Just Think of the Possibilities: Formats for Reading Instruction in the Elementary Classroom

Kimberly Kimbell-Lopez

For a printer-ready version of this article, click here. Use your Web browser's "back" button to return to the Reading Online site.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe six basic formats that can be used to teach reading in the elementary classroom: shared reading, read-aloud, guided reading, Readers Theatre, sustained silent reading, and literature circles. Each format is discussed by describing the focus of instruction, suggestions for implementation strategies, and examples of materials that could be utilized. For each approach, a description of the focus of instruction is offered, along with suggestions for implementation, examples of instructional materials, and a list of print resources.

Related Postings from the Archives

- Picture Book Read-Alouds by Denise Johnson
- Literature Circles/Club de Lecture by Maureen Baron
- A Survey of Sustained Silent Reading Practices in Seventh-Grade Classrooms by Nancy M. Nagy et al.

Shared Reading | Read-Aloud | Guided Reading | Readers Theatre | Sustained Silent Reading | Literature Circles | Frameworks | References

---

In the elementary classroom, a variety of approaches or formats are used to instruct children in how to read. Merriam-Webster Online defines format as "the general plan of organization, arrangement, or choice of material." In terms of reading instruction, the term "format" correlates well with the many different options that can be used to most effectively meet the literacy needs of our students. The formats that will be discussed in this article are shared reading, read-aloud, guided reading, Readers Theatre, sustained silent reading, and literature circles.

Each of these formats differs in terms of the number of students involved, the amount and type of materials used, the structural elements included in the lesson, and the specific focus or content emphasized. Some of the options for decision making that must be addressed once the reading format is selected are identified below:

How are the students grouped?

- heterogeneous versus homogeneous (visit Education World for a discussion)
- whole group, small group, or one-on-one (Education Place features an article)

What type of reading materials will be used?

- big book or text written on chart paper or overhead (see the Patchogue-Medford Literacy

Initiative for more information)
- guided reading sets (visit Suite 101.com for a discussion)
- novel sets by theme (the SESD Teacher Resource page features a list of themes)
- picture books (go to the New York Public Library site for suggestions)

What is the focus of the lesson?

- modeling of concepts about print (North Central Regional Educational Library provides a definition)
- reading for enjoyment (visit Saskatchewan Learning for some guidelines)
- monitoring student use of reading strategies (go to the NCTE site to access an article)
- modeling how to use a particular strategy using think aloud (Suite 101.com features a discussion)

Using a combination of these six reading formats, it is possible for students to have multiple interactions with a text and thereby to practice and apply word recognition, fluency, and reading comprehension strategies. Morrow, Strickland, and Woo (1998, p. 82) have stated that grouping children in a variety of arrangements eliminates the stigmas attached to a single grouping system and allows children to interact with all others in the class. The amount of teacher or peer modeling of strategy use will vary depending on the particular format that is selected. Strickland (2002, online document) and Opitz (2000, online document) both expand on the concept of flexible grouping to facilitate the teaching of reading.

It is also important to consider which of the formats would be most developmentally appropriate based on the needs of individual children in the classroom. The International Reading Association (IRA) has produced a joint position statement with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) that includes a continuum of children's development in early reading and writing (IRA/NAEYC, 1998, online document).

Varying Instruction Using These Formats

The students in our classrooms today vary greatly in their needs and ability levels. As a result, it is necessary to provide multiple opportunities for students to read so that they can develop their ability to read and comprehend text. Teacher or peer modeling of different reading formats can help to ensure that students see effective application of strategies, and that they have the opportunity to practice and apply these strategies within the context of real reading. The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) identifies 10 research-based principles for improving reading achievement. Addressed within these principles is the need for primary-level instructional activities to promote growth in word recognition through instructional activities that include repeated reading of text, guided reading and writing, strategy lessons, reading aloud with feedback, and conversations about texts children have read. CIERA (1998) also states that proficient reading in third grade and above is sustained and enhanced by programs that adhere to four fundamental features:

1. Deep and wide opportunities to read

2. The acquisition of new knowledge and vocabulary, partially through wide reading but also through explicit attention to acquiring networks of new concepts through instruction

3. An emphasis on the influence that the kinds of text (e.g., stories versus essays) and the ways writers organize particular texts has on understanding

4. Explicit attention to assisting students in reasoning about text

Duffy-Hester (1999, p. 489) states that through reading aloud, students hear quality literature read to them; through guided reading, they read materials written on their instructional level with teacher guidance and minimal support; through shared reading, they read materials that may be too difficult for them to read independently with the support of other students and the teacher; and through independent reading, they read easy materials. One other format, literature circles, makes it possible to transform power relationships in the classroom, to make students both more responsible for and more in control of their own education, to develop lifelong readers, and to nurture a critical, personal stance toward ideas (Daniels, 1994, p. 31). In addition, the use of Readers Theatre provides an opportunity to enhance comprehension of text (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1999, p. 204) as well as to create interest in and enthusiasm for learning (Ruddell, 1999, p. 236).

How Much Time Is Enough?

An issue raised by many educators is the amount of time that should be spent reading. In describing observations of more effective versus less effective teachers, Allington (2001) states that the more effective teachers had students reading for longer periods of time than the less effective teachers. Typically, the more effective teachers engaged their students in reading for 40 to 45 minutes per every hour allocated to reading instruction. In contrast, the less effective teachers had their students reading approximately 25 minutes of this one-hour block. The less effective teachers spent more time doing follow-up such as response activities, workbook exercises, story review, and vocabulary checks. Allington observed similar disparities in social studies and science classrooms where the more effective teachers had students reading two to three times as much material in these content areas as did the less effective teachers.

Allington (2001) discusses the fact that there is no exact time identified by research as being ideal for readers to develop proficiency in reading. He further states:

> Time spent reading, my preferred measure of volume, is important. The research does not provide clear evidence on whether one type of reading is better than another. In other words, increasing the volume of oral or silent or choral or paired reading or almost any combination of these has been shown to enhance achievement. It does seem reasonable that older and more experienced readers might read more often silently and beginning readers might more often read aloud. But as long as children and adolescents are reading, the type of reading seems less critical. (p. 35)

When considering the possibilities for reading instruction, remember the needs of the students in your classroom. What works best for one student might not necessarily work for another. When the possible formats for reading are varied, there is an increased probability that the student will receive an appropriate amount of skill and strategy instruction as well as the time and opportunity to practice reading in authentic contexts. In addition, the probability of pressing the "magic button" that turns a child on to reading is much greater.

Shared Reading

> Shared reading is a time when the entire class gathers together to share a variety of literacy experiences by reading and discussing a variety of texts (Fisher & Medvic, 2000, p. 3).

What Is Shared Reading?

Shared book experience is a reading format that is useful for developing a sense of story and narrative. It involves a daily time set aside for reading and rereading favorite rhymes, songs, poems, chants, and stories to and with children in order to demonstrate that reading is a pleasurable and meaningful experience (Butler & Turbill, 1987, p. 61). In shared reading, children participate in reading, learn critical concepts of how print works, and get the feel of learning

(Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 1). This format is a great way to share and demonstrate the pleasure of reading a good book with young children.

The Montgomery County Public School Department of Academic Programs provides an early literacy guide at their website that addresses basic elements of the shared reading activity. It features information focusing on conducting the shared reading session, procedures to follow, learning that can be observed, and ideas for after the shared reading activity. LingualLinks provides further information about using shared reading through a summary and guidelines for implementation. A third resource on shared reading is provided by the University of West Florida through its discussion Shared Reading: A Strategy That Leads Towards Better Readers. Specific topics that are addressed pertain to maintaining student interest in shared reading, selecting a lesson focus, choosing resources and materials, and creating your own shared reading lesson.

Cathy Corrado (May/June, 1999) discusses Shared Reading and Writing: Directing the Tour Through Text from *Perspectives in Education and Deafness: Practical Ideas for the Classroom and Community*. Corrado discusses how she uses the shared reading experience when working with deaf and hard-of-hearing second through fifth graders. As she reads a story, students are invited to read along silently or to sign along with her. She and her students look for main ideas and predict what will happen in the storyline as she teaches reading strategies and the basic concepts needed to decode print. She makes note of how repeated readings of a text can help all students develop confidence in their ability to read.

Familiarity With the Text

Students can join in shared reading as they become more familiar with the text, or in some cases listen as the rest of the class reads the story. Fisher and Medvic (2000, p. 29) state that familiarity supports learning to read, independence in reading, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary development, and love of learning. Eventually, most children join in with the shared reading once they have become familiar with the text. As the teacher reads aloud from the big book, the students are able to follow along or read along with her. The teacher models concepts about print through the left to right movement of text on the page, and the return sweep as the reader moves from top to bottom in the text. Students experience the inflections and rhythm of the teacher's voice when she foreshadows events in the text by lowering or raising her voice or by the pace in which she reads the story. Through subsequent readings, an understanding of capitalization and punctuation increases as the students begin to read along with the teacher. The shared reading introduces students to colorful language and presents new vocabulary and concepts in a safe and supportive atmosphere. Best of all, it scaffolds the student's learning experience so that eventually, each can go and read the book independently based on the shared-book experience.

Types of Books

McCracken and McCracken (1995) suggest that some of the books we read to children should be those that are easily memorized. Use of these types of books helps children to learn about how print works, about story structures, word recognition, and the fact that books can be a source of enjoyment as well as information. McCracken and McCracken (1995) suggest six types of books that provide these learning opportunities (pp. 41-64):

Rhythmic books. The rhythm of the text enables children to anticipate some of the words. An example would include Leland B. Jacobs book, *Good Night, Mr. Beetle* where each line follows the format, "Good night, _____," with a culminating line for "The moon's in the sky."

Repetitive books. Many books contain repetitive text by which children can easily learn and join in during that part of the reading. The classic story of the *Three Little Pigs* provides an example of repetition:

I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in.

Cumulative books. This type of text continually builds each page by repeating text from previous pages and adding a new line of text with each new page. For example, in the *House that Jack Built:*

This is the house that Jack built.
This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the rat, that ate the malt, that lay in the house that Jack built.

Basic sentence pattern books. In this type of book, a basic sentence pattern is used to provide support for the reader. For example, the basic pattern could be represented by, "This is my _____," which is repeated on every page with variations in the last blank of the sentence (i.e., dog, cat, etc.). Dick Bruna's *My Shirt Is White* and Lois Lenski's *Mr. Small* books provide examples of this type of book.

Two-part books. *Brown, Brown Bear, What do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr, is a good example of a two-part book. This type of text reads like a conversation in which a question is asked by one animal over two lines in the book, and a response from another animal is given with a subsequent two lines.

Information books. These books do not follow a storyline, but are instead full of information about content-related topics. Use of information books is a good way to support students as they learn vocabulary, facts, and concepts. Examples include *Antarctica* by Helen Cowcher, *Sharks* by Russel Freedman, and *Pumpkin, Pumpkin* by Jeanne Titherington.

Using information books as part of the shared reading activity also provides an opportunity to teach about tables of contents, reading tables, charts and diagrams, and the index and glossary. The use of these books also provides a support structure where children can easily practice and rehearse what they are learning about books, stories, story structures, language patterns, and language structures. For additional resources, the Montgomery County Public Library's website provides a listing organized by type that includes cumulative, repetitive, rhyme, and pattern books.

Print Resources for Shared Reading

Connections and Extensions

- Write the story, or a portion of the story on sentence strips so that students can retell or build the story in a pocket chart (McCracken & McCracken, 1995).
- Cover up key portions of the text to focus on vocabulary or graphophonic elements of particular words.
- Assign children roles by giving them index cards labeled with each character's name. The students then wear the role tag and act out the story as a creative drama activity (Fisher & Medvic, 2000).
- Have children write a big book that extends from the storyline by predicting what would happen next if the story were to continue.
- Use puppets for role-playing so that students can dramatize and

become the character (Fisher & Medvic, 2000).

Read-Aloud

> Three keys to the success of read-aloud is that it is fun, it is simple, and it is cheap (Trelease, 1989b).

A read-aloud session is a method framework often used by teachers to develop independent readers (Leu & Kinzer, 1999). Jim Trelease's *The New Read-Aloud Handbook* is a wonderful resource for teachers and parents. It provides information on getting started with read-alouds, along with a collection of recommended books. The read-aloud event involves social relationships among people--teachers and students, parents and children, and authors and readers (Morrow and O'Connor, 1995, p. 102). By participating in the read-aloud experience, children are able to see that print differs from speech and that it carries a message.

As part of the read-aloud, the teacher models good oral reading--expression and intonation--and introduces children to a variety of language patterns as well as new vocabulary and concepts. The enjoyment children receive from read-alouds sparks their desire to read for themselves in a way that worksheets can not (Campbell, 2001, p. 91). Reading aloud can easily be used as a way to model thinking aloud about what is being read and to highlight strategies that good readers use. This type of format is appropriate across all grade levels from kindergarten up to college.

For more information on how to do a read-aloud, the Montgomery County Public Schools' website addresses the rationale for using read-aloud, the most effective way to read aloud, procedures for implementation, and criteria for selection. Another resource, which features activities written by Teresa Matthews and used with fifth graders is provided by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute: Beyond R. L. Stine: Read-Aloud Books and Group Activities for Fifth Graders.

Guidelines

The National Education Association's website includes tips for reading aloud from the Public Broadcast System's *Between the Lions*. The Bank Street College of Education also provides helpful hints for reading tutors to follow when conducting read-aloud sessions.

Trelease (1989a), author of *The New Read-Aloud Handbook*, also offers some general guidelines to follow when reading aloud to your class:

1. Start with picture books and build to storybooks and novels. A sampling of recommended books can be found at a website hosted by Jim Trelease and Reading Tree Productions. The full *Treasury of Read-Alouds* can be found in the print version of *The New Read-Aloud Handbook*.

2 Practice the story ahead of time to get a feel for voice inflection and expression.

3. Adjust your voice tone and pace for exciting and suspenseful parts of the book.

In addition to a list of what should be done, Trelease also provides a list of what should not be done so that students are not turned off to the read-aloud experience:

1. Do not read books that you do not enjoy yourself.

2 Choose another book if the one selected turns out not to be a good choice.

3. If your students have seen the book as a movie or on television, then select another book. It is likely their interest will be diminished if they know the plot and outcome ahead of time.

In addition, when choosing books for read-aloud, try not to be influenced by the awards a book may have won. Awards such such as the Caldecott and Newbery are given for the quality of the writing, and how well a book might read aloud to an audience is not necessarily considered. Instead, select books that are recommended by children, such as those identified by the International Reading Association's Children's Choices book awards cosponsored with the Children's Book Council. For a list of other favorites, try out *Education World Online,* which features a list of book titles recommended by school principals to be used when reading aloud to children.

Don't Forget Informational Books

Remember to include information books when selecting the book for your read-aloud session. Moss (1995, pp. 122-123) identifies five reasons why it is important to read nonfiction books aloud.

1. It expands children's knowledge, thereby contributing to schema development, a critical factor in comprehension.

2 It sensitizes children to the patterns of exposition.

3. It provides excellent tie-ins to various curricular areas.

4. It promotes personal growth and moves children to social response.

5. It whets children's appetite for information, thus leading to silent, independent reading of this genre.

Through selection of information books that cover such topics as the rainforest, dinosaurs, World War II, and the Civil War, children are provided opportunities to explore the world around them. CreativeClassroomOnline hosts a page about nonfiction features, which discusses organizational features, language features, and the ways that reading nonfiction differs from reading other types of texts.

Interactive Read-Aloud

A variation of the read-aloud is the interactive read-aloud, which encourage verbal interaction with the text, peers, and teacher (Barrentine, 1996a; Campbell, 2001). The interactive read-aloud is an instructional practice that uses dialogue to assist and enable novices in the meaning-making process (Barrentine, 1996b). In addition to assisting meaning construction and developing shared meanings, interactive read-alouds can promote intimate familiarity with a story, enhance enjoyment of stories, allow for positive social interaction, and provide rehearsal of comprehension strategies (Barrentine, 1996b, p. 53). Interactive Read-aloud with First Grade ELLs discusses how one teacher used the read-aloud in her dual language classroom of language-minority students whose home language is Spanish.

The Development and Dissemination Schools Initiative, a five-year project of the New York City Board of Education's Office of English Language Learners and the Education Alliance at Brown University, features information on its website on how to adapt the interactive read-aloud in dual-language classrooms. This resource, Adapting the Interactive Read-Aloud, addresses the use of read-aloud with second-language learners and provides a description of the strategies that were used as part of the project during the 1999-2000 school year.

Print Resources for Read-Aloud

Connections and Extensions

- Take the time to discuss the book before reading each day, but also leave time at the end of the read-aloud session to do so as well. Go back and reread special sections of the book and talk about your students' different interpretations of the particular event. Invite them to talk about why a character reacted in a certain way.
- Provide opportunities for students to share their thoughts through journals writing. Encourage them to write about what was read, evaluate the material, ask questions about what is happening in the book, and make connections to self and connections to movies or other books.
- Have students reenact the story as a creative drama activity. For books that are longer, students can work in groups to select key events from the story to reenact.
- Listen to music that reflects the content or time period of the story.
- Embark on an Internet information search about the author or illustrator to learn more about each one. Many authors now have webpages that highlight their lives and books. The Children's Book Council features a webpage that provides links to a variety of authors and illustrators. Some authors have e-mail addresses listed at their websites for those who are interested to correspond them. For example, when visiting the website for Jane Yolen, there is an e-mail link that can be selected to send her a message.

Guided Reading

> It is through Guided Reading that teachers can show children how to read and can support children as they read (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 1).

In IRA's summary of the National Reading Panel Report, guided oral reading with feedback was found to positively impact word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension. The use of this format across grade levels was found to help children recognize new words, read with more accuracy, read with more ease, and understand what they were reading.

The teacher's goal during guided reading is to interest the children in the story, relate it to their experience, and provide a frame of meaning that will support problem solving (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 8). During the guided reading session, the teacher works with a small group of children who use similar reading processes and are able to read similar levels of text with support. The teacher introduces the book and ties it in to their prior knowledge. She then walks the students through the text, highlighting vocabulary and concepts they may come across when they read the book independently. As the students read the book softly to themselves, the teacher monitors individuals for evidence of reading strategies that are being applied, or in some cases, not applied.

During the session, one to two teaching points may be addressed (i.e., calling attention to a word in

context; locating and noticing specific features such as beginning or ending). The ultimate goal of the guided reading is for students to be able to read text independently and silently. A discussion of guided reading at the Montgomery County Public School's website provides additional information about the benefits, principles, materials, and evaluation procedures.

Patricia Cunningham's website details how guided reading is an integral part of her Four Blocks approach. In contrast to Fountas and Pinnell, Cunningham advocates the use of heterogeneous groups versus homogeneous groups when working with the guided reading groups. Cunningham uses a variety of partner, small group, and whole group formats in order to make the guided reading session as multilevel as possible. The students who meet in these groups change regularly and better readers are included who serve as models for the struggling readers.

Selecting the Text

A general rule of thumb when selecting texts for guided reading is that the children should be able to read the text with 90% or higher accuracy. A text that is within this range enables children to draw on their knowledge of visual as well as meaning and structure cues. When the student is reduced to simple word calling because the text is too difficult, then he or she becomes unable to construct meaning or to cross-check and self-monitor. Staying within the 90% range allows "children to sustain attention while problem solving an extended piece of text and, in doing so, build a system of strategies that they can use for reading other texts" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 9).

One key to the success of guided reading is the selection of books that are on the level of readers in the group. One website about leveled books [website no longer available] allows the user to search for books according to the reading recovery level or by title of book, author, imprint, or publisher. Other resources that allows readers to search an interactive database for leveled books include the Beaverton School District and Portland Public Schools websites. Selecting from a range of materials that includes fiction and nonfiction guarantees that children are also exposed to different types of text features.

The text selection should also be based on the focus of instruction for the lesson, which will be dependent on the interventions that are needed by each child. In other words, students will be placed in groups based on strategic behaviors that may they already have or may be missing or need additional work. This placement should then build on previous strengths to help improve weaknesses that have been noted during instructional activities. Carolyn Schmidt's website includes a discussion on strategies, minilessons, and assessment.

The Dynamic Aspect of Grouping

Another important aspect of guided reading is that the groups are dynamic (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), and constantly changing, based on the teacher's ongoing observation and assessment of each child. The teacher's use of running records for each child enables her to effectively monitor the student's use of reading strategies. The teacher keeps careful records of guided reading, including books read, running records, and any notes on specific reading behaviors.

What About the Rest of the Class?

The most common concern among teachers wishing to implement this format relates to what the rest of the class is doing when the teacher is working with the guided reading group. The answer is the use of literacy centers, which are ideal for classrooms at all levels of learning--not just primary but also intermediate levels. It is important to introduce the centers slowly so that learning routines and procedures can become established.

Kathy Shrock's Guide for Educators offers a listing of links for more information on possible literacy centers that can be used in the classroom. In addition, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) recommend a

variety of centers that can be managed using a workboard. The purpose of the workboard is to diagram the names of children in groups, along with names and pictures of routine tasks in the classroom, thereby providing a flexible way of rotating students through the centers. Fountas and Pinnell describe the use of an ABC center involving letter or word activities using magnetic letters, a listening center with a variety of stories on tape, a writing center where children's journals and other writing resources are stored, a drama center with puppets or other props to role play or act out the story, a poetry center with a box of poems the children have heard the teacher read or children have learned to read during shared reading, and a computer center where children can learn to write their own stories using publishing software or play games that extend and enrich language and literacy.

Print Resources for Guided Reading

Connections and Extensions

- Build on the grammar of the story and write a class big book using the format.
- Retell the story by acting out using puppets or other props.
- Draw a picture and write about your favorite part of the story.
- Make a list of interesting words (i.e., describing/adjective, action/verb, naming/noun, etc.) or high-frequency words that were found in the story. To reference lists of high-frequency words, the Dolch list can be found at The School Bell website.
- Look back through the book and write targeted words on chart paper (i.e., words ending in -ed, -s, -es, -ing; words beginning with certain sounds--sh, th, wh; different ways to say "said"--shouted, whispered).

Readers Theatre

> The Reader's Theater format offers a way for readers to participate in repeated readings in a meaningful and purposeful context (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999).

Readers Theatre is another way to enhance comprehension of text (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1999, p. 204) as well as to create interest in and enthusiasm for learning (Ruddell, 1999, p. 236). Readers Theatre is unlike a traditional play where students have costumes, sets, and have memorized lines. Instead, students read aloud from a script using their voices and facial expressions to share the story. This format provides an opportunity for students to develop fluency in reading through the multiple readings of the text, using expressiveness, intonation, and inflection when rehearsing the text. The Readers Theatre format offers a way for readers to participate in repeated readings in a meaningful and purposeful context (Martinez, Roser, and Strecker, 1998/1999). Carrick (2001, online document) provides a description of Readers Theatre along with sources for scripts and for information on implementation, additional classroom applications, and assessment.

Types of Scripts

In this format, readers can develop a script after reading a literature selection, which helps to draw their attention to story elements, thus developing an understanding of characters, setting, problem,

key events, and solution. Another option is for students to use a script such as those found in websites hosted by Aaron Shepard and Rick Swallow. FictionTeachers.com also provides links to scripts and lesson plans that can be used for Readers Theatre.

Guidelines for writing scripts and other tips can be also found at Aaron Shepard's website. Here, he addresses script roles, cuts and changes, narration, script format, and team scripting. The Internet School Library Media Center and LiteracyConnections.com also provide lists of Web resources related to Readers Theatre.

The use of Readers Theatre can offer a different context in which children are exposed to texts focusing on poetry, science, social studies, or other content related topics. Educational consultant Lisa Blau offers biographical scripts that focus on the lives of Helen Keller and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as informational scripts such as "Stupendous Snakes" and "Japan--The Land of the Rising Sun."

Print Resources for Readers Theatre

Connections and Extensions

- Analyze personality traits of major characters in the story. Cite examples from the script that support each personality trait identified for the character.
- Develop a story map that details character, setting, problem, events, and solution.
- Identify examples in the script of colorful and vivid language that are used to create images in the script.
- Use the scripts for Readers Theatre to illustrate how to use dialogue to show spoken language by a character.
- Follow the lesson plan written by Jean Rusting to conduct a Readers Theatre for the English folktale *Cap o' Rushes* (a variant on Cinderella).

Sustained Silent Reading

> Only by providing quality SSR programs can we truly attain the goal of creating readers who both *can* and *do* read (Pilgreen, 2000, p. 70).

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a time when everyone, including the teacher, reads silently for a given period of time (Butler & Turbill, 1987, p. 49). Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR), Drop Everything And Read (DEAR), and Sustained QUIet Reading Time (SQUIRT) are other names for this concept. In their survey of seventh-grade teachers, Nagy, Campenni, and Shaw (2000, online document) found that the practice of setting aside time during the school day for silent reading is alive and well. The teachers surveyed expressed satisfaction with the use of SSR, in part because it helped them to achieve curricular goals, helped students develop positive attitudes toward reading, and fostered students' habit of reading for information and enjoyment (Nagy et al., 2000). Noted educators John Pikulski and J. David Cooper state that independent reading in school should be increased and cite relevant research that supports this argument.

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers,* Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) report that

independent reading is associated with gains in reading achievement in school or out of school; therefore, children should spend more time in independent reading. By the time students are in third or fourth grade, they should be reading a minimum of two hours a week (Anderson et. al, 1985). Allington (2001) looks at the volume of reading in his book *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*. He examines research studies and states that what these studies have consistently shown is "that there exists a potent relationship between volume of reading and reading achievement" (Allington, 2001, p. 33).

Stephen Krashen, a major proponent of sustained silent reading, offers a critique of the National Reading Panel Report and the review of studies that were completed regarding SSR. In comments at a National Reading Panel Forum, he states that "despite their repeated claims of rigor and completeness, the section on free reading/sustained silent reading is very sloppy." His main argument pertains to the fact that the report restricted the review of studies conducted since 1984. By doing so, 41 studies were left out of the panel's review, of which 38 of these studies showed that readers in silent sustained reading programs did as well or better on tests of reading than children who spent an equivalent amount of time in traditional instruction. Krashen (Pilgreen, 2000) has stated that when studies are allowed to run for a sufficient length of time, then those who do SSR do better.

In his foreword in Pilgreen's (2000) text on sustained silent reading, Krashen discusses specific studies that support the use of SSR as part of classroom literacy activities. One teacher, William Marson, corroborates Krashen's claims about the success of free voluntary reading. At Education World's website, Marson discusses his success in motivating sixth graders in his article Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) Pays Big Dividends!

Guidelines

The most critical elements to sustained silent reading are that students must have the time and opportunity to read. A major benefit of SSR is that during this time students develop proficiency in reading independently for an extended period of time. Students may only read three to five minutes at the beginning of the school year. The goal is to gradually increase the amount of time children spend reading so that they are reading for longer, sustained periods of time. Through involvement with SSR, students develop an appreciation and enjoyment of literature while they are reinforcing those skills and strategies in which they are proficient. This reading format gives students time to practice emerging reading skills and strategies.

In a chapter excerpt from *The Read-Aloud Handbook,* Jim Trelease addresses the issue of sustained silent reading. He includes a structure for SSR recommended by Robert and Marlene McCracken, discusses Stephen Krashen's research on SSR, which he calls Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), and describes the benefits of using this reading format. Trelease also considers the pros and cons of using computerized "reading incentive" programs such as Advantage Learning System's *Accelerated Reader* and Scholastic's *Reading Counts.*

Factors for Success

In *The SSR Handbook: How To Organize and Manage a Sustained Silent Reading Program,* Pilgreen (2000) identifies eight factors for SSR success: 1) access, 2) appeal, 2) conducive environment, 4) encouragement, 5) staff training, 6) non-accountability, 7) follow-up activities, and 8) distributed time to read.

Access and appeal. The children need to be able to select from a variety of interesting reading materials during the SSR time (Pilgreen, 2000). In addition to picture books and novels, also include nonfiction texts, newspapers, magazines, comic books, books created in class with students, and any other free and appropriate reading materials that can be accessed. It is also important to determine what type of materials appeal to students by administering interest surveys or conducting

informal class discussions about what students would like to have available for reading materials. Using this information, the next step is to include materials that range from easy to more difficult so that a variety of reading levels are available from which to choose.

Conducive environment and encouragement. The classroom using sustained silent reading should provide an environment that is conducive to free reading (Pilgreen, 2000). Some basic characteristics of the reading environment should include comfortable surroundings, a consistent structure in terms of procedures, a low-risk atmosphere (i.e., quiet music or book covers to maintain privacy of reading selections), and acknowledgement of the sacred time through insistence on no interruptions. Teacher modeling is also a critical component, since the students are more likely to value reading when the teacher values it as well.

Staff training. Pilgreen (2000) emphasizes the necessity "for the entire staff to believe in the benefits of SSR and wholeheartedly support its implementation" (p. 522). When all involved understand the philosophy underlying SSR, then the level of commitment they bring to its implementation will be stronger.

Non-accountability and follow-up activities. The non-accountability component means that after the free reading period, the students are not required to complete a record or report (Pilgreen, 2000). Freedom from this aspect enables children to make mistakes without feeling embarrassed for failing to demonstrate competence. It also means children are able to experience the joy of reading and develop confidence in the selection of more difficult reading material.

When discussing SSR, Pilgreen (2000) is careful to distinguish between accountability measures versus follow-up activities. Interactive or sharing activities can provide positive contributions to the SSR program. These interactive activities can also involve collaborative opportunities for the student to work together on a joint project. Most important to this component is the need for students to self-select the activity. Pilgreen (2000) points out that "the more freedom the students have to develop their own ideas, the greater the degree of ownership and engagement they will have in the activities" (p. 67).

Time to read. When starting SSR, USSR, or DEAR time, it is best to set a time goal that will be easily attainable for the students. The students must be able to sustain the reading time which may only be three or four minutes in the beginning. Older students can begin with 10 minutes (Pilgreen, 2000, p. 68). Gradually, the time can be extended until students are reading 20 to 30 minutes or longer (Butler & Turbill, 1987).

Print Resources for Sustained Silent Reading

Connections and Extensions

- Volunteers give 60-second reviews of in-progress highlights about their book; the class develops student-produced newspapers with "book recommendation" sections; or have a book and author luncheon (Pilgreen, 2000, p. 65-66).
- Students read aloud or share thoughts about their book while sitting in the Author's Chair (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988).
- Teacher holds monthly "book sales" where students who have finished a book and want to sell it explain the main points of the

> book, tell about the authors, characters, or setting, or give their personal reactions to the book (Revel-Wood, 1988).

Literature Circles

> When teachers value their students' responses, literature discussion groups provide a safe place for children to use language to explore important ideas and issues (Wells, 1995, p. 132).

A major purpose of the literature discussion groups is to change the way children talk about the texts they read. Key features include: a) children choosing their own reading materials; b) formation of small temporary groups; c) group readings of different books; d) groups meeting periodically to discuss what has been read since the last meeting; e) the teacher acting as facilitator; and f) evaluation consisting of teacher observation, group evaluation, and self-evaluation (Daniels, 1994; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Roser & Martinez, 1995).

A useful resource for learning more about literature circles is LiteratureCircles.com, which features discussions about this format, book recommendations, research on effectiveness, ideas for classroom management, links to related sites and organizations, and news of relevant publications and events. This site also includes a featured article of the month as well as a section called In the Classroom that discusses management, logistics, troubleshooting, and problem solving for literature circles in the classroom. Other resources include Laura Candler's Literary Lessons and *Education World's* Literature Circles Build Excitement for Books! by Mary Daniels Brown, which offers advice about how to begin using literature circles.

Guidelines

Harvey Daniels and the team of teachers he has worked with identifies literature circles by using the following definition:

> Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle (Daniels, 2002, p. 2).

Daniels (2002), in his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2nd ed.), expands on the concept of role sheets in the chapter on books and materials. He explains the concept of role sheets as a type of support structure that may actually be beneficial to more experienced book clubs as opposed to those students first beginning literature circles. He describes the role sheets as temporary devices to help students internalize and practice making multiple cognitive perspectives on texts. He cautions against the overuse of the role sheets because it can cause children's conversations to become stilted and mechanical. In the second edition of his book on literature circles, Daniels advises that the role sheets should be used for only about three to four weeks at which point they can be replaced with a reading log (Daniels, 2002). The reading logs become a place where students can write down connections they make, questions they might have for the author, any criticisms or opinions they want to share, or drawings of pictures or ideas that were triggered by the story.

Daniels (2002) emphasizes that literature circles are not to be used only with fiction books. Texts for nonfiction can be pulled from whole books about animals, people, and places. There are also

books about notable historical figures, sports, entertainment, adventure tales, and science series like Eyewitness books. Shorter pieces can be taken from magazines, newspapers, or even historical documents related to a unit of study. Daniels (2002) states that readers will require the same discussion skills whether they are reading fiction or nonfiction texts. "Kids need to know how to keep a response log, mark important sections of a text, participate effectively in a group, reflect on and improve discussions, and so forth" (Daniels, 2002, p. 202).

Adapting Literature Circles for Different Grade Levels

Literature circles are more often used with children in third or fourth grades and up, but can also be an appropriate format for younger children. In order for them to be most successful, it is helpful for the students to have developed some independence in reading. At Multiage-Education.Com, Linda Geist writes about how literature circles can be adapted for young children. She discusses the group size that she recommends as well as the roles the students used as part of the literature circles in her first- and second-grade classroom.

Seattle University's School of Education hosts the Literature Circles Resource Center, which features information on topics such as structure for literature circles in the primary grades and structure for literature circles in middle school. Each of these topics links to a webpage focused on a specific teacher's classroom and gives an overview of its process by the day, by the week, and by the year. This site also has a section of general guidelines that provides useful information on planning, choosing books, reading the books, and extension projects.

Another Web resource that focuses on using literature circles with fifth grade was developed by Marjorie Duby at Joseph Lee School. This website, hosted by *Inquiry Unlimited* includes links to pages that discuss the roles these fifth graders used, delineate how evidence of participation would be determined, and address how the students rotated through the various roles during the literature circles.

An example of a literature study unit using *The Cay* and *Timothy of the Cay* has been developed by Sara Bork, Carrie Kriescher, Candice Murphy, and Melissa Randall as part of the St. Norbert College Ocean Voyagers Program. These teachers identify how to implement a unit involving these two books. Their 10-day unit breaks down how the book is introduced, how roles are rotated so that each student is responsible for each role at least once, and how assessment of the literature circles is determined.

Role of the Teacher

The role of the teacher during this process is usually identified as that of a facilitator. However, when first introducing the concept of literature circles to children, the teacher might need to take a more active role by modeling discussion tactics and written responses. The Literature Circles Resource Center's Making Discussions Work, adapted from *Getting Started with Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy L. Johnson (1999), addresses selecting a discussion format, teaching students how to discuss, helping students prepare for discussion, and debriefing after the discussion to cover skills. Another useful resource at this site, Sample Forms for Discussion, provides examples of templates for the discussion log, comment cards, self-evaluation, and focus questions.

Addressing Skills and Strategies

Minilessons highlighting particular skills are easily incorporated into the classroom using the literature circles as a format for reading instruction. For example, *Amelia Bedelia* by Peggy Parish could be used to teach figurative language, *The Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder could be used to look at description, and *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen could be used to examine character development. Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site models how to use good literature to

model comprehension strategies. She includes minilessons that address reading for detail along with inferencing using *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, making inferences with *Holes* by Louis Sachar, visualizing using Lois Lowry's *Autumn Street*, and making predictions using *Crabbe* by William Bell.

Print Resources for Literature Circles

Connections and Extensions

- The *Literature Circles Resource Center* discuss a variety of extension projects that can last anywhere from a day to a week to complete. The projects discussed range from beginning projects such as character bookmarks and accordion books to more complex projects that include the collection of artifacts for a jackdaw or creation of a story quilt.
- Samples of sharing devices are addressed in Harvey Daniels's book *Literature Circles.* The chapter on forming, scheduling, and managing groups includes a listing of projects such as posters advertising the book, videotaped dramatizations, a timeline of the story, and collages representing the different characters.

Frameworks for Organizing Instruction

Reading Workshop

The formats that have been discussed can be used as part of the reading workshop framework that is most commonly associated with Nancie Atwell's book, *In the Middle* (1998). Major components of this framework include a short minilesson, time for independent reading, responding, conferencing, and sharing. The time that is set aside for the independent reading, responding, and conferencing is the largest chunk of time that could be anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour of the instructional block. The teacher may opt to start off the workshop with a shared reading or read aloud session. During the independent time, students can participate in guided reading groups, literature circles, or Readers Theatre. The sustained silent reading portion of reading workshop is when students have the opportunity to read the literature club selection, reread a previous text, or self-select other material that is of interest.

For more information on how to organize instruction for reading workshop, visit the Reading Language Arts webpage. Other useful resources include the article Making the Difference with Reading Instruction: Reader's Workshop, by Richard Wulf-McGrath, which offers further insight into reading workshop; tips on management and grouping posted on Scholastic's Teacher Resource website by Laura Robb, author of *Teaching Reading in Middle School;* and Reading Workshop Assessments and Mini Lessons by Sarah Crocker.

Book Club

Another framework is that of Book Club, which was begun in 1989-1990 by Susan McMahon and Taffy Raphael. These researchers developed a framework for this program that includes four contexts for instruction and participation in language and literacy: (a) community share, (b) reading, (c) writing, and (d) student-led book clubs. A primary goal of the Book Club program was to create a context within which students could engage in meaningful conversations, on their own, about the texts they read (McMahon & Raphael, 1997, p. 4).

Print Resources for Frameworks

Considering the Options

These formats for reading instruction can be considered as a reminder of the many different options that are available to us throughout the day. The options that are best for each teacher would be dependent on the needs of the students in his or her class. For example, a first grade or second grade class might start the morning with a shared reading activity followed by the teacher working with a guided reading group while other students are working at literacy centers. Later in the morning, the class could gather around for a read-aloud by the teacher. A third grade, fourth grade, or fifth grade class might start their day with sustained silent reading, followed by sessions where students work on a Reader's Theater story or meet together to discuss a book they have been reading as part of a literature discussion group. This does not mean that the first grade class will not at some point during the day also participate in Sustained Silent Reading. It means that the choices that a teacher makes about which formats to use during a particular day or week will be based on the literacy needs of the students in the classroom.

It is also important to provide numerous opportunities for children to participate in meaningful writing experiences. Used in conjunction with the formats that have been discussed, it becomes simple to provide such opportunities. Children can write stories modeled on favorite books read or listened to during read-aloud, shared reading, sustained silent reading, or guided reading. Another option is to write personal reflections in a journal or literature log after participating in literature circles. Budding screenwriters have the chance to adapt an existing script or write an original script about a book as part of activities associated with Readers' Theater. The bottom line is authentic writing experiences that enable children to connect to what has been read is one other way to enrich their literacy growth.

One last note--the formats discussed in this article are by no means the only formats for teaching reading in the elementary school. However, each can easily be used to address skill areas that children need to learn while modeling these skills within the context of real books. We must remember that in order for our children to read, they also need the time and opportunity to practice what they are being taught. Again, the use of these formats can accomplish that task. In combination, these formats for reading instruction provide a much needed balance between independence and instruction that will support our students as they learn to read.

References

Allington, R.L. (2001). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based reading programs*. New York: Longman.
Back

Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1984). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the Commission on Reading*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.
Back

Barrentine, S.J. (1996a). Engaging with reading through interactive read-alouds. *The Reading Teacher, 50,* 36-43.
Back

Barrentine, S.J. (1996b). Storytime plus dialogue equals interactive read-aloud. In L.B. Gambrell & J.F. Almasi (Eds.), *Lively discussions: Fostering engaged reading* (pp. 52-62). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

Burns, P.C., Roe, B.D., & Ross, E.P. (1999). *Teaching reading in today's elementary school* (7th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Back

Butler, A., & Turbill, J. (1987). *Towards a reading-writing classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

Campbell, R. (2001). *Read-alouds with young children.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

Carrick, L. (2001, July/August). Internet resources for conducting Readers Theatre. *Reading Online, 5*(1). Available: http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/elec_index.asp?HREF=carrick/index.html
Back

CIERA (1998, Summer). Improving the reading achievement of America's children: 10 research-based principles. Available (retrieved July 5, 2002): http://www.ciera.org/library/instresrc/principles/index.html
Back

Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse.
Back

Duffy-Hester, A.M. (1999). Teaching struggling readers in elementary school classrooms: A review of classroom reading programs and principles of instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 52*, pp. 480-495.
Back

Fisher, B., & Medvic, E.F. (2000). *Perspectives on shared reading: Planning and practice.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

Fountas, I.C., & Pinnell, G.S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

Gambrell, L.B., & Almasi, J.F. (1996). *Lively discussions: Fostering engaged reading.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

Harste, J.C., Short, K.G., & Burke, C. (1988). *Creating classrooms for authors: The reading-writing connection*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

IRA/NAEYC (May,1998). Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, part 4: Continuum of Children's Development in Early Reading and Writing. Available: http://www.naeyc.org/resources/ position statements/psread4.htm
Back

Leu, D.J., & Kinzer, C.K. (1999). *Effective literacy instruction* (4th ed.). UpperSaddle River, NJ: Merrill.
Back

McCracken, M.J., & McCracken, R.A. (1995). *Reading, writing, and language* (2nd ed.). Winnipeg

Manitoba Canada: Peguis.
Back

McMahon, S.I., & Raphael, T.E. (1997). *The book club connection: Literacy and learning and classroom talk*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association and Teachers College Press.
Back

Martinez, Roser, & Strecker (1998/1999). "I never thought I could be a star": A reader's theater ticket to fluency. *The Reading Teacher, 52,* 326-334.
Back

Morrow, L.M., & O'Connor, E.M. (1995). Literacy partnerships for change with "at-risk" kindergartners. In R.L. Allington & S.A. Walmsley (Eds.), *No quick fix* (pp. 97-115). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

Morrow, L.M., Strickland, D.S., & Woo, D.G. (1998). *Literacy instruction in half- and whole-day kindergarten.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

Moss, B. (1995). Using children's nonfiction tradebooks as read-aloud. *Language Arts*, *72,* pp. 122-126.
Back

Nagy, N.M., Campenni, C.E., & Shaw, J.N. (2000). A survey of sustained silent reading practices in seventh-grade classrooms. *Reading Online, 4*(5). Available: http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=/articles/nagy/
Back

Opitz, M. (2000). Meeting special needs: Empowering the reader in every child. *Instructor.* Available (retrieved July 5, 2002): http://www.scholastic.ca/education/professionalarticles/langarts/opitz.html
Back

Pilgreen, J. (2000). *The SSR handbook: How to organize and manage a sustained silent reading program*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

Revel-Wood, M. (1988). Invitations to read, to write, to learn. In J.C. Harste, K.G. Short, & C. Burke (Eds.), *Creating classrooms for authors: The reading-writing connection*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Back

Roser, N.L., & Martinez, M.G. (1995). *Book talk and beyond: Children and teachers respond to literature.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

Ruddell, R.B. (1999). *Teaching children to read and write: Becoming an influential teacher* (2nd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
Back

Schlick Noe, K.L., & Johnson, N.J. (1999). *Getting started with literature circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.
Back

Strickland, D. (2000). Balanced literacy: Teaching the skills and thrills of reading. *Instructor.* Available (retrieved July 5, 2002): http://www.scholastic.ca/education/professionalarticles/langarts/balancedlit.html
Back

Trelease, J. (1989a). *The new read-aloud handbook* (4th ed.). New York: Penguin Books.
Back

Trelease, J. (1989b). Jim Trelease speaks on reading aloud to children. *The Reading Teacher, 49,* 200-206.
Back

Wells, D. (1995). Leading Grand Conversations. In N.L. Roser & M.G. Martinez (Eds.), *Book talk and beyond: Children and teachers respond to literature* (pp. 132-139). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
Back

About the Author

Kimberly Kimbell-Lopez is an assistant professor at Louisiana Tech University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy and technology. She may be contacted by e-mail (kklopez@latech.edu) or via mail (P.O. Box 3161, Ruston, LA 71272).

Back to top

For a printer-ready version of this article, click here. Use your Web browser's "back" button to return to the *Reading Online* site.

Citation: Kimbell-Lopez, K. (2003, February). Just think of the possibilities: Formats for reading instruction in the elementary classroom. *Reading Online, 6*(6). Available: http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=kimbell-lopez/index.html

---

Reading Online, www.readingonline.org
Posted February 2003

© 2003 International Reading Association, Inc. ISSN 1096-1232