

Read Alouds

Read alouds may seem old school and even charming. You may picture a teacher in a rocking chair with students held in rapt attention. Read alouds often elicit specific memories for children and adults. Perhaps you recall a favorite book you read aloud to your students each year. Or maybe you think of selected snippets of text that you read aloud to your intermediate students before beginning a unit of study in history. I often think about specific beloved picture books now gathering dust on my office shelves that I once read side by side with my now-adult children.

Read alouds hold long-standing support. *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, an important report from 1985, named read alouds as “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). Mollie Ness (2023), author, educator, and read-aloud expert, defines *read alouds* as a “shared literacy experience engaging children and adults in conversation and engagement around a high-quality text” (p. 3). Ness (2023) uses the terms *read aloud* and *interactive read alouds* interchangeably, as I do. It’s not clear how frequently teachers engage in read alouds, although they appear to be more commonplace in elementary, especially primary, classrooms. Before students become fluent readers, there is no better everyday fluency model than you as their teacher. Make time to read aloud every day, for you may be the only model of proficient reading a student hears daily (Khan, Purtell, Logan, Ansari, & Justice, 2017).

In addition to offering a strong model of reading fluency, let’s not forget that teachers and students also love read alouds. An interactive read aloud often includes interpreting the text using voice and gestures, and provides an engaging give-and-take experience for participants. When I’ve worked with teachers, many recall their favorite Kate DiCamillo book or another beloved author that they look forward to reading expressively each year. Many teachers report students groaning when it is time to stop, begging for the next chapter. I readily concur with Ness (2023) when she says, “The read aloud is necessary for every student, every day—regardless of age, grade level, or language background” (p. 2).

As with other strategies, you should plan read alouds with intentionality and purpose. In this case, that means modeling for your students the three aspects of fluency: accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression. Consider focusing on expression when reading aloud a book with rich characters, as found in *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo (2015). Or, when reading a book that includes a moody setting, consider slowing your rate to replicate that moody feeling for your students.

In the following read-aloud strategy, adapted from Douglas Fisher, James Flood, Dianne Lapp, and Nancy Frey (2004), I’ve summarized best practices for planning and implementing read alouds to promote fluency.

Strategy: Read Alouds

Pillar: Fluency

Grade Level:

- ☒ K
- ☒ 1
- ☒ 2
- ☒ 3
- ☒ 4
- ☒ 5
- ☒ 6

Instructional Grouping:

- ☒ Whole Group
- ☒ Small Group
- ☐ Individual

Consider This:

- Select several read alouds for the specific purpose of modeling fluency.
- As you read, pause along the way to have students notice specific aspects, such as how your voice changes when the character is excited or sad, or how you create suspense with your tone. Think aloud as you slow down to decode an unusual word and try to determine the meaning.

What is it? Reading aloud is “a shared literacy experience engaging children and adults in conversation and engagement around a high-quality text” (Ness, 2023, p. 3).

Why is it important? Read alouds provide a natural shared experience where teachers can purposefully plan targeted objectives—fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—and use the read-aloud experience to focus on those objectives.

What works in the classroom?**Planning Read Alouds**

- **Select the text for the read aloud carefully:** Don't be haphazard with book selection. Since your goal should relate to the three aspects of fluency—accuracy, rate, and expression—think about selecting a book with characters, a setting, or a plot that calls for expressiveness. Select read alouds with a balance of genres, themes, genders, cultures, and diversity. Review recent Newbery, Caldecott, Coretta Scott King, and Geisel award-winning books or ask your media specialist or librarian for suggestions.
- **Preview and practice:** Always preview and practice the text before reading to students. Think about the inflection and tone each character may use with each other. Also think about how you can set the stage with your voice to connote setting or emotions such as wonder, surprise, or fear.
- **Establish your purpose:** Will you focus on reading rate? How about meaningful expression? Determine your objective for the read aloud and share the purpose with students, such as, “Today I want you to notice how I use my voice and expression to help you imagine the setting.”
- **Model fluent and accurate reading:** Model fluent reading and use the think-aloud process to help students think specifically about the three components of fluency.
 - **Consider rate and accuracy—**Consider slowing down when you notice unusual vocabulary, determining how to pronounce new words or comprehend their meaning (think your actions aloud). Or, perhaps model self-correction when you mispronounce a word. If you are focusing on rate, select sentences to read more quickly, places to slow down, and moments to pause to create suspense or grab students’ attention.
- **Use animation and expression:** Students benefit from expression and animation as you read aloud.
 - **Think carefully about prosody and expression—**How will you denote differences between the characters with your voice and tone? How will your voice and expression create suspense, surprise, joy, or sadness? Will you provide any movements to support the text and engage your readers?
- **Discuss the text:** The heart of fluency is comprehension. Select specific points, perhaps marked with sticky notes, to stop and engage in a brief conversation with students. Use the cover and illustrations to engage students’ background knowledge and prediction skills.
- **Connect reading and writing:** Consider having your students respond to the selection by writing a few sentences or cowriting several sentences with a partner, depending on students’ age and skill level. Then, have students read those sentences, connecting writing, fluency, and comprehension. Students may read with a partner or take turns reading aloud until they read the sentences fluently.

References

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