

Literacy

Reading is one of the most crucial skills teachers hope to give their students, and yet it is also the subject many of us feel the most ill-prepared to teach. As skilled readers, we have difficulty breaking down what it is that we *do* when we read and yet explicit instruction and strategies are just what struggling and dependent readers require. Don't worry! There is no shortage of valuable and teacher friendly information out there providing guidance as to what good readers do and how we can help our students achieve.



In this section, Jessie Gerson outlines the basic meaning of literacy, various Kentucky literacy initiatives, and offers some practical advice and jumping off points towards incorporating reading and reading skills in the classroom.

LITERACY: Helping Students Achieve as Readers and Thinkers

The Range and Impact of Literacy Levels on Your Classroom

- Although the specifics depend on where you teach and the students you work with, within your classroom you can expect to have students who read at, below, and substantially below grade level.
- Students who read well below grade level are often referred to a *struggling readers* or *dependent readers*. Students who read on grade level but choose not to do so are often referred to as *reluctant readers*.
- The impact of this range of readers on your class will be myriad. For example, students who struggle to read often engage in a range of coping behaviors to compensate. Some of these coping mechanisms can take the form of disruptive behavior and denigrating comments. (“I’m bored!” “This is retarded!” “I’m not doing this.”) Other times, students have become skilled at hiding their struggles making it difficult for you as a teacher to identify their reading problems and give them the support they need. It is helpful to be aware that in this case, as in many others, students who misbehave are often students for whom school is a challenging and often humiliating place. If a student consistently refuses to engage in work or tries to divert you with problematic behavior it may be a red flag academically.
- It is both difficult and crucial to take into account student reading levels when planning assignments both within the classroom and for homework. It is important to help struggling readers experience the success they desperately need to boost their reading confidence but it is also important to challenge the other readers in your classroom. Later in this chapter we will go over some possible ways of accomplishing that.
- It is also incredibly important not to embarrass students. This is true (of course!) all the time, but it is doubly important when dealing with struggling readers who are often already deeply insecure about their literacy. Make sure that you are not inadvertently putting kids into unpleasant situations through traditional activities such as round-robin reading or picking them to read aloud when they appear to not be paying attention. Reading should not be a source of punishment or humiliation.

Reading programs in place in Kentucky.

- At many schools in Kentucky all teachers are responsible for teaching one period of literacy, even if that is not their content area. If you are in a school where that

is not the case it is still useful to be familiar with the programs with which many of your kids will be working.

- **Corrective Reading** is a scripted reading program designed for students from 4th through 12th grade who are reading at least one year below grade level and is often used in ECE classrooms. The three goals of the program are to build fluency (speed of reading), accuracy (correctly identifying words and sounds) and, to some degree, improving comprehension. When you hear teachers talk about a reading program where they read verbatim from a teacher guide book and have to snap their fingers and make various physical cues to students they are often talking about Corrective Reading.
- **Read 180** is a program for struggling readers which combines books of different lexiles (reading levels) as well as computer programs. The program works through stations and through direct teacher instruction. Students receive mini-lessons on various decoding and comprehension skills. They then cycle through the centers where they work with a computer, in a small group with a teacher, and read independently.
- **Read XL** is a program for older struggling readers or for students who are reading only slightly below grade level. It pairs low-lexile, high-interest texts with a workbook which focuses on building reading skills and comprehension.
- **Every1Reads** is a part of a Louisville-wide effort to have every child in JCPS reading on grade level within the next four years. It pairs an adult reading friend/tutor/mentor with a child who is a struggling reader.
- **9 Good Habits For All Readers** organizes the research on what good readers. It instructs struggling readers on how to use those skills, has them practice those skills on accessible texts with some scaffolding and then removes the scaffolding and has the student attempt to practice the skills independently. 9 Good Habits includes a textbook that provides an overview of the skills and stories with which to practice. The concept is great but the stories are often boring for middle schoolers.
- **Rewards:** Is a short duration, intensive program for struggling readers that focuses almost exclusively on fluency and decoding skills. It is excellent at breaking down words into sections, and teaching recognition of common words parts and vowel combinations.

What are the basic skills of readers?

- To understand what your struggling readers need it is helpful to understand what sophisticated readers do to build comprehension.
- According to best practice in reading, independent readers:
 1. Visualize (make mental picture or sensory images)
 2. Connect (link to their own experience, to events in the world, to other readings.)
 3. Question (actively wonder, surface uncertainties, interrogate the text and the author.)
 4. Infer (predict, hypothesize, interpret, draw conclusions.)
 5. Evaluate (determine importance, make judgments, weigh values.)
 6. Analyze (notice text structure, author's craft, purpose, theme, point of view.)

7. Recall (retell, summarize, remember information.)
 8. Monitor (actively keep track of their thinking, adjust strategies to text at hand.)
- If even your most skilled readers are fluent in all of these skills then you are a fortunate teacher! Actually, every reader can improve (even us!) and this attitude can help make a classroom a safer learning space from reluctant readers up through the most proficient.
 - When teaching these strategies the key is to be extremely explicit. Independent readers often do these things naturally, struggling or dependent readers need you to show them *how* to do it. Modeling, guided practice, and think alouds are just some of the possible ways to do so.

More on Prior Knowledge ...What is it? How Do I Activate It?

- Prior knowledge refers to the understanding we bring to a text and the way we integrate that understanding with the material we are interacting with. Imagine trying to read a book on astrophysics. Even if the language itself was at your reading level it would be almost impossible to make sense of it. You would have no prior knowledge of the subject at hand. One of our jobs as teachers is to help create and activate prior knowledge.
- Another name for this is **Schema Theory** or the idea that “each child brings a unique set of experiences and knowledge, called *schemata*, to reading.” (Robb, 14)
- When helping students access a text it is helpful to first ascertain their level of prior knowledge and help them make linkages to the reading material or, if they have little prior knowledge of the subject, providing background information to aid in their comprehension of the text.

Reading Techniques for Class

- It is one thing to understand what makes a good reader and another thing entirely to incorporate that knowledge into your classroom. There are numerous excellent books devoted to just that (see suggested reading) but the goal here is to outline just a few tips and general ideas.
- Key to success in literacy is pairing children with texts that reach them. This means different things in different situations.
 1. When I read aloud to my class I pick books above many of my students independent reading levels but that are deeply engaging and relevant to their lives. One book with which I have had particular success as read aloud text is “Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff.” Its important to think not just about a students independent reading level but also about their independent thinking level.
 2. Although sustained silent reading is often deemed crucial to student success it is a tricky thing to accomplish when working with struggling and dependent readers. The ultimate goal is to pair students with books at their independent reading level or reading stanine while finding books that will hold their interest. One problem I have had when working with students with low reading stanines is that books at their independent reading level often seem

- “babyish” to them. Honest conversation and the frequent use of picture books as teaching tools in class is one way to partially circumvent this problem.
3. Students will be motivated to read when they believe that the material is relevant and when they believe that they can successfully read it. Students shut down when they cannot access a text.
- Here are a few reading techniques to use in class to help students at all levels get engaged and meet with success:
 1. *Jigsaw Reading* involves breaking students into pairs or groups and then dividing a long or challenging text between those groups. Each group is responsible for becoming an “expert” on their section which they then teach to their classmates. This is also an excellent setting in which to practice reading strategies such as predicting, visualizing, and making connections.
 2. *Anticipations Guides* are a quick and enjoyable way to help students engage with a text. (See Anticipation Guide at end of section.) Ask students to respond true or false to a series of thought-provoking statements relating to the text you are about to read. The goal is to provide statements for which there is no absolute right or wrong. An example might work as follows: In an anticipation guide for *The Diary of Anne Frank* a statement might read “True or False—It is wrong to disobey the laws of the government.” The anticipation guides activate prior knowledge and get students ready to engage intellectually and emotionally with a text.
 3. *Readers’ Theatre* can function in many different ways but at its most basic, it involves students dividing into groups and acting out sections of a text. This is a great way to engage kinesthetic learners and forces students to visualize and engage. Lots of fun!
 4. *Think Alouds* can be an incredibly helpful lead in to a mini-lesson on strategies and eventually a great way for students to demonstrate their own mastery. A think aloud makes explicit the usually implicit ways good readers tackle a text. You will read a text aloud modeling good prosody and then begin to intersperse the reading with your own thoughts involving things like clarification, vocabulary, connections and any other techniques you are trying to teach. Warning! It’s important to practice the think aloud in advance.
 5. *Annotating* the text is a wonderful skill and one that many of us perfected in college but don’t think to teach our students. This can be as easy as having students go through a text and put a question mark next to content that confuses them; smiley faces to mark material that they like, an exclamation point to mark something they think is important. This is not only a study skill that will carry over into their other subjects, it is also a great way teaching kids that reading is an *active* process rather than the passive sounding out of words.

Teaching a child to read with confidence is one of the most lasting gifts you can give as a teacher. There is a wealth of research and reading material on this topic to help you figure out how best to accomplish this goal. Good luck!

Glossary of Terms: Literacy

- **Comprehension** – Refers to students’ ability to understand the meaning of a text in addition to being able to sound out the words that make it up.
- **Decoding** – Refers to a readers ability to connect word sounds correctly.
- **Dependent Readers** – Refers to readers who struggle to read grade level texts without support.
- **Fluency** – Refers to the accuracy and speed with which a person can read.
- **Lexiles** – Refer to the level of a reader and to the level of a text. Scholastic suggests thinking of lexiles as a reading thermometer. Once you know a student’s reading level (lexile) you can pair them with a book at the same level. Lexile.com allows you to learn the lexile of most young adult fiction.
- **Phonics** – Refers to the sounds letters make both individually and in combination with one another. When people discuss using phonics to teach students to read this refers to an emphasis on sounding out, chunking and decoding words.
- **Reluctant Readers** – Refers to readers who are able to read at or near grade level and yet do not read enthusiastically or willingly.
- **Sustained silent reading (SSR)** – A form of school-based [recreational reading](#), or [free voluntary reading](#), where students read silently in a designated time period every day in school . An underlying assumption of SSR is that students learn to read by reading a lot. Successful models of SSR typically allow students to select their own books and require neither testing for comprehension nor book reports. (taken from

Wikipedia)

- **Think Aloud** – Refers to the techniques of making reading strategies explicit by reading out loud while inserting the thought processes independent readers engage in to make sense of a text.

- **Whole Language** – A term used to describe an instructional philosophy which focuses on reading as an activity best taught in a broader context of meaning. Rather than focusing on reading as a mechanical skill, it is taught as an ongoing part of every student's existing language and life experience. Building on language skills each student already possesses, reading and writing are seen as a part of a broader "whole language" spectrum. (taken from Wikipedia)
- **Word Calling** – Refers to students who guess at words based on insufficient evidence. (i.e. the first two letters or the general context.)

Suggested Reading for Literacy

Allen, Janet. *Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4-12*.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*.

Keene, Ellin Oliver, and Susan Zimmerman. *Mosaic of Thought. Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*.

Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read What Teacher's Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6-12*.

Robb, Laura. *Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching that Improves Comprehension and Thinking*.