

JULIE WRIGHT | BARRY HOONAN  
Foreword by Mary Howard

# WHAT ARE YOU GROUPING FOR?

How to Guide Small Groups Based on Readers—Not the Book

GRADES 3–8



*Thank you*

FOR YOUR  
INTEREST IN  
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *What Are You Grouping For?*, Grades 3-8 by Julie Wright and Barry Hoonan.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title, including Features, Table of Contents and Reviews.

## CRAYOLA NAMES FOR GROUPS

**Purpose:** To quickly build a sense of community and explicitly name shared values around collaborative work

**When:** First days of school

It's the first day of school, and the fifth-grade students enter the room with a name tag assigned to a table group. Right away they scurry to their new landing spots, and a boy named Josh asks if he can change seats.

"Let's play the believing game, Josh. Trust me. This chair with this table group is going to work out fabulously." The initial message for Josh and others is that we will be intentional in our small group arrangements, we will trust and believe in our enormous problem-solving abilities to get along and share with students different from ourselves, and soon he and his classmates will be asking others to play the believing game. Simply put, we will know more together than we could ever know just by ourselves.

Establish transparent expectations for small groups from the first day of school.

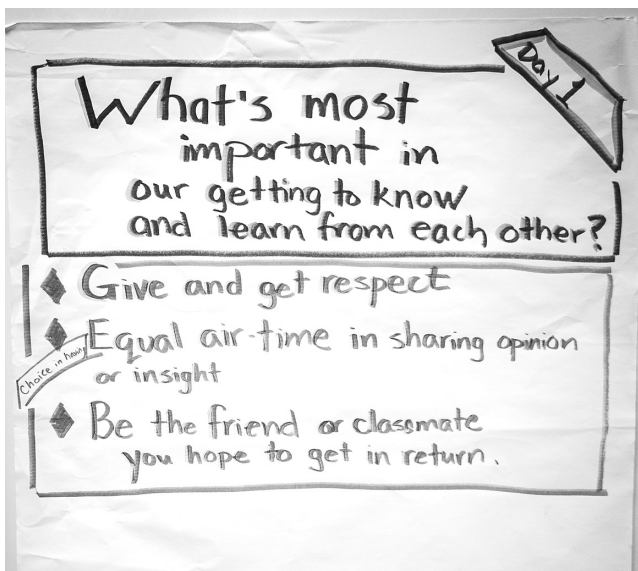


Photo by Christian Ford

Our first order of business is to welcome each other, and we begin with a small group name game. We quickly move to brainstorming what the most important agreements for working together in our room will be. After a short discussion,

each student votes for the most important agreement. Fifteen minutes later, students name every student at their table and what is essential to getting along and learning together. For example, all five tables conclude:

- The groups should commit to giving and getting respect as their team motto
- Everyone gets equal airtime and an equal voice in decision making, no matter what
- Each student should be the friend, classmate, and group member he or she hopes to get in return

In Barry's classroom, committing to being respectful speaks volumes about how his class will do good work and learning each school year. It is not by accident that the first class activity emphasizes learning together in small groups. Barry notices his students leaning forward and putting their ideas out for review. They listen, jot ideas, prioritize, agree, disagree, and create shared agreements.

Challenge can act as an engine for small groups, or it can be a distraction. Our second challenge is to come up with a name—an identity—that will unify each group. Heads turn around with funny expressions on their faces, so Julie, Barry's coaching partner, steps in and shares a mentor text that lists all of the Crayola crayon colors. She asks the students if they might borrow ideas from the text to generate group color names. They vote to use the Crayola colors as inspiration; then the groups go about the busywork of choosing a tantalizing and fitting color name that all the students in the group agree on. As the students put forth ideas, argue, discuss a bit, and eventually agree on their group's color, Julie and Barry pay attention to the many ways kids contribute. They take notes and photos for future reference.

The class is buzzing, perhaps a bit too loudly, but buzzing nonetheless, when Julie leans over to Barry and whispers, "This looks like the beginning of a very messy process called democracy." Barry smiles. When asked what worked in this brief activity, students explain that working with others is not easy, and speaking out is easier for some students and more difficult for others. They say that they wonder if everyone will stick to their agreement about giving and getting respect. We culminate this activity by looking over some photos

*Challenge can act as an engine for small groups, or it can be a distraction.*

capturing the small group process in action. With the photos beamed onto the whiteboard, we ask students to name what makes their group work well. As they share, we record their ideas:

### To Get to What You See Here, Try This

1. Prepare name tags for each student, and assign each student to one of five groups consisting of three to five members.
2. Groups spend 15 minutes brainstorming and then reach consensus on the most important aspects of getting along.
3. Groups decide a fitting group name.
4. Take photos of this democratic process in action.
5. Share the photos on a whiteboard and invite a class discussion that leads to a “final” version of “What Makes a Group Work Well?”

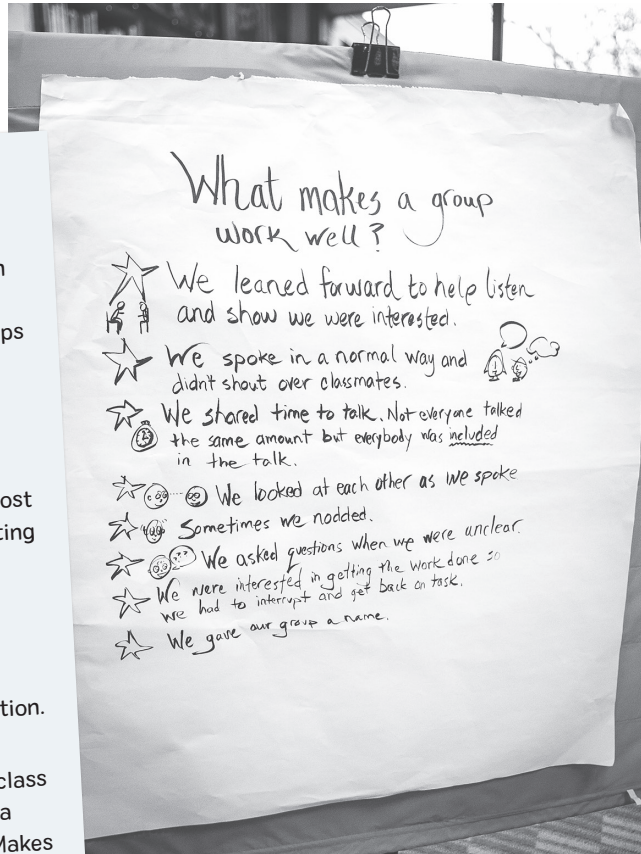


Photo by Christian Ford

## “COOL STUFF” BAGS

**Purpose:** To declare expectations and to “ice break” with an engaging, low-risk activity that lets all readers know they matter

**When:** Beginning of school year

On the second day of school, Barry’s students charge into the classroom with their “cool stuff” bags: bags containing three to six personal items that highlight their curiosities, passions, habits, and needs. The class is abuzz. After placing

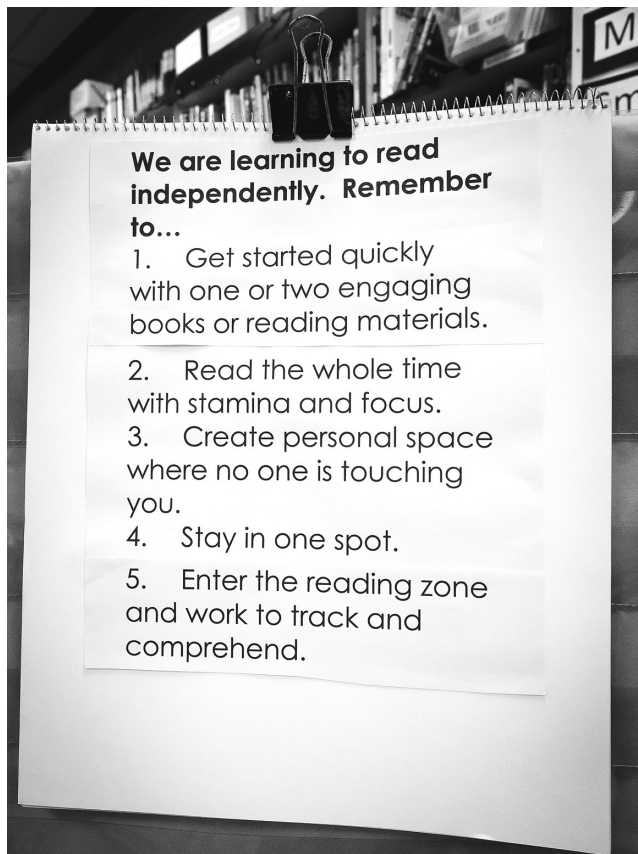


their cool stuff bags on a specified shelf in the classroom, students head to the carpet. Barry begins by asking if anyone is reading a “can’t put down” book. Several different titles are shouted out. Then Barry directs the kids to silently read the notice on the whiteboard:

**Today during reading workshop we will**

1. Read independently for 30 minutes
2. Meet in a small group to talk about and share things we care about that are in our cool stuff bags

Before readers go off to read independently and the color groups begin to meet, Barry pulls out the anchor chart created the day before. He asks the kids to read aloud the shared agreements:



• Reviewing shared agreements, written with active verbs, before independent reading leads to more consistent independent behavior.

*Photo by Christian Ford*

Barry then asks the readers to choose at least one behavior to work on during this reading workshop. He goes over each expectation, and students signal the ones they are going to focus on. Students in the Jungle Green group are reminded that they meet first. Reading workshop works best when everyone is on the same page (figuratively speaking), expectations are clear and agreed upon, students nudge themselves to improve, and the time and routines are predictable. In the beginning weeks of each year, Barry does a lot of explicit modeling and teaching about norms and expectations so that he will have to do less of it once students know what is expected of them.

With cool stuff bags in hand, small groups create a circle in a meeting spot. While Barry will join each of the groups across the next few days, he waits and lets them get started on their own before joining the Jungle Green group. Barry thanks the class in advance, and reminds everyone of the purpose for the small group meeting: “Today we will be taking turns sharing stories and things about ourselves through the artifacts we have in our cool stuff bags.” Barry joins the Jungle Green group and asks these students to stick around a little longer than the other groups because part of their work is to develop a tip sheet for future groups. Barry takes out yesterday’s list, “What Makes a Group Work Well?” and students make revisions, coming up with a final protocol chart:

1. Meet at the small group within a minute.
2. Sit together so you can see one another.
3. Lean forward and show interest.
4. Speak in a level 2 voice.
5. Share time and involve everyone.
6. Ask curious questions.

We like to co-construct these “agreement” or tip sheets with students because it creates buy-in, ownership, and clarity.

*Groups work better when all members know their purpose.*

Knowing groups work better when all members know their purpose, Barry writes on the whiteboard, “Cool Stuff Bag Sharing—our job today is to listen and learn as much as we can from our classmates’ stories in the next 10 to 15 minutes.”

He then places the protocol chart before the group so everyone knows exactly how the meeting is going to proceed. A student volunteers to start, and a

timekeeper in the group puts two minutes on the timer. When the timer beeps, kids ask questions for an additional minute. Since Barry is participating, he shares his cool stuff bag, takes notes, and snaps photos.

The students are introduced to a small group protocol that guides them to begin a short discussion about the purpose for sharing their personal items.

### Protocol for Launching Small Group Work and Cool Stuff Bag Sharing

1. Sit together so you can see one another.
2. Review the small group work chart and commit to working on these routines.
3. Name the purpose for the meeting (to share and listen to stories and interests from group members).
4. The timekeeper facilitates by placing two minutes on the timer, reminding the speaker to bring his or her talk to an end, and offers a one-minute question-and-answer period. The timer moves to the right so everyone gets a chance to facilitate.
5. The last timekeeper thanks everyone for sharing and brings the meeting to an end: "Thanks for sharing today. I hope we were successful at learning stories and interests about each person in our group. Let's move quickly to our independent reading work."

The beauty of this first meeting is that it puts students in leadership positions. The protocol provides just enough structure so the conversation is meaningful and timely. It also establishes a shared power arrangement where the teacher can sit alongside and observe or participate in the small groups.



Photos by Christian Ford



### To Get to What You See Here, Try This

1. Ask students to bring three to six personal items that highlight their interests, hobbies, and passions.
2. Write on the whiteboard, "Cool Stuff Bag Sharing—our job today is to listen and learn as much as we can from our classmates' stories in the next 10 to 15 minutes."
3. Review protocol and assign roles.
4. Take notes and take photos for future reference of student interests.

See page 73 in Chapter Three for the Crayola Name and Cool Stuff Bag groups' schedules.

## Listening In and Joining In

---

During the first days of school, a solid practice is to listen in and join in. This is an opportunity to saddle up next to a small group and listen in. You can observe. You can assess. You can take in all of the happenings and interactions individually and collectively. Then, if and when there are opportunities and/or needs, you can join in. Reasons for joining in may include

- You preplanned some instruction around existing or next texts that you want to nudge forward with students
- You see or hear something, in the moment, that you think will lift the group

Let's look at some practices Barry uses at the start of the year to get his students to be responsive. His two main moves are listening in and joining the groups. These group meetings are the intentional and predictable teaching moves that undergird flexible groups. They help define the teacher's role as an anthropologist who digs into the small group for information and ideas that he or she can use to lift the learning from that day forward.

- **Listening in:** Using your listening and observation skills to understand what students know and what they need next
- **Joining in:** Nudging thinking at the table by asking questions, teaching, and inspiring

With notebook or tablet in hand, teachers can create an archive of observations and wonderings from the first days of school. If the intent is to *listen in*, then teachers must do just that. During this time, teachers are doing more listening—much more listening than talking. They are not there to impart new ideas or content; they are there to listen, observe, study, and take note. In short, this is a form of kidwatching as discussed in Chapter Four.

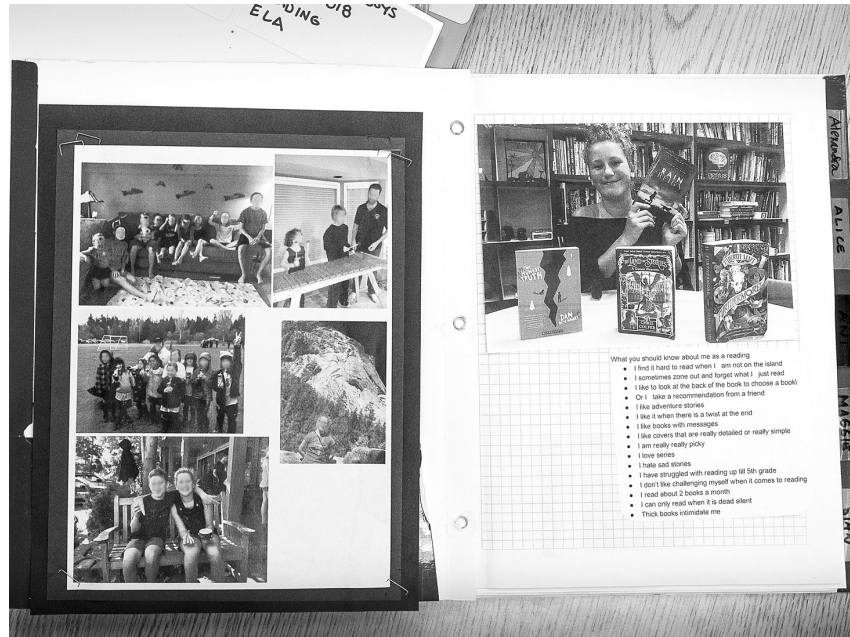
Here are some notes from Barry as he sat alongside the Jungle Green group during one of the cool stuff bag small group discussions. (See page 267 in the Appendix for a full-page Listening In template.)

## Listening In

<b>What do I see? What do I hear?</b>	<b>Why does it matter to student learning?</b>	<b>Wonderings</b>
<p>Graysen: loves dance—tap, ballet, and more; has two dogs; parents are from Texas; enjoys camping with her sister and parents; traveled to New York and Universal Studios.</p> <p>Devon: loves dance; travels a lot to her older brother's sports events; is close to a few friends; has a huge 140-pound mastiff dog.</p> <p>Nora: loves to read and hike; her father works at a restaurant that serves “farm to table” dishes; her mom teaches.</p> <p>Piper: likes to joke around; she's a big Harry Potter fan, and the middle kid in her family.</p> <p>Olive: leans forward, listening intently but missing her cool stuff bag of items, and turns to ask if she can share another day.</p> <p>Piper begins the small group by welcoming students and asking what they should work on together as a small group. Nora and Olive interrupt each other, laugh, and then say, “Listen and don't interrupt.” Piper smiles and goes over procedures.</p> <p>Devon asks Piper to talk more about what it means to be the middle kid.</p> <p>The two-minute timer is keeping the sharing time quick and clear. Barry coaches the speakers to tell a bit of the story behind their artifacts and to avoid simply labeling (e.g., “These are my ballet dance shoes”).</p> <p>Devon chimes in and asks, “Graysen, can you tell us more about a time you danced ballet?”</p> <p>Then Olive jumps in and begins talking about her own dancing and singing. Sometimes the urge to share is simply too great.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The round table in the corner of the room is spaced far enough away not to distract independent readers.</li> <li>• Students are lively and appear to enjoy the independence of asking and talking about their cool stuff bags without the teacher facilitating.</li> <li>• The gender grouping of fifth-grade girls is familiar and seems to promote talk and questions.</li> <li>• By focusing on writing down insights, I think the kids have given me permission to be invisible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The table is positioned next to the student recommendation display. Will students grabbing a student-recommended book be a distraction in the future?</li> <li>• Familiarity and trust matters. What would happen if this was a mixed-gender group? Would the students be so comfortable sharing their “girl” world with boys?</li> <li>• What is an effective way for the members of this group to share out their success with the class?</li> <li>• Photograph? A “what worked” chart?</li> </ul>

Because Barry was curious about how the kids in the Jungle Green group conversed, and what they brought and shared, he snapped a photo of each person's cool stuff artifacts and jotted some personal notes about each student. The notes about each student went into his “What I Should Know About . . .” section of his reading/writing student binder.





Photos by Christian Ford

In order to make decisions about flexible small groups, we have to understand where they fit into our reading workshop structure. Let's take a minute to examine where we fit in these small groups and how the compelling structure supports independent reading.

