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# TEACHER READ-ALOUDS: MORE THAN JUST STORY TIME

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## **Abstract**

Read-alouds not only reinforce story time traditions but also hold significant educational value when used strategically. Reading aloud benefits all students, no matter the grade or achievement level. This article explores a number of research-based academic benefits of reading aloud in K-12 classrooms. The author shares practical tips for prioritizing read-aloud time, selecting appropriate text, modeling various reading strategies, making read-alouds interactive, and promoting vocabulary and language development. The author provides a list of current, award-winning K-12 picture books and chapter books to elevate classroom read-aloud experiences.

## **Key Words**

read-aloud, literacy instruction, K-12 classroom, reading aloud

When you think back to your own elementary school experiences, what memories stand out to you the most? Common experiences may include gathering on the carpet, captivated by a story being read aloud by the teacher. Reading aloud is a treasured reading tradition that takes place in classrooms all over the world. Teachers and students alike savor the authentic connections that shared read-aloud experiences offer and often cherish those memories for a lifetime. When teachers read aloud, they inspire students to read independently and ultimately create communities of readers in our classrooms (Laminack, 2017).

Reading aloud not only promotes reading joy but is also a fundamental activity for building knowledge and encouraging academic success across all grade levels and content areas (Anderson, 1985; Laminack, 2017; Layne, 2015; Trelease, 2019). When teachers read aloud, they model fluent reading, stimulate dialogue, boost comprehension, and promote vocabulary acquisition (Laminack, 2017; Trelease, 2019; Wright, 2018). Moreover, read-alouds appeal to students of all academic abilities, whether they are reluctant, proficient, or accelerated readers. If read-alouds are inexpensive, yet highly effective ways to connect to and educate students, how can teachers elevate instructional time so that students can reap the emotional and cognitive benefits of reading aloud? The following tips can help K-12 teachers maximize read-aloud time.

## **Prioritize Read-Alouds**

In order to elevate read-aloud experiences, teachers must prioritize them. Designate a time and place for reading aloud and honor that commitment every day. For example, starting class with a read-aloud will ensure it happens consistently. It might be difficult to make a habit out of reading

aloud every day, but it is not impossible. Fisher et al. (2020) suggested that it helps to frame language to state why read-alouds are used, “I use read-alouds to...” In addition Layne (2015) recommended that teachers display a “Do Not Disturb” sign outside of the classroom door before facilitating read-alouds, as it sends a message to the students and outside guests that reading aloud is valuable instructional time. As reading aloud becomes a daily habit, under no circumstances should teachers “cancel” read-alouds as this implies that reading aloud is not important instructional time (Layne, 2015). While these instructional tips might seem like minor adjustments, they can hold teachers accountable for utilizing read-alouds as instructional time.

With strategic planning, one read aloud text can accomplish multiple objectives (Lane & Wright, 2007). For example, a teacher can model fluent reading, inferencing, and making text-to-text connections within the span of one text. As students advance through school and may not rely on their teachers to model reading as much, they can participate in collaborative read-alouds activities that combine interactive read-alouds and Reader’s Theater (Elliot-Johns & Puig, 2015) where students have opportunities to read aloud. While upper grade teachers may not have as much instructional time to read aloud (Routman, 1991), it is still possible. Secondary teachers may consider reading aloud song lyrics and poems (Reynolds, 2018), short articles, or short stories (Easley, 2004). Another option for upper grades is reading aloud crossover picture books, or narrative texts that contain controversial characters and social issues, which appeal to both younger and older readers (Beckett, 2021; Bintz & Ciecierski, 2021).

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### Carefully Select Text

Proper book selection is essential in implementing read-alouds. In fact, the type of text will influence the type of thinking in which students engage (Braid & Finch, 2015). While selecting and planning for read-alouds, identify the purpose for using the text and anticipate the types of thinking it may initiate. Use this opportunity to also expose students to a variety of writing styles, genres (Lane & Wright, 2007) and diverse authors and characters (Boston & Baxley, 2007). Reading experiences should be centered around the readers (Rosenblatt, 1995), and in order to connect to the read-aloud texts, students must be able to see themselves in the stories (Larrick, 1965). As technology continues to play a key role in our everchanging society, teachers must find ways to integrate it into literacy instruction (Larson, 2015). One way to implement technology-rich read-alouds is through audiobooks. Some researchers consider audiobook reading to be “real reading” (Irwin, 2009; Moyer, 2011), and it should be used in conjunction with print texts (Mediatore, 2003; Pederson & Have, 2012). Just like traditional print-text read-alouds, audiobooks can activate and build background knowledge (Moore & Cahill, 2016), connect written and spoken literacies (Frey & Fisher, 2006), and promote critical thinking and listening skills (Trelease, 2019).

Quality read-alouds should include texts that convey a clear reading purpose, build content and vocabulary knowledge, share diverse perspectives, and make cross-curricular connections (Fisher et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 2020; Wright, 2018). Texts should align with learning standards and objectives to maximize instruction (Johnston, 2017). Along with academic requirements, consider students’ personal interests and social-emotional needs (Fisher et al., 2004; Trelease, 2019). To secure books that students will likely enjoy, observe what they read during independent reading time and ask them for book recommendations. To find high-quality children’s and young adult literature,

browse distinguished fiction and nonfiction book award lists, like the E.B. White Read Aloud Award, the Randolph Caldecott Medal, the John Newbery Medal, or the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal (Fisher et al., 2004) to name a few. To celebrate diversity and multicultural reading, consider honorary lists like the Coretta Scott King Award and Honor, Jane Addams Children’s Book Award, and Pura Belpré Award (Boyd et al., 2015; Kesler et al., 2020). See the table below for examples of high-quality K-12 titles.

***K-12 Read-Aloud Titles***

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Award</b>	<b>Grade Levels</b>	<b>Instructional Focus</b>
<i>See the Cat: Three Stories About a Dog</i>	David LaRochelle	2021 Theodor Seuss Geisel Winner	K-2	Retell Events in a Story; Describe Characters, Setting, and Plot
<i>Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story</i>	Kevin Nobel Maillard	2020 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Winner	K-3	Identify Main Idea and Details; Determine Meaning of Unknown Words
<i>Du İz Tak</i>	Carson Ellis	2017 E.B. White Read-Aloud Winner, 2017 Caldecott Honor	K-6	Decode Unfamiliar Words, Make Inferences
<i>We Dream of Space</i>	Erin Entrada Kelly	2021 Newbery Honor	3-7	Compare and Contrast Point of View, Interpret Words and Phrases Used in the Text
<i>Efrén Divided</i>	Ernesto Cisneros	2021 Pura Belpré Winner	4-8	Identify Theme, Analyze Character Development
<i>Genesis Begins Again</i>	Alicia D. Williams	2020 Newbery Honor	4-8	Identify Theme, Make Inferences
<i>All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys’ Soccer Team</i>	Christina Soontornvat	2021 Robert F. Sibert Honor, 2021 Newbery Honor, 2021 Orbis Pictus Honor	3-12	Make Inferences, Compare and Contrast Individual Personalities
<i>The Undefeated</i>	Kwame Alexander	2020 Caldecott Winner, 2020 Newbery Honor, 2020 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Winner	3-12	Analyze Illustrations, Determine Author’s Point of View
<i>The Girl Who Drank the Moon</i>	Kelly Barnhill	2017 Newbery Medal	5-12	Make Inferences, Analyze How Structure Contributes to Meaning of the Text
<i>Kent State</i>	Deborah Wiles	2021 Odyssey Award Winner	7-12	Compare and Contrast Point of View; Analyze Character, Event, and Idea Development
<i>Firekeeper’s Daughter</i>	Angeline Boulley	2022 Walter Dean Myers Award, Teen Category	9-12	Analyze Character Development, Make Inferences

<i>Just Mercy (Adapted for Young Adults): A True Story of the Fight for Justice</i>	Bryan Stevenson	2019 Flora Stieglitz Straus Award for Older Readers	9-12	Identify and Discuss Author’s Point of View, Determine Central Ideas
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**Model Strategic Reading**

Read-alouds are essentially mentor texts that allow for students to listen to the most fluent reader in the room—the teacher (Laminack, 2017). Outside of read-alouds, students rarely hear a well-written text read from beginning to end by someone with such familiarity and respect (Laminack, 2017). Moreover, students can develop favorable feelings toward reading the more teachers read aloud (Marchessault & Larwin, 2014). As teachers read aloud, they should engage in “think-alouds”, or model their thinking out loud, to demonstrate proficient thinking that caters to students’ specific literacy needs (Fisher et al., 2020).

In primary grades, incorporating authentic read-aloud experiences is more likely to spark student motivation than teaching phonics in isolation (Trelease, 2009). As teachers model phonetic decoding strategies during read-alouds, they should also concentrate on the prosodic elements of reading, such as pacing, inflection, mood, and intensity, in order to draw students into the story (Johnston, 2016; Laminack, 2017; Layne, 2015; Morrison & Włodarczyk, 2009). When reading with expression and animated voices, teachers are sure to captivate students’ attention and imagination.

As students grow older and become more proficient readers, they are less likely to engage in regular read-aloud experiences in school (Laminack, 2017; Layne, 2015; Serafini & Giorgis, 2003; Trelease, 2019). In light of pressure to focus on standardized test preparation in upper grades, teachers should know that reading aloud has been proven to increase standardized test scores (Anderson et al., 1985; Elley; 1992). Students can often listen and comprehend texts at a much higher level than they can by reading the text themselves, which is even more reason to continue reading aloud as students grow older (Layne, 2015; Trelease, 2019). Even in high school and beyond, educators can use read-alouds with rich subject matter to support vocabulary development, comprehension, and academic growth (Massey, 2015; Richardson, 2000). Finally, it is important to remember that older students enjoy being read to just as much as younger students (Freeman et al., 2011; Serafini & Giorgis, 2003; Trelease, 2019).

No matter the grade level, teachers should also employ effective comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading to support understanding. Text functions vary depending on genre and are written for distinct purposes. As teachers read aloud, they should demonstrate *how* and *why* literary and nonfiction text structures nurture a reader’s ability to understand the text on a deeper level (Wright, 2018). Comprehension strategies will vary in complexity but are necessary no matter the context or grade level. For example, in accordance with the Common Core State Standards, second graders could compare two or more versions of the same story while twelfth graders might analyze and evaluate multiple versions of the same story ((NGA & CSSO, 2010).

**Before** reading, it is important that students understand the purpose(s) for reading (Fisher et al., 2004). Read-alouds not only establish students’ background knowledge but also activate any existing schema (Johnston, 2016; Kaefer, 2020; Laminack, 2017). As students listen to read-alouds, they are strengthening their cultural knowledge and understandings of the world around them (Kesler et al., 2020; Wright, 2018). Take the time to inquire about students’ prior experiences and encourage them to make personal connections and predictions related to the text.

**During** the read-aloud, students can continue building upon their existing knowledge by making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections (Marchessault & Larwin, 2014; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). Engage in teacher “think alouds” to model making connections, as well as

more complex reading comprehension strategies like inferencing and visualizing (Johnston, 2016; Marchessault & Larwin, 2014; Lapp et al, 2008). Visualization is crucial, especially when reading aloud chapter books or texts with few illustrations (Layne, 2015). Interactive anchor charts, vocabulary word walls, drawing pictures, and even role-playing will help strengthen students' comprehension during read-alouds.

*After* reading aloud, students should respond to the text (Johnston, 2016; Hancock, 2008; Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009). Read-alouds often elicit students' uncertainties and revelations, and they should be given time to understand and communicate them, either through written, verbal, or artistic expression (Trelease, 2019). Aside from the traditional paper and pencil methods, teachers should utilize available classroom technology when prompting reader response (Clarke, 2014; Lee, 2012). The following reader response activities can be adapted for any grade level: think-pair-share collaboration, illustrating big ideas/main ideas, recording FlipGrid reflection videos, writing a letter to the author, or participating in service-learning projects.

### **Make It Interactive**

As teachers model intentional reading behaviors before, during, and after read-alouds, students become an integral part of the reading experience, even if they are not actually reading the text themselves. Traditional teacher read-alouds position students as passive listeners, whereas interactive read-alouds encourage the involvement of both students and teachers (Fisher et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 2020; Johnston, 2017; Wright, 2018). As students take charge and interact with the text and each other, their ideas expand and evolve (Braid & Finch, 2015). Students can learn just as much from each other as they do from their teachers.

Dialogue is the foundation for making teacher read-alouds more interactive and should occur before, during, and after reading the text (Fisher et al., 2004). The teacher assumes the role of "facilitator" and enables students to actively think about and control the conversations (Braid & Finch, 2015; Wright, 2018). When sharing picture books, students should be discussing the various facets of the book. The cover, title, endpapers, illustrations, and text are all components that contribute to the overall meaning of the book and should not be ignored (Braid & Finch, 2015). Students should autonomously draw their own conclusions and voice them openly.

As the facilitator of student discussions, teachers should anticipate students' reactions to the text and prepare thought-provoking, open-ended prompts to spark conversation. Likely, every question posed while reading aloud is related to a necessary reading skill, such as sequencing events, identifying main ideas or making inferences (Layne, 2015). Open-ended questions encourage students to think critically and will gauge their comprehension on a deeper level (Johnston, 2017).

Questions beginning with *what*, *where*, and *why* can encourage students to express their own thoughts rather than regurgitate one precise answer (Johnston, 2015; Laminack, 2019; Lane & Wright, 2007). "What did you think?" or "How did that make you feel?" are simple, yet powerful questions to facilitate discussions (Neumann, 2009; Trelease, 2019). It is important to note that teachers should not be the only ones to pose questions; students should generate and share their own (Laminack, 2017).

### **Promote Vocabulary Acquisition and Oral Language Development**

An interactive read-aloud is a teaching tool that directly impacts vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary is not built through skills practice but through authentic experiences (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Students encounter more complex words through books and dialogic reading than through spoken language, therefore, their vocabularies increase more through read-aloud experiences than through casual conversation (Senechal et al., 1996; Trelease, 2019). As teachers plan for read-alouds,

they should brainstorm content-specific, valuable, and unusual words that can be highlighted during class discussions (Johnston, 2017; Laminack, 2017; Lane & Wright, 2007).

Reading-aloud fuels listening and thinking growth (Fisher et al., 2020). Since listening comprehension levels nurture and surpass silent reading comprehension levels (Layne, 2015; Trelease, 2019) texts above students' independent and instructional levels are favorable for read-alouds (Layne, 2015). Layne (2015) coined this idea as the act of "listening up" (p. 55). As students "listen up", they are exposed to vocabulary, fictional elements, and informational text structures that are more advanced than those offered in grade-level texts (Layne, 2015).

Listening to these words being read aloud is not enough for students; they must have time to actively process the new language (Lane & Wright, 2017; Wright, 2018). To actively process newly acquired vocabulary, students need opportunities to manipulate those words in various ways. Younger students could practice using the words in complete sentences, discuss synonyms and antonyms, and illustrate or role-play words. Older students could analyze root words and affixes, practice identifying and using context clues, and interpret figures of speech.

Simply put, the more words students hear, the more words they learn. The number of words students hear and can understand, otherwise known as receptive vocabulary, are significantly higher than their expressive vocabulary, the words they actually use (Beck and McKeown, 2001). Reading aloud, combined with student-centered discussions that articulate newly acquired language, reinforces necessary oral skills (Santoro et al., 2008). Like the expression, "Rome wasn't built in a day," neither is vocabulary acquisition and oral language development. It is a gradual process that takes time to develop and read-alouds can make the process more enjoyable for all involved.

### Closing Thoughts

Reading-aloud is "a simple act with magnificent and complex results" (Gurdon, 2019, p. xvi). While teaching in a culturally and academically diverse classroom, I prioritized read-alouds every day. Whether I was reading aloud picturebooks or chapter books, my students could expect every class period to start out with a read-aloud. Read-alouds quickly became a class time favorite, and for that short period of time every day, we were immersed in a shared reading experience that brought us together as a classroom community. I noticed my students were not only excited for read-alouds but were more motivated to read independently and share their books with me and with each other. My goal to develop lifelong readers unfolded right before my eyes, and I have never felt prouder. When prioritized and utilized properly, read-alouds endorse tremendous literacy growth and achievement. Reading aloud is not a luxury that should be afforded only on special occasions; it is an indispensable tool that expands beyond classic storytime and plants the seed for a lifetime of reading enjoyment and success.

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