

# Read Aloud Often and Well

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I've long been an advocate for reading aloud to students of all ages. In fact, I read aloud to my undergraduate and graduate students at the university level and have for over twenty years. While reading aloud is a given in most primary grade (K-2) classrooms, the practice seems to wane as students move through the grades and gain greater independence with reading. Yet, read aloud experiences have great value in the intermediate and middle grades as well.

The power of reading aloud to students may be underestimated by some in the middle grades. However, it is my view that read-aloud experiences are an essential component in a balanced literacy model and that every read-aloud experience should be intentional and well planned. I pose three primary intentions for reading aloud to students of any age (Laminack, 2009; 2016).

## 1. Read Aloud to Inspire

Our most basic goal is to generate interest in reading, to create a thirst for a reading life, and consistent read-aloud experiences can be the best enticement there is. When we select relevant texts and present them with attention to tone, intensity, pacing, and mood we have a much greater chance of pulling students from the banks of "onlooking" into the flow of a well-crafted text. It has been my experience that students need to get caught up in the current of story (poetry, information, essay) before they will want to pursue it on their own.

Establishing a routine of read-aloud experiences provides exposure to the best available texts presented by the most fluent reading voice in the classroom community. Hearing a well-written text in the voice of someone who is both thoroughly familiar with the text and has deep respect for the writing is a rare experience. This routine exposes students to a variety of genres,

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topics, authors, styles, voices, formats, and opinions, which allows them to sample each as they find new interests they may want to pursue independently. A routine read-aloud experience creates a cultural norm, an expectation that some text will be "heard" each day at a given time. Further entice your students to delve into texts independently by creating a browsing collection of related texts to extend what you are reading aloud. Read aloud to them with no other intention than to inspire them to delve into print independently.

## 2. Read Aloud to Invest

There are times when we read aloud with the intention of paving the way for future work. I call this an investment in future instruction. My intention here is to immerse students in content-specific vocabulary paired with images that will help them build background information and schema for upcoming independent reading of denser texts. Often there are topics for which our students lack sufficient background, yet we ask them to read novels that we expect will expand their understanding. However, without adequate background, their attempts at visualizing, interpreting information, and making connections with the text will be limited. For example, let's assume that in two weeks your colleagues in social studies are planning to launch a unit of study on the Holocaust. Consider the benefits of reading aloud from a set of carefully

selected picture books at the opening of your language arts class. If you have established a routine of opening class with a read-aloud as the springboard for your work in literary analysis, comprehension, vocabulary, writer's craft, text structures, and so on, you will continue that work without interruption. In addition, you are making an investment in your students' future success with the texts (historical fiction, primary documents, textbook,



information texts, etc.) they will encounter in the upcoming social studies unit.

Let's assume, for example, that over the ten days leading up to the launch of the social studies unit you will begin class each day with one of the following picture books:

*The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* by David Adler

*The Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* by Eve Bunting

*The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark* by Carmen Agra Deedy

*The Cats of Krasinski Square* by Karen Hesse

*Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti

*The Harmonica* by Tony Johnston

*Who Was the Woman Who Wore the Hat?* by Nancy Patz

*The Butterfly* by Patricial Polacco

*Let the Celebrations Begin* by Margaret Wild

*Erika's Story* by Ruth Vander Zee

Content-specific vocabulary, related images, and concepts will form layer by layer (like the formation of a hailstone) through daily read-aloud experiences from this collection of picture books. This collection of books will become a community touchstone as students begin their work in the social studies unit. As the content-specific work begins, your students will have common points of reference to ground their connections, comments, and questions (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006).

Now, imagine you move on to other work as your colleague takes the set of picture books into the social studies class and loops back to scenes from each text as concepts and vocabulary are introduced within the content. The collection of picture books you've read aloud now becomes resource material in the social studies class over the next two weeks. As the social studies unit enters the second week, you can build on the content with book clubs reading from a collection of novels written about the period. For example you may have small groups of students reading each title from this list:

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne

*The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank

*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry

*The Upstairs Room* by Johanna Reiss

*Behind the Bedroom Wall* by Laura E. Williams

*Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen

The work you have done through the read-aloud experiences paired with the deeper look into the content done by your colleague establishes substantial background knowledge supported by images of the era paired with the new vocabulary. Launching the book clubs with this support structure in place is a worthy dividend for your investment.

### 3. Read Aloud to Instruct

It is likely that each of us has had a moment when one of our best-planned lessons just didn't hit the mark, and our students seemed totally confused. I have found that when this happens, a read-aloud can be the vehicle to moving forward. For example, when teaching the difference between perspective and point of view, I turn to *Trouper* by Meg Kearney to explore the impact a shift in point of view (first person, second person, third person) would have upon the meaning of the text versus a shift in perspective (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2015). In this case, the story is presented in first person through the perspective of Trouper, the dog. Shifting the perspective so that we experience (see, hear, feel, think about) the story through the dogcatcher or the boy not only changes the meaning, but alters the entry and exit points in the story as well. The ten minutes required to read this story aloud followed by ten minutes of exploring the impact of shifting both point of view and perspective provides clear and concise instruction in the moment.

Knowing there will be times when a lesson may fail to hit the mark, I try to keep a stack of texts at the ready for an in-the-moment read-aloud that will help to clarify the point of the lesson. Consider having a small stack of picture books handy to turn to when your students need an additional entry point to a concept. I find it helpful to have books at the ready that will bring the concept down to a simple and concrete level. Having these on hand for a quick read-aloud sets up a situation where you can turn to the book and read aloud, then ask your students to pause for about forty-five seconds to reflect and think of the three best questions they could ask after hearing this text. As you listen to the questions, make a few notes and

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notice whether the questions reflect a lack of conceptual framework, general background knowledge, or a lack of familiarity with the vocabulary. These questions will give you information about how to adjust your next lesson to better match your students' needs.

Reading aloud to our students is a worthy instructional endeavor with many benefits. Take the time necessary to select the texts carefully. Be clear about your intentions for the read-aloud experience and plan it as carefully as you would any other lesson. I encourage you to make the first read-aloud of any text a gift where you read start to finish without stopping. At the end of it you can always return to dig in to any detail, concept, example you wish. I encourage you to pause at the end and let your students sit with the text floating in their minds for a moment. Let the language and the concepts steep as you would a pot of tea. Give them something to reflect on and give them the time to reflect. Pause before going to your questions and invite your students to share the questions the text has evoked in them. I think you'll find their questions lead to much more robust and authentic conversations.

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## Wheadon Scholarship Recipient

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The 2017 NCTE Edwyna Wheadon Postgraduate Training Scholarship recipient is **Danielle Tefft**, who teaches English at Veterans Memorial High School in Corpus Christi, Texas.

The Wheadon Scholarship will assist Danielle as she pursues an MS in Reading at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, qualifying her to become a reading specialist. “I chose this path because my ultimate goal is to help students who struggle with reading and help all students find a love for a subject they think is not so lovable.”