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READ-ALOUNDS

“Reading aloud is the best way we have to immerse children in the glories of reading, showing them both how and why one reads.”

Lucy Calkins, 2015

Readng aloud is one of the most important contexts for teaching reading. With the thoughtful selection of read-aloud texts and careful planning, a teacher can help students understand both how and why a person reads. Students learn a key aspect of how to read by listening to the teacher fluently read all types of texts. Read-alouds help students acquire an awareness of the structure of language, learn new vocabulary, build oral language, and gain background knowledge. In addition, when read-alouds include interactive aspects, including discussion and collaborative work, students develop critical thinking skills that will improve their reading. Students learn why one reads—and develop their own love of reading—when they hear the teacher read interesting material in an engaging way.

TOPICS IN THIS CHAPTER

Understanding the elements of effective read-alouds

• Planning read-alouds with intentionality

• Engaging students in collaborative conversation

• Incorporating think-aloud practices



Provide multiple opportunities to expose students to a variety of reading materials to learn language and hear models of fluency.

What You Need to Know About Read-Alouds

Taking the time to plan and deliver an interactive read-aloud is one of the best investments of time you can make. Whatever literacy goal you have for your students, there is a good chance that a read-aloud can help you achieve it. To be effective, a read-aloud cannot be a passive or “sit and get” experience for students. It is important to plan with intentionality and be clearly focused on the purposeful use of the text being read. We want all students to enjoy books and love to read themselves, but read-alouds can be more than reading great books to students.

Read-alouds:

- Provide the opportunity for students to learn about book language and hear models of fluency. Both are helpful for students, and they provide a strong scaffold for English Learners. Studies show that students who understand language prosody—the pattern of stress and intonation in language—have better reading comprehension.
- Aid comprehension in many ways. They help students build vocabulary and build background knowledge, and develop an understanding of the story and text structures.
- Expose students to a variety of reading material—from poems to picture books to essays to nonfiction.
- Build culturally responsive classrooms by reading texts that mirror students’ experiences and open windows to new understandings.
- Help students develop higher-order thinking skills when accompanied by intentional, thoughtful, interactive questions and discussions.
- Motivate students to read by giving them the opportunity to develop a positive and meaningful relationship with reading.
- Model the fact that different genres and text types are read differently and support creating mental models of text that students can draw from when they read independently.
- Build vocabulary and understanding of language structures that are not part of daily conversation but are an aspect of complexity in book language.

Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, said, “People would stand in line for days and pay hundreds of dollars if there were a pill that could do everything for a child that reading aloud does.”

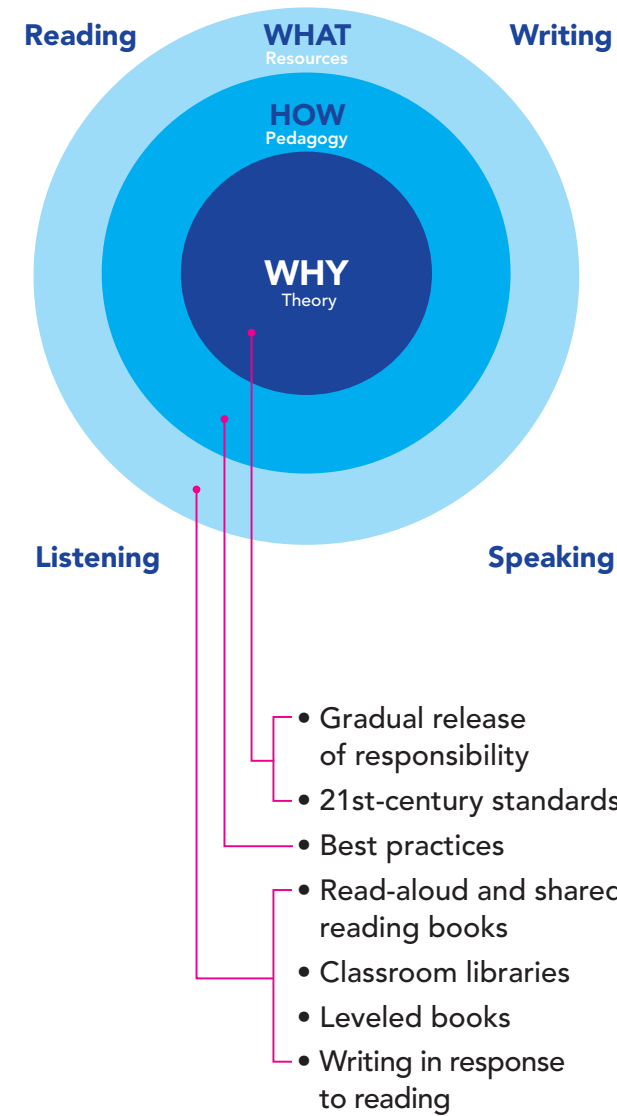
Read-alouds have many different dimensions as a best practice. Some books can be read in one session, others over an extended period of time. Other books lend themselves to opportunities for a follow-up shared reading lesson on a portion of the book, or a think-aloud for modeling different critical thinking and metacognitive strategies. Don’t hesitate to reread a book at a later point in the school year for a different purpose; it is like revisiting an old friend and delving deeper in the discussion; it is part of the work that supports reasons for rereading, and deep or close reading.

Planning

While the read-aloud itself does not take a lot of instructional time—it can last anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes—it is important to invest time in the planning so that your students can gain the most from it. Here are some suggestions for planning effective read-alouds.

Decide on your purpose. What strategies and skills do your students need to be successful readers? What big theme would you like them to explore? What knowledge about literature and the full range of text types would students benefit from hearing and learning about? And, of course, reading aloud is always about motivating the students to be lifelong readers themselves.

Starting with the WHY



NONFICTION TEXT STRUCTURES
Descriptive
Cause and Effect
Problem/Solution
Sequential
Compare and Contrast

As you select nonfiction texts, select texts with different text structures. It is important for students to be familiar with these patterns so they can anticipate the kind of information that will be presented.

The purpose of a read-aloud often varies by grade level, but there are a number of similarities across the levels. The comprehension strategies and skills we want students to use in their small-group and independent reading are modeled in the read-aloud, but this work has to be recursive—we should regularly revisit them. For example, teachers revisit using a comparison-and-contrast structure across text types and with books of ever-increasing complexity so that students gain a deeper understanding of the application and then transfer this strategy. What we compare and contrast in Kindergarten and the language we use about this understanding is foundational but still challenging at the Grade 6 level, when the vocabulary is more varied, the concepts more complex, and the background knowledge demands are greater. It isn’t about “once and done” but about students’ ongoing development and appreciation of comprehension strategies in new types and styles of text. The teacher’s gradual release of responsibility and students’ assumption of responsibility are continuous across the school year, and across grades.

Choose a text. There are a number of questions to ask yourself when choosing what to read aloud with your students. First, does the text provide you with the opportunity to focus on your big theme and teach the strategies and skills you want students to learn? Second, but equally important, will students enjoy it? Choose books—or articles or poems—that will grab, and hold, students’ attention. Choose a text that models good writing, and vary the types of text you use throughout the year. Choose texts that are often more challenging than what your students are able to read independently. Feel free to introduce students to new topics, but help support the background knowledge necessary to understand the reading. Think about the cultural relevance and diversity represented in the book, and use this knowledge both to meet the range of needs in your classroom and to expose students to lives and experiences different from their own. Many websites have been developed to share collections of diverse titles and are updated often. Importantly, remember that the texts we choose are not simply vehicles for our strategy instruction—they are an integral part of building skilled and enthusiastic readers.

Where can you find texts that will work for you? Consider your favorite books and poems, and acclaimed books such as the Newbery and Caldecott Medal winners. Read professional journals. Ask your colleagues and/or your school librarian for recommendations. A school-based teachers’ book club is a great way to get to know a range of titles. You can also search the Internet for websites with suggested book lists to teach various strategies and specific standards. Also, think about the wide range of literature competitions voted on by students, such as local and state book awards, and national and international projects such as Read Across America Day and the Global Read Aloud. Without much effort, you will construct a lengthy list of engaging books to use.

Keep in mind that picture books are a unique area to explore regardless of what grade you teach. Many picture books provide excellent support for all learners because they have shorter text passages and draw on illustrations to help tell the story. Picture books can deal with complex issues in a simple way that helps students probe ideas more deeply. The understanding a three-year-old child brings to a picture book like *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown, when read aloud at home or in preschool, is very different from that of a Grade 5 student reading for style or metaphor use. *Goodnight Moon* is a book often analyzed by college literature majors. So, what is the reading level of this picture book?



Work with colleagues to review and discuss texts that address the instructional need and topic, and that engage students.

Questions to Pose During Read-Alouds

- What do you anticipate might happen next?
- What evidence did you use to make this decision?
- What picture does this description make in your mind?
- What’s one word or phrase you would use to describe this character?
- What does this remind you of in another book or your own experience?
- How do these details support the main idea or theme?
- What mood does the description in the text create in this chapter or scene?
- What advice do you have for this character?
- How does this text make you feel?

The discussion can add layers of deeper understanding more relevant than a score on a scale of levels.

Preview your reading material. Grab a pad of self-stick notes or a pencil to write in the margins, and read your mentor text through the lens of what you want to teach. Stick a note wherever you notice that big theme or find yourself using the skill you want to teach. Be selective—stay targeted and focus. Remain focused on your purpose unless a key issue comes up during the read-aloud that students want to pursue. Decide whether you will read the entire text or a portion of it. Be reflective of your own process as a reader when reading this book. What about the book you have chosen offers opportunities to contribute to student readers’ growth? Where are ideal places to pause and assess students’ ongoing learning?

Next, review the text and write open-ended questions that promote the kind of thoughtful engagement with the text that will help you help your students analyze and interact with it. The sidebar lists some questions you might use. Responses to these questions provide rich assessment information about students’ learning of strategies and skills, writing themes, and the social contexts we bring to reading.

Note places where you can model a strategy you want to teach as well as places where you can give students the opportunity to practice it. Make sure to note places where you can check on how well students are assuming responsibility for doing strategy and skill work “on their own.”

As you are preparing for the read-aloud, it is also a good time to review the many ways in which your students can interact with the text. They can answer questions individually, they can turn and talk with partners, they can stop and jot, they can sketch, and they can use sign language and hand motions (such as a thumbs-up or thumbs-down), among other things. While you might want to decide which of these to use as you read, it helps to keep in mind all the tools available to you. You might even want to jot these strategies down on a self-stick note so that, like most of us, you don’t fall back on using the same one or two response options; it is important to recognize and incorporate the various communication styles of all learners.



Go back and read your mentor text to identify vocabulary for which students will need scaffolding. Decide if you want to pre-teach a few of these words or introduce or review them briefly during reading at point of use. When we engage in vocabulary work at point of use, we can model how a reader does this independently. You might have students jot down a word and go back to it later, or even give you a quiet hand signal such as a “V” sign during reading to indicate they’d like some support to understand a word or phrase during reading. This is not about interrupting the reading or teaching all the words needed, but about how students might transfer these skills to their independent reading. It is part and parcel of our important scaffolding approach. Think about your own process when you encounter a new word in text. What is the first strategy you use and would want your students to know? Books don’t come with a vocabulary list, so much of independent reading requires students to read, problem-solve, and use strategies as they read. Throughout the scaffolding that you do with your students, your conversations and students’ responses to your questions will provide a continuous stream of information about their progress. This is valuable, formative assessment data.

Identify vocabulary that needs to be pre-taught.

Next, practice reading the text aloud. There is no substitute for taking time to do so. Think of the most engaging readers you have heard and try to emulate them in your reading. Be dramatic. Use intonation. If there are different characters, use different voices. Use facial expressions and hand gestures. Occasionally, you might choose to play an audio recording of a book or a portion to demonstrate various voices. In both their oral and silent reading of a book, students need to think about how different characters' voices change, and how that helps comprehension. Reflecting on voice changes involves more than dialogue; it also helps students learn about using expression and all prosodic elements.

Finally, think of a brief introduction to the text to hook your students. This might be as simple as reading the hook found on a book's back or inside cover, or showing an illustration from the book and asking purposeful open-ended questions.

Using a Think-Aloud

A think-aloud is a teaching strategy in which we verbalize our thought process. As part of a read-aloud, a teacher shares his or her thinking while reading to help students see how skilled readers construct meaning from a text. Think-alouds help make the invisible—comprehension and comprehension strategies—more concrete. Think-alouds help students develop strategies that will improve their reading. They give students insight into what might be happening during reading. Successful think-alouds do two things: they provide a rich context in which a strategy is taught, and they provide appropriate details about when the strategy is used, how the strategy is used, and why we use it. As we read aloud with our students, think-alouds help us model how to:

- connect prior knowledge about the topic, the genre, or the author to a new text;
- apply new strategies that consist of meaningful steps and procedures;
- identify strategies suitable for different reading situations;
- think about text structure or features;
- problem-solve words and explore vocabulary;
- reflect on one's thinking in ways that contribute to self-awareness and accomplished reading.

Think-alouds can also be used during shared reading and mini-lessons. Every one of those practices can incorporate a think-aloud as part of the progression of lessons, or as a stand-alone lesson. Whatever goal you have for your students, a think-aloud can help you support students to think metacognitively about the reading process.

Delivering a Read-Aloud Lesson

Once you've chosen a text, annotated it, and practiced reading it, you're ready to share it with your students. Here are some ways to ensure the best delivery.

Set the mood. You can help students get the most out of the read-aloud experience and also create a clear transition by taking one or more simple steps to set the mood for your read-aloud. This might be as simple as turning off the bright overhead lights and sitting in a special chair, such as a rocker or stool, to read to students.

Set the mood to engage students in text. Having students sit in close proximity helps establish the tone for the read-aloud.



Read-Aloud Essentials

- Choose an engaging text with a big idea worthy of exploration.
- Read and reread your text to familiarize yourself with the resources it holds and to prepare your lesson.
- Annotate where you will think aloud, model strategies, and ask open-ended questions.
- Practice reading the text aloud.
- Set the mood for the read-aloud.
- Read the text fluently, modeling clear phrasing, intonation, and prosody.
- Keep the reading interactive through collaborative conversations.
- Think aloud to model comprehension strategies—the how, when, why, and where.

You might play music that is related to the text. In the lower grades, if you have a rug where students can gather to sit and listen to you read, that’s great. But you don’t need that. You simply need to establish that this is a special time and that everyone needs to be quiet and attentive. Having students sit closer together, whether they pull up their chairs, sit on the floor, or do some combination of the two, creates an environment where the students can talk to one another and share ideas. This proximity helps establish the tone for the read-aloud. Proximity also enables students to see any pictures. Some teachers use a document camera to share photographs or illustrations since often a good portion of the story is told through these images.

Read. Use your hook to fully focus the students’ attention, and then begin reading. Remember to read fluently and expressively. Stop where you planned to model skills and invite students deeper into the text. Remember to vary the ways you ask students to respond. Allowing time for collaborative conversation is an important part of the read-aloud. One or two stopping points during a read-aloud is usually sufficient. Striking a balance among reading, thinking, and discussion requires making important decisions in the planning stage. These decisions are planned ahead of time, but feel free to divert once in a while when a point comes up that students are eager to pursue. However, be aware that tangents may cause you to lose your focus if you haven’t planned your read-aloud carefully.

Finish. The intentional thinking that happens after reading is closest to what a reader would do during his or her own independent reading, and this thinking helps transfer learning from the whole group to the small group and the independent work a student does. Support conversations in which students relate the book to their lives and the real world. Ask them to consider what they found most impactful in the read-aloud, and what they learned as readers. The focus should include both the questions you ask the student AND the questions students ask and answer themselves. This is another opportunity for you to think aloud, modeling how you make connections to the text and ask yourself questions. In addition, the conclusion of a read-aloud session provides many opportunities to evaluate what students have learned from the lesson, about both the text and the strategies and skills they use.

Make the text available for students who might want to read it independently. You might also want to make available an audio version and related texts to share with students. These audio texts can be especially helpful for English Learners, who benefit from consistent models of reading. A useful technique is to use regular phone and tablet devices to record the read-aloud in “live time” with all the bumps and glitches. Many students like to revisit the reading and discussion, so make these recordings available in the classroom during independent work time.

Connect to other parts of the literacy block. It’s important to extend the whole-group lesson to deepen students’ understanding. Ensure that students have opportunities to practice the skills you’ve introduced to the whole group when they meet in small groups. You might also want to consider a culminating project, including writing related to the big idea or goal of your lesson. For example, if you have focused on how an author used a step-by-step procedure in science, you might have a culminating project that has students first working together to create steps in a process and then demonstrating those steps to other groups of students. And remember to encourage students to practice the strategy you introduced during the read-aloud—and that they likely practiced in small group—in their own independent reading. For these reasons, we say the read-aloud is directly connected to what students do in their independent reading.

Assessment

Read-alouds offer many assessment options—for both the type of assessment we use and the focus of the assessment. We can monitor student progress in the following ways.¹

Listening comprehension. We can ask questions accompanying our read-alouds. With fiction, our questions help us determine students’ developing sense of story, plot, action, characters, and settings. With nonfiction, our questions help describe student understanding of key details and main ideas, as well as claim and evidence. We can also explore students’ understanding of authors’ craft and authors’ purpose. We can check on students’ developing ability to identify different types of writing: persuasive, humorous, and informational.



Extend the lesson to deepen students’ understanding. This gives them additional opportunities to practice the skills.

Think-aloud. We can ask students to do their own think-alouds. From these, we can infer the nature and success of their reading strategies. The gradual release of responsibility model focuses on students’ incremental learning of strategies, and thinking aloud provides a window on how this learning is progressing. We can judge their progress toward independence in reading as they take increased responsibility with decreased teacher scaffolding.

Discussions to understand the state of student understanding. Discussions are gateways for teachers interested in how (and how well) students have understood the texts they read. Within discussions we have opportunities to ask students to clarify, to elaborate, and to retell. Each student response is an assessment opportunity.

Learning new vocabulary. New texts introduce new vocabulary. When we read aloud, students are absolved from the need to decode—they can listen and try to understand. Thus, whole-group reading is an opportunity to introduce and use new words. Student understanding of these words can be assessed through direct questioning, listening to student conversations, and examining student writing.

READ-ALOUD LESSON PLAN

DATE 10/13

TEACHING PURPOSE *Sequencing key events in a story; past tense*

TEXT TITLE *"Dana Daring: Dino Detective"*

Interactive questions and discussions. Whole-group reading offers many opportunities for questions and discussion. It is important that we come to each whole-group reading episode with planned questions as well as being open to spontaneous questions. Planned questions help us determine if students have learned information that we have judged to be of high value, prior to the lesson. Spontaneous questions complement our understanding of students as we work through a whole-group reading lesson. Incorporating these relevant questions sends the clear message that students are partners in learning at all

times. Finally, we can witness student laughter, the joy in students’ eyes, students’ increased interest in reading, and their enthusiastic discussion. All are valuable, firsthand evidence that read-alouds are working in our classrooms!

In Action

Here are two sample read-aloud lessons, one primary and one intermediate. Notice how each teacher models thinking and gives students many opportunities to talk with one another.

P Read-Aloud Lesson

In this Grade 2 lesson, Ms. Santiago reads aloud an article called “Dana Daring: Dino Detective.” As she reads, she will engage students, asking them questions along the way to spark their interest in the topic. She will also focus on the past tense of verbs and help students understand how to identify and sequence key events in a story.

Today I am going to read “Dana Daring: Dino Detective.” This is an article written by a dinosaur detective. I wonder what a dinosaur detective does. Turn and talk to your partner about what you think a dinosaur detective does.

Ms. Santiago allows time for students to think and share some of their ideas. Students suggest that a dinosaur detective looks for dinosaur bones, since there are no longer any living dinosaurs. She then reads the first paragraph and pauses when she comes to the sentence “Our job begins when a crate of fossilized dinosaur bones arrives at the museum.”

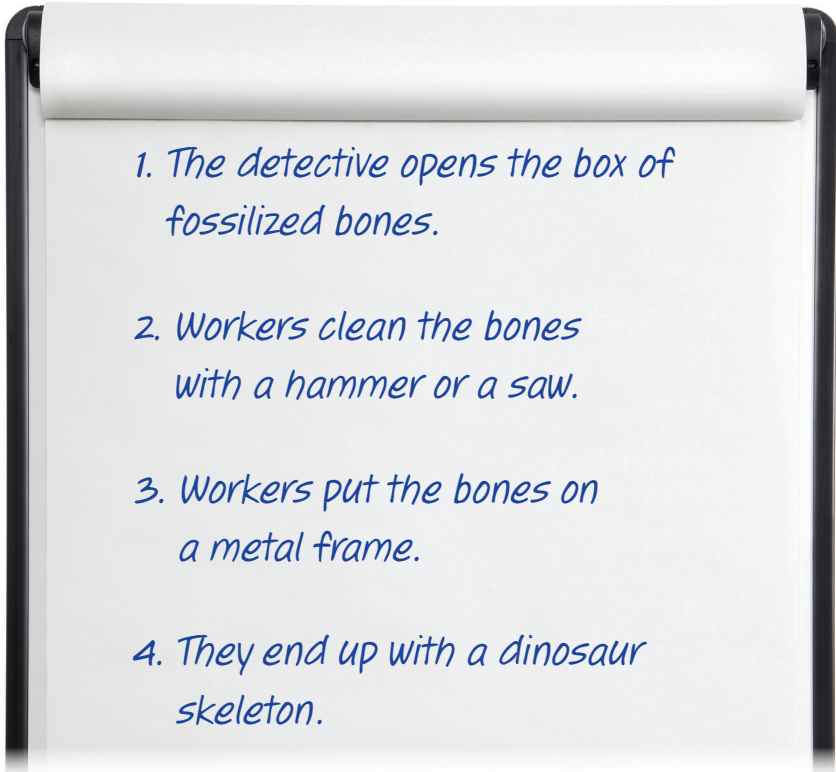
I need to think about the word *fossilized*. I know that the root, *fossil*, is the stone remains of something that lived a long time ago. I also know that the suffix, or ending, *-ize*, means “to become.” The *d* on the end makes the word past tense. So *fossilized* means that the dinosaur bones have become fossils. I wonder what Dana does with these bones.

She continues reading, stopping at points to have students answer more questions and discuss the ideas in the text. She pauses when she gets to the sentence “We study the bones as we work. We try to figure out how big the dinosaur was, how it moved, and what it ate.”

Thumbs-up if you know the tense of the verbs *was*, *moved*, and *ate*.

Ms. Santiago calls on a student with his thumb up, and he correctly answers “past.”

That’s right. Just as *fossilized*, with the **d** on the end, was past tense, *was*, *moved*, and *ate* are also past tense. That makes sense, since dinosaurs lived in the past. Let’s keep reading.



sequencing
of key events in
the article

At the end of the story, Ms. Santiago invites students to recall the events in the story. Students suggest several events.

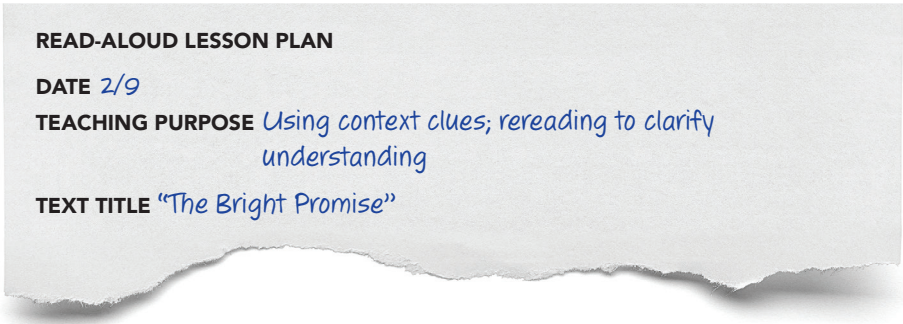
Now let’s imagine that we are turning this article into a book. What are some key events that we would want to illustrate in our book?

Students suggest several events.

These are all great suggestions! Help me write them in the order they happened.

Ms. Santiago supports students in finding the right order and writes the list on chart paper. The list of key events is evidence that students understood the story—and this is valuable assessment information!

Thumbs-up if we’ve got all the main steps here.



She pauses while students signal their agreement and specifically comments on the thinking students shared. She wraps up the lesson by acknowledging students’ hard work.

I Read-Aloud Lesson

In this Grade 5 classroom, Ms. Chen is reading a section of an article titled “The Bright Promise.” It provides information related to a topic the class is studying—industrialization. As she reads, she plans to focus on using context clues to understand vocabulary and to model reading strategies including rereading to clarify understanding.

Today I am reading the first part of an article called “The Bright Promise.” It is about girls who went to work in factories in the 1800s because working there promised them a better life. Turn and share with your partner some questions you have before we read the article.

She allows time for students to think and then share some ideas. Partners share a variety of questions: *How old are the girls? What’s so great about working in a factory? What was it like to work in a factory? How much did they get paid? How did working in the factory help promise “a better life?”*

These are all great questions that will help us understand the article. They aren’t predictions, but they show you’re thinking about the text before we read it. As I read, see if you can find answers to any of them.

Ms. Chen reads two paragraphs and then pauses at the sentence: “Francis Cabot Lowell, for whom the town was named, was a Boston businessman who, in 1813, had founded one of America’s first textile companies.”

Okay, I need to stop my reading here. I always stop or slow down when I think there might be a problem. I haven’t seen the word *textile* before, but I think I can figure out what it means based on context, or the words and sentences surrounding it. Thumbs-up if anyone else figured out the word’s meaning and wants to share how you figured it out.

She calls on a student with her thumb up, who says *textile* means “cloth.”

What context clue helped you figure that out?

The student points out that the article mentioned that the town was famous for its woven cloth. Ms. Chen acknowledges her good thinking, and she continues reading to the end of the article. Then Ms. Chen asks the students to share some ideas. Student answers help Ms. Chen determine how well the lesson is going.

Get ready to write in your reading journal. Imagine you are a farm girl in the 1800s. Would you prefer to stay on the farm or go work in a factory? Give at least one reason from what we read to support your answer.

Students spend some time writing.

Discuss with your partner the pros and cons of working in the factory. Then reread what you wrote in your reading journal about whether you would prefer to stay on the farm or work in the factory. Next, you may do either of two things. One, you may keep the answer you had and add another detail to support your choice. Or, two, you may change your answer. If you change your answer, provide at least one detail supporting your new choice.

Ms. Chen walks around to check, confer, and discuss with students as needed. During her walk around, she asks:

This is part one of an article. Based on what we have read so far, what is one thing you think we will learn more about in the continuation of this article? Write it in your reading journal.

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LEARNERS

- Look for ways that students can make connections between their first language and English, such as pointing out cognates.
- Use gestures and actions to support oral explanations of words in the read-aloud.
- Allow opportunities for students to engage in collaborative conversation about the text. Students need the opportunity to think and talk about what they are listening to in the text.
- Choose read-alouds to support the diverse makeup of your classroom and to expose students to a wider range of experiences.
- Consider providing a translated reading of the text read-aloud in English when possible. This provides ELs with the opportunity to hear the text in a comprehensible language. With this experience, ELs may build a coherent understanding of the English text.
- When asking questions, avoid questions that are convoluted and difficult to follow.

FURTHER READING

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She gives students time to write and then share. Students suggest:
I think we’re going to hear about some other jobs at the factory.
I think we’re going to learn more about immigrants coming to Lowell. I think we’re going to read about what happens to the factory when the immigrants arrive.

These are all great ideas. When we read tomorrow, you can check back to see if your thinking was on the right track and to add new information about this factory in Lowell.

Concluding Thoughts

Read-alouds are a whole-group experience that can have a big impact on your students’ reading gains and on their love of reading across their whole lives. We are conveying this love of learning across generations. As read-aloud expert Jim Trelease said, “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.” As a teacher, you also know that success in reading is a great predictor for success in school and in life. You can give your students so much simply by reading aloud to them. Listening to read-alouds builds students’ vocabulary, exposes them to increasingly complex text, and helps them understand how different types of text are structured. And everyone, no matter what age, enjoys being read to.



Read-alouds can be presented through technology.

Reflecting on Your Teaching

Here are some questions to help you reflect on your teaching and to guide professional learning discussions:

- 1. How do you select a text for a read-aloud? Are you providing a range of text types?
- 2. What are some ways you ensure that you engage your students during the read-aloud?
- 3. When might you include a think-aloud as part of your read-aloud practice?
- 4. How might you add collaborative conversations to your read-alouds?
- 5. During the read-aloud, what were your best sources of assessment information?
- 6. Are your questions during read-aloud both planned (addressing the content of the text) and spontaneous (addressing students’ interests and issues that emerged during the lesson)?
- 7. Can you document changes in students’ attitudes toward reading and discussion as a result of using read-alouds?