

The Reading Process

Teachers can easily optimize the use of reading materials with students by utilizing the three-part framework of the reading process to plan for and facilitate learning. To do this, break reading assignments into three comprehension-building components: before, during, and after reading. It is important to note that what teachers and students do during each of these stages during the reading process is crucial to student learning.

Before Reading

As the teacher prepares for a student reading experience, he or she should carefully read the text ahead of time to determine how to best prepare students for the reading task, being mindful to not overly scaffold or “frontload” the text for students prior to the actual reading task. Leaving a “just right” degree of challenge allows students to grapple with the text and draw their own conclusions, which is an important skill highlighted in the Common Core State Standards. Use before-reading time to purposefully set students up for the selected reading in order to allow them to take ownership of their reading experience and be ready to create meaning as they read. Prior to beginning a reading assignment, the teacher may engage students through a variety of activities so that they can successfully enter the reading task. Constructing before-reading activities that match the students’ strengths and needs, address the demands of the text, and consider the instructional context requires careful teacher preparation and includes choices such as generating student interest in the topic, activating prior knowledge/experience or building background knowledge, and setting the purpose for reading.

Teachers who motivate students and create interest prior to assigning the reading can actually improve their students’ overall comprehension. Students who are motivated to read a particular text are more engaged and actively involved in the process of learning than those who are unenthusiastic about reading. Motivated readers are also more likely to have better long-term recall of what they read.

Teachers can motivate students by addressing their prior knowledge and stimulating their curiosity about the topic. Knowing students’ current knowledge on a topic makes it easier to activate that knowledge and then build on it during reading. The mind holds information in the form of frameworks called schemata, and as we learn new information, we store it in frameworks that link new learning to what we already know. Teachers who build on and activate students’ prior knowledge and experience before reading prepare students to more efficiently process, sort, and comprehend the new information that they read. For students who do not have the critical background knowledge necessary to enter into a text with meaning, the teacher may use the before-reading time to briefly share significant information that is not provided by the text and is essential to set the context or concept for the reader.

Prior to reading, teachers can prepare students to be strategic readers by helping them set a purpose for their reading. There are a number of different purposes that readers have for a reading assignment such as to understand a new literary concept, to identify literary devices in a text, to learn new vocabulary, to summarize the information, and so on. Students need to have a purpose in mind as they read. Students utilize all their strategies during reading to create meaning, but a purpose for reading helps students attend to particular aspects of how they are reading and comprehending that text. Once a purpose is established, students read and respond to the text with that focus in mind.

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Sometimes before reading, teachers find that they must present a concept or directly teach several academic or content-specific vocabulary words that are not supported contextually. Therefore, language arts teachers may also use the before-reading time to introduce that key concept or critical, selected vocabulary prior to reading. This information is often shared in a brief introduction before the students dive into the text. Teachers only scaffold what is absolutely necessary so that students can successfully negotiate the text reading. In doing so, teachers facilitate students' comprehension and fluency as they read.

Finally, as students prepare to read, teachers may coach students into a metacognitive awareness of their reading strategies. Teachers prompt students to note what they are thinking and doing as they are reading. Developing metacognitive awareness allows students to better understand the strategies they use during effective reading and meaning construction. It also enables students to take control of their own learning thereby developing more independent readers and learners, a goal emphasized by the Common Core State Standards' College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading. Within these Anchor Standards for Reading, students "read and comprehend literary and informational texts independently and proficiently." Creating opportunities for students to demonstrate independence as they engage in before-reading activities is crucial to students' academic success (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers 2010).

At this point, it is important to note that before-reading activities are limited when the teacher engages students in a close reading of a text. Close reading is done with a short, grade-level challenging text where the text itself becomes the "teacher." Therefore, the "frontloading" or pre-teaching of the text during close reading is minimal, and, instead, the teacher leads the students into digging out the layers of meaning on their own through several repeated readings of the text and well-selected, thought-provoking questions that probe for students' understanding. Therefore, most of the following before-reading activities listed below would not be a part of a close reading experience. However, even in close reading sessions, the teacher may recognize that before a close reading of a particular text, students might need essential background information to understand the context or meaning of the selected text.

The activities and/or questions selected to use before reading differ depending on the text selected, the students' strengths/needs and prior knowledge, and the identified purpose/focus for reading. Most often, teachers employ these activities before a shared, interactive read-aloud text or as a part of a small, instructional reading group time. During independent reading with self-selected texts, students set themselves up for reading based on the many strategies they have learned.

Before-Reading Activities

Examples of before-reading activities are as follows:

- Have students scan any text features that accompany the text (e.g., illustrations, images, or captions). *Look at the illustration on page 6. What do you think this passage will be about?*
- Have students preview for chapter titles. *Are the chapters numbered or are they named? Will this change how you read the passage?*

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- Encourage students to skim the text to activate prior knowledge. *What do you already know about Greek mythology?*
- Preview only essential unknown vocabulary that is not morphologically or contextually supported within the text. *Let's discuss the meaning of earnest. Do you think the double meaning of this word will be important in this book?*
- Activate and build on students' prior knowledge/experience about the text's topic or build critical background knowledge about the topic. *What do you know about dystopian societies? What other texts have we read with an unreliable narrator?*
- Work with students to generate a few guiding questions to consider while reading. *From what point of view is this story told? How will this character change from the beginning to the end of this story based on _____?*
- Briefly allow the students to predict some of the possible plot developments. *Look at the description of the story from the cover. What are some things that you expect to happen? What do you think will happen to the main character? Do you think the title gives away the ending? Why or why not?*
- Converse with students to develop a purpose or focus for their reading. *As you read, note especially how the main character develops over the story. Which events or individuals impact this character?*

During Reading

During this stage of the reading, students read text, ask and answer questions (either self-generated or teacher-generated), monitor their comprehension of the text, consider their purpose for reading, visualize the information, and integrate new learning into their existing knowledge from various texts, concepts, and contexts. Most often, students are engaged in answering questions while they read. Proficient readers self-question as they read to make sure they understand the reading material. In addition, students search for the answers to questions they may have generated prior to reading. As students process the text, they begin to infer what the author intended and begin to summarize and analyze the specific details in the information provided. They also look for textual evidence for the questions they must answer.

Students are involved in monitoring and regulating their reading strategies while they are actively reading. If a section of the text is confusing, students problem solve by rereading the section, use fix-up strategies to clear up any confusions, or adjust the speed of reading to suit their purposes or to match the difficulty of the text. Thus, students modify or self-correct as needed to successfully access the content being presented. As a significant component of monitoring, students also determine or clarify the meaning of unknown words as they actively read. If they do not know what a word means, they may attempt to employ word-meaning strategies as they attend to context clues or word parts to decode the meaning of the word. As students address vocabulary needs, they also observe the text structure and features as they read, which helps them organize the new information and identify main ideas.

During reading, teachers can refocus students' attention on the objectives of the reading task established during the before-reading activities. Students may adjust their processing and thinking based on the information they are reading and on their prior knowledge.

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Proficient readers actively work to create mental images during reading that represent the concepts in the reading material. Language arts teachers may converse with students about the mental images they create as they read and how visualization helps them better comprehend the text. This strategy promotes greater reader recall of the information and fully engages that student in the reading process.

In addition, while students are reading and visualizing, they are in the process of integrating the new information they are learning into their existing schemata. Therefore, language arts teachers should be actively involved in helping students make connections between what they already know and what they are learning. This thinking prepares them for the synthesis of the information.

During-Reading Activities

Examples of during-reading activities are as follows:

- Prompt students to utilize known “fix-up” strategies when they encounter a confusing part in the text. *What can you try to help yourself? I’m not sure what is meant by “fortune’s fool,” so let’s reread those lines, and look for text clues to help us better understand this phrase.*
- Encourage students use word meaning strategies to determine the meaning of unknown words. *What is a prospector? Do you see a chunk or part of this word that you know what it means? What clues are there in the text to help you figure out what this word means?*
- Encourage students to monitor and regulate their reading. *What is the significance of Anne’s family traveling to Bath?*
- Model for students how to self-question to monitor their understanding. *Can I explain what the author means in this paragraph? Let me reread to clarify.*
- Coach students as they work to identify text evidence that supports their responses as they answer questions. *Why did Priscilla react as she did in this part of the text? How do you know?*
- Observe how the author organized the text or a portion of the text. *How did the author use a flashback to give us important information about the main character?*
- Support students in making and/or adjusting predictions during reading. *Last week, we read a fable. In this new fable, what lesson do you think this character will learn?*
- Encourage students to make connections between ideas, new information, and prior knowledge. *How does this theme develop over the course of the novel?*
- Build on students’ prior knowledge. *You already know that a plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Let’s see how this author orders the plot elements and why.*
- Pose higher-level questions that require the students to infer from the text. *Why does the author describe her with masculine characteristics?*
- Model for students how to infer author’s intentions. *What does the author want us to understand about family in this passage? How did you infer that from the reading?*
- Discuss visual images after reading a short text section. *Let’s stop and picture what the scene at the ball may have looked like based on the details that the author gave us in the text. What do you “see” in your mind?*

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After Reading

Students expand their understanding after reading the text. Again, this processing and conversing can happen within small group instruction, whole class instruction, or after a close reading session. During this final stage, students contemplate the text, clarify ideas, refine their thinking, make inferences and draw conclusions, and synthesize and evaluate the new information. After reading, the teacher engages students through follow-up experiences where they have the opportunity to reflect on their reading. Teachers revisit the text with students through a variety of conversations and experiences that require readers to make inferences from what the text says explicitly, allowing them to modify their understanding, make connections between different ideas and concepts, and draw their own conclusions based on evidence in the text.

After-Reading Activities

Examples of after-reading activities are as follows:

- Have students reread to review information and locate specific information. *What are Lysander's first lines in the play?*
- Have students confirm predictions. *You were right that the conflict between these characters would be resolved.*
- Discuss what was understood, as a class, and share information. *Now, you understand that plot does not have to follow a strict sequence. Authors purposefully modify the order of plot elements to create meaning in their works.*
- Encourage students to clarify meaning. *Who can explain the scene taking place on the scaffold? What is the significance of the characters' physical locations?*
- Have students summarize what was read. *Who can summarize the relationship between Huck and Jim?*
- Invite students to synthesize new information. *Now I understand where the saying "Slow and steady wins the race" comes from.*
- Model for students how to analyze different elements of the text. *Let's examine this text from a historical perspective. How does that change your interpretation of the text?*
- Remind students to evaluate the quality or accuracy of the text. *How trustworthy is this narrator? How can you tell?*
- Have students generate new questions. *Let's examine this text from a historical perspective. How does that change your understanding?*