroom setting, the program integrated activities within the self-access center, providing a flexible and learner-centered environment. These initiatives aimed to enhance motivation, build community, and encourage reading for enjoyment and personal growth.

5.1 Creating a learner-centered reading space

The self-access center offers students a dedicated space to engage with graded readers at their own pace. This environment supports autonomy by allowing learners to select materials independently while still benefiting from teacher guidance and peer interaction during organized activities. The center also serves as a hub for collaborative programs such as reading circles and holiday reading initiatives.

5.2 Bookworm reading circles

One such initiative was the introduction of reading circles, also known as reading groups, which are recognized for boosting motivation and fostering a sense of belonging—a key factor in sustaining ER habits (Aronson & Steele, 2005). To support these outcomes, a reading circle program was launched in the self-access center to build a lasting learner community. Based on the *Oxford Reading Circles* method (Oxford University Press, 2021), two teachers launched the “Bookworms Reading Circle” to promote pleasure reading, improve comprehension, and encourage discussion. The structured format helped guide conversations and increase engagement, and with minor adjustments, it worked well in the self-access setting.

For these reading circles, teachers selected a graded reader for discussion, considering availability and seasonal themes. For example, *Dracula* (Stoker, 2008) from the *Oxford Bookworms Library* was chosen to coincide with Halloween. Books were typically at A2 or B1 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to ensure accessibility. Copies were provided in advance, and students were expected to read the book beforehand. As an added incentive, participants earned MReader bonus points for attending. During sessions, teachers introduced the book and author, led discussions, and used publisher materials such as summaries and background notes. Building on these, the teachers created discussion prompts focusing on comprehension, vocabulary, cultural, and personal reflection (see Appendix). Additional resources such as audio recordings and video clips also enriched the sessions.

Despite careful planning and an engaging format, participation in the reading circles remained low. Although open to all students, only a few attended. It became clear that occasional meetings were insufficient to foster strong relationships or a lasting sense of community. To address this, future iterations of the reading circles could incorporate digital tools to sustain ongoing engagement. For example, Microsoft Teams could serve as a collaborative platform where students receive updates, share recommendations, respond to discussion prompts, and vote on future book selections. Teachers could also use Teams to host virtual reading circle sessions, making participation more flexible and accessible. These digital elements may reduce isolation, promote consistent participation, and help build a self-sustaining ER community.

5.3 Holiday reading program

In addition to the reading group, the university piloted a holiday reading program during the summer and winter breaks to provide continued access to ER outside the regular academic calendar. The program utilized Xreading, a virtual library and learning management system featuring tools like MReader, making it both accessible and familiar to students. The university funded the subscriptions with participation limited to approximately 20 students per break. Prior to the holidays, students attended an

orientation session where they were informed that completed books would be credited to their MReader accounts.

While many students began enthusiastically, interest declined as holiday plans took priority. The absence of community and structured interaction likely contributed to this drop in engagement. Without regular contact or social accountability, students were left to manage their reading independently. Interestingly, several students who were not officially enrolled continued reading using campus or public library materials. Results showed little difference between these independent readers and official holiday participants, suggesting that paid access to digital platforms, while helpful, may be unnecessary if students have access to physical reading materials.

6. Reflections and future implications

6.1 Supporting motivation through community and flexible access

Sustaining student motivation beyond the classroom remains a central challenge in extensive reading programs. While access to graded readers provides a necessary foundation, long-term engagement depends on a combination of scaffolding tools, institutional support, and community building efforts. Tools like MReader and initiatives such as the MReader Challenge have proven effective in helping learners set goals, track progress, and stay motivated through tiered recognition and public acknowledgment. However, motivation tends to decline when these tools are disconnected from coursework, underscoring the need for integration with classroom practices.

Community-oriented efforts, including the reading group and the holiday reading program, have demonstrated the importance of social connection in maintaining reading habits. Although participation in these programs was limited, they provided valuable insights. Students are more likely to remain engaged when they feel part of a community and when reading becomes integrated into their personal routines. The reading group offered a structured and enjoyable space for discussion and reflection. The holiday program revealed that even without formal enrolment, students with access to physical or digital materials often continued reading independently. This finding highlights the significance of providing flexible and easily accessible reading resources. More broadly, the evidence suggests that while physical resources and recognition systems are effective, they must be complemented by digital platforms and community-building strategies to maintain engagement.

6.2 Sustaining and extending SAL support

SAL environments play an important role in supporting student learning and autonomy, but they often require dedicated physical space, administrative support, and ongoing educator involvement. Birdsell (2015) notes these demands can be costly and may not always be feasible, particularly in institutions with limited resources. Despite these challenges, the core principles of SAL such as learner autonomy, resource accessibility, and community support can be maintained through alternative formats.

One promising direction is the development of online SAL communities. With teacher support and thoughtful design, digital platforms could replicate many of the benefits of physical SAL centers. Microsoft Teams, for instance, can be used not only for communication and resource sharing but also for interactive activities such as a virtual

reading circles and collaborative discussion. Alongside tools like Google Sites, Teams can facilitate peer interaction, provide updates, and create spaces for ongoing engagement. These virtual environments offer flexibility, reduce overhead costs, and can extend the reach of ER programs to a broader student population. Humphreys (2023) demonstrates that well-designed digital self-access resources in Japanese university contexts can foster learner autonomy and engagement, particularly when educators provide guidance and opportunities for collaboration.

7. Conclusion

Extensive reading programs benefit most from a balanced approach that combines structured support, motivational tools, and opportunities for community engagement. While tools like MReader and the MReader Challenge help learners set goals and track progress, their effectiveness depends on consistent integration with classroom practices. Without this connection, motivation can fade, especially when learners are expected to continue independently. Community-based initiatives such as reading circles and holiday programs have shown that students are more likely to sustain reading habits when they feel part of a supportive environment and have flexible access to resources. Even limited participation in these programs revealed that autonomy and engagement are strengthened when learners have the freedom to choose and reflect on their reading.

Although self-access learning centers play a valuable role in promoting autonomy, they require ongoing resources and support that may not be feasible in all contexts. However, the principles of SAL can be extended through online platforms. With teacher guidance, digital communities can offer continuity, interaction, and access to materials, helping students maintain their reading routines beyond the classroom. Looking ahead, the thoughtful integration of digital platforms for communication and collaboration can enhance continuity and extend the reach of ER programs. By thoughtfully blending institutional scaffolding with learner driven initiatives both in physical and virtual spaces, ER programs can empower students to transition from course dependent reading to independent, sustained engagement.

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Appendix

Bookworms Reading Circle Discussion Questions

Comprehension Questions

What is the main idea of the story?
Who are the main characters, and what are their roles?
Where and when does the story take place?
What events are most important in the plot? Can you summarize them?

Vocabulary and Language

What new words did you learn from the text? Can you use them in a sentence?
Were there any phrases or expressions that you found interesting? What do they mean?
How does the author's use of language create mood or tone in the story?

Cultural Insights

Did you notice any cultural elements in the book? How do they compare to your own culture?
What did you learn about the culture presented in the story?

Personal Connection

Did you relate to any characters or situations in the story? How?
What was your favorite part of the book, and why?
Do you agree with the characters' decisions? Why or why not?

Reflection and Opinion

What message or lesson do you think the author wanted to convey?
How did the story make you feel? Why?
If you could change one thing about the story, what would it be?