

Reading Aloud Like a Pro

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Why Read Aloud?

In 1985, the report of the National Institute of Education stated that “**the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children**” (Anderson, Hievert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985). Numerous studies do show that storybook reading is positively related to vocabulary and language development, early reading, motivation, and is a strong predictor of long-term reading achievement (see Sulzby & Teale, 1991, for a review of research). Noting this, it is disturbing to realize that **few teachers, parents, and mentors in actually read aloud to their students/children on a daily basis** (Trelease, 1989, Allington & Cunningham, 1996).

How Often Should I Read Aloud?

How often do you think you read aloud to your students/children? Test the validity of your answer by actually documenting the time you spend reading aloud during a typical week. You may find that you are not devoting as much time as you thought. **Reading experts describe how typical it is for teachers and those working with children to innocently overestimate the time they spend reading aloud and giving reading instruction** (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). In my role as a teacher educator, I have spent time observing teachers and preservice teachers in literally hundreds of classrooms. I can confirm that in most classrooms, teachers are not reading aloud to children as often as they should.

We should routinely read aloud to our students/children everyday for a minimum of thirty minutes. This goes for children in all grade levels, K-12! At first, you may have to break up the time into two 15-minute sessions for younger students until their attention spans have more fully developed. These thirty-minute read aloud sessions should be in addition to (not in place of) your formal reading instruction.

Is Time Spent Reading Aloud Worthwhile?

The answer is yes and no. In my experience, the effectiveness of teachers and parents who do read aloud in their classrooms varies greatly. I’ve seen the best and the worst of read aloud practices. **If you are not using effective read aloud practices; you are wasting everyone’s time.** However, **if you follow the practices outlined below, the time could not be better spent** because it transforms the read aloud from a passive activity into a rich and active learning experience.

How Can I Improve My Own Read Aloud Practices?

Reading aloud effectively to children is not a talent, it is a skill that can be mastered with knowledge of effective practices and some practice. The following tutorial was developed through a process of synthesizing the information gathered from many excellent sources. **This tutorial will teach you will teach you what you need to know to make your read-alouds effective and instructional.**

**10 SIMPLE STRATEGIES
For Reading Aloud Like a Pro**

STRATEGY	HOW TO DO IT and WHY IT WORKS
Before Reading	
<p>1. Choose a quality book.</p>	<p>This may seem like an obvious thing to do, but it is one that many teachers fail to do. A poor book cannot be made better, no matter how well the reader reads it, so choose a book that: 1) has significant literary value; 2) is developmentally appropriate for the target age level students; and/or 3) affords instructional opportunities (e.g., you can use it to teach a specific concept or skill). In addition, you need to select literature that students will find appealing. After all, they won't attend to anything that doesn't interest them. The following website is an excellent source for titles that are "sure bets":</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "The Children's Literature Web Guide: "Lots of Lists"- http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/lists.html
<p>2. Preview the book and make a plan.</p>	<p>Transforming a read-aloud into an opportunity for reading instruction does not just "happen", it requires careful and thoughtful pre-planning. To do this, you begin by previewing the book-- reading it to yourself ahead of time. As you read through the book, make notes of specific times during the read aloud that give you the opportunity to demonstrate or directly model strategies that effective readers use (see #8). Keep in mind that your goal is to transform the read aloud from a passive activity to an instructional one that actively involves the reader.</p> <p>The <i>Children's Literature News</i> is an excellent resource for helping you preview superb books. You can receive a subscription for a nominal fee at the following website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ http://www.childrenslit.com/news.htm
<p>3. Stimulate prior knowledge.</p>	<p>Spend an adequate amount of time stimulating prior knowledge about relevant content and concepts in the text so students can "attach" or connect what they are about to learn to what they already know. This strategy relates to what Piaget (1969) called schema theory. When we stimulate prior knowledge, we help children activate their related schema, thereby facilitating the learning process.</p> <p>Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks you will have is deciding what the relevant content and concepts for your text might be. To determine this myself, I find it very helpful to ask the question, "What is this book <i>really</i> about?" My answers <i>are</i> the relevant content and concepts. For instance, the relevant content/concepts in <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> has nothing to do with wolves or grannies, what is it <i>really</i> about? It's basically about using caution when dealing with strangers. Silverstein's <i>The Giving Tree</i> isn't really about trees, it's about the joy of giving and the foolishness of taking the gifts of others for granted. There is not always just one "right" thing to focus on in a given book. On one occasion, you might read <i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i> to teach about fairy tales and then on another occasion you might use that same book to teach about repetitive patterns.</p>
<p>4. Introduce the book.</p>	<p>Introduce the book by reading the title and the names of the author and illustrator. Explain what words like <i>author</i> and <i>illustrator</i> mean. This conveys to children that humans, not machines, create books.</p> <p>Include interesting information about the creators whenever possible. This adds dimension to the author and illustrator, which helps students identify with them as fellow lovers of literature. You can find out such information by reading the dust jacket, referring to the periodical <i>Something About the Author</i>, or searching the Internet for author/illustrator information (e.g. "Authors on the Web" at http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/authors.html).</p> <p>There are also many websites that even give the email addresses of authors (e.g. for Jan Brett author of books like <i>The Mitten</i> http://www.janbrett.com/) so students can easily submit their comments via email.</p> <p>You should also point out any awards the book may have received which serves to elevate the book's status. A list of Caldecott books can be found at</p>

	<p>http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/caldecott.html or Newberry at http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/newbery.html.</p> <p>Any information you can relay that helps students gain a sense of familiarity and/or value for the book is desirable. Point out other well-known titles by the author/illustrator as well. If you personally relate to the book for some specific reason, share it (e.g. you could tell about your own favorite teddy bear as a child before reading <i>Corduroy</i>).</p>
5. Elicit predictions about the story.	<p>Ask children what they think the story might be about based on the title and cover or think aloud yourself to model how such predications can be drawn. Prediction is not synonymous to guessing; it is a deduction process and students need to learn this to become effective readers. Take for example, the book <i>Is This a House for Hermit Crab?</i> by Megan McDonald (1990). With coaching from you, students can <i>predict</i> (not guess) what this story is about by focusing on the question mark in the title, which draws a reader to conclude that the hermit crab is on a search for a house. The illustration on the cover shows a hermit crab crawling up to a piece of driftwood. Using this clue, students can deduce that the crab might try to use the driftwood as a home. As you progress through the read-aloud, you can make references to these earlier predictions to model how effective readers constantly test predictions and form new ones based on new information.</p>
6. Anticipate the reading.	<p>Show pleasure and interest in anticipation of the reading. If you don't act like you are looking forward to reading the book, why should your student "audience"? You can demonstrate your excitement by saying why you look forward to reading the book, through your body language, or by giving the audience a motivating purpose for listening (in most instances this can simply be to test the predictions made in step #3).</p>
During Reading	
7. Give a dramatic reading.	<p>Give a lively reading by displaying interest and delight in language and the storyline. There is nothing worse than listening to someone read using a monotone voice, so make sure you effectively use voice inflection. Dramatizing a read-aloud not only makes it more enjoyable for the listeners, but increases their comprehension. Characterize the voices of different characters in the book. For instance, the "three bears" should not sound alike. The papa bear has a great big deep voice, the mama bear has a sweet mild voice, and the baby bear has a high-pitched wee little voice. If the plot is getting exciting, speed up your reading rate. If something is funny, laugh! You get the idea.</p> <p>If you ever get a chance to hear Jim Trelease author of <i>The New Read Aloud Handbook</i> in person, do so. He models how to give a dramatic reading very effectively. I will never forget being mesmerized by his ability to bring the characters in the book <i>Ira Sleeps Over</i> by Bernard Waber (1972) to life. It felt like Ira's nagging sister and stuffed-up-nose friend Reggie were really in the room. You can achieve this too through practice and the willingness to let your inhibitions go to some degree.</p>
8. Model aloud what effective readers do.	<p>Don't take it for granted that what you know about reading, as an experienced and effective reader, is something your students know as well. Because in all likelihood, they don't. Since students can't read your mind or thoughts, you will have to express out loud the thought processes you are using as you read. This involves self-query, making predictions, drawing conclusions, exploring unfamiliar words, using prior knowledge, etc. Your students should hear you pausing occasionally saying things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "I wonder if the fox is trying to trick the Gingerbread Man?" (self-query) ▪ "I think the little Billy Goat Gruff is just trying to avoid getting eaten by telling the troll his brother is much bigger and fatter." (making a prediction) ▪ "Chicken little seems to be worrying for no good reason!" (drawing a conclusion) ▪ "I wonder what the word <i>nectar</i> means? Let's look at the sentence and the pictures and figure out what it means together." (exploring unfamiliar words) ▪ "I saw a real lion at the zoo once and he couldn't talk like the fictional one in this book." (using prior knowledge)

	If you would like to further explore modeling as a teaching strategy, I highly recommend the book <i>Vygotsky in the Classroom</i> by Krauss (1996).
9. Encourage active listener participation.	Actively involve your students in the reading. When students know they get to participate, their attentiveness dramatically increases! You can do this by periodically asking them to make predictions about where the plot is going or by hesitating at predictable parts in the text to ask students to fill in words or phrases. First graders are delighted to join in when you get to the part “Run, run, as fast as you can, you can’t catch me, I’m the Gingerbread Man!” Fourth graders can certainly predict what will happen when Johnny touches the hot liquid metal in <i>Johnny Tremain</i> . Involving readers in these ways keeps their minds actively involved in the story and increases comprehension.
After Reading	
10. Take the time to process what was learned.	<p>Many teachers unfortunately end their read-aloud sessions by closing the book and moving directly to the next scheduled activity. This is an unfortunate mistake. Providing time for students to process what they just experienced during the read-aloud increases the quality and quantity of what they learned. You should end the read-aloud with a “finale” by summarizing, discussing, and celebrating the book.</p> <p>It is important to summarize the relevant content you identified during the pre-reading (step #3) by exploring together how those ideas were played out in the story. You could do this by asking critical thinking type questions such as, “What would have been a smarter response for Little Red Riding Hood to give the wolf when he asked her where she was going?” You can also summarize by drawing relationships between what happened in the book and your students’ lives.</p> <p>A brief discussion should also be held where students are able to ask questions about things they might not have understood or express parts of the book that were meaningful to them. Keep the discussion moving in a productive direction by asking the group to respond to what a student just said.</p> <p>Finally, celebrate the book by planning an extension activity where students can revisit the book and make sense of what they learned in a personal way. This might involve placing the book in a reading center, writing to a prompt about the book in their journal, creating a project of some sort, turning the book into a reader’s theatre or puppet show, retelling the story from a different perspective, etc. The possibilities are practically endless. Sources for innovative literature lesson plans are abundant, so do some exploring to find a follow-up activity that ties what was learned from the book all together.</p>

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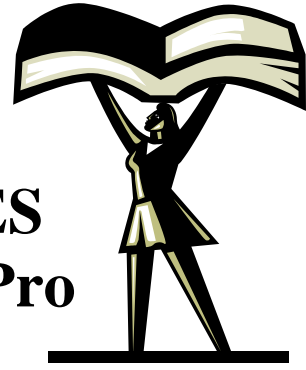
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