

Helping Struggling Middle and High School Readers

Most discussion of reading instruction deals with the early elementary grades, but reading is also a crucial issue at the middle and high school levels. Many students seem to make good progress in grades K-3 as they develop basic decoding skills, but then falter as they enter the upper elementary grades and encounter textbooks and other materials that require more advanced comprehension skills and sophisticated reading strategies. Older students' reading and writing skills affect their achievement in all subject areas, including English, math, science, and social studies.

As a teacher, you know it's important to help older students develop their literacy skills, but you may wonder how much time you can devote to reading instruction. Fortunately, you don't have to choose between teaching students subject matter and helping them become better readers. There are many ways that you can embed reading and writing instruction in content area instruction. And research suggests that if you make time to do this, your students' overall achievement will improve.

The Importance of Motivation

Unfortunately, many students' enthusiasm for the world of books declines just at the age when schoolwork demands more advanced reading skills. Research has documented the trend of decreasing interest in reading as students mature (Anderson, Tollefson, and Gilbert 1985; Lesesne 1991; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 1996; O'Sullivan 1992). This is an important point, because reading for fun has been linked to reading achievement (NCES 1996).

Therefore, a key way to promote your students' reading abilities is by encouraging them to read more and to read widely. How can you create a classroom that turns students on to reading? Here are a few strategies.

Provide Choice in Reading Materials

Instead of requiring the entire class to read a particular book, give students a list of books from which they choose the titles that most appeal to them. Design this list with student interests in mind. Ample research shows that students prefer being able to select their own reading (Gross 1992; Kellerman 1991; Kletzien and Hushion 1992).

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Hallmarks of an Interactive Reading Program that Actively Engages Students:

- Students play an important role in suggesting or selecting reading materials.
- Time is set aside during the school day for students to read silently or aloud.
- The classroom has an abundance of print materials.
- High-interest books on tape are available in the classroom library along with the printed copies.
- Students have an opportunity to respond to reading material (such as literature, newspaper articles, and biographies) in writing—for example, by writing in dialogue journals.
- Students discuss their reading materials in small groups.
- Students draw on personal experiences to understand what they are reading.

Create a Print-Rich Environment

Research tells us that students read more when books are readily available (Krashen 1993). Creating a classroom library is one way to get students excited about reading. Such libraries can be set up in both English and other content-area classes, and contain a supply of light reading materials relating to the subject under study. In creating a classroom library:

- Include a wide array of high-interest materials such as young adult novels, historical fiction, science fiction books, and magazines.
- Include materials for a wide range of reading levels. High interest/low vocabulary materials are particularly helpful for struggling adolescent readers; several lists of these materials are available. (For example, see links to some of these resources at <http://www.resourceroom.net/comprehension/hilow.asp>.)
- Include “picture books” related to topics presented during instruction. Many of these books—for example, Kodama’s *Shin’s Tricycle* that “conveys the terror associated with the bombing of Hiroshima”—address complex issues and actually

are written for an adolescent audience (Billman 2002). Using this type of book in class may help below-grade-level readers to feel more comfortable when selecting them for independent reading.

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Use Young Adult Literature as a Stepping Stone

The types of reading that typically appeal to adolescents include teen romances, comics, science fiction or fantasy, and problem novels (novels with teen characters who have realistic problems, such as dealing with divorce, puberty, or alcohol abuse). These books have the potential to spark interest in even the most reluctant reader. They can meet the developmental needs of adolescence, acting as a bridge between the books of childhood and the books of adulthood (Reed 1985). Therefore, consider incorporating young adult literature into the curriculum as a supplement to such classics as *Hamlet*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Expose Students to a Wide Variety of Materials

While you provide students with reading materials that meet their developmental needs and spark their interest, you should also broaden their interests and challenge them to read new types of materials. For example, in a social studies classroom, students might read newspaper articles, stories about people from different cultures or times, or travel guides in addition to the textbook. In English classes, expose students to materials such as plays, poetry, and biographies as well as to novels and short stories.

Practice In-School Free Reading

One way to encourage adolescents to read for fun is to set aside time for free reading during the school day. This also demonstrates that reading is a high-priority concern to you and your school. Set aside a certain period of time during the day or week in which students can read books of their choice. Allow them to select materials from the school or classroom library, or even bring in reading of their own choosing. Model the reading habit by reading silently along with the students, rather than using the time to do paperwork. While free reading typically provides time for students to read purely for pleasure, providing time for

independent reading more closely linked to the curriculum is also a good strategy. For example, several periods within a unit of study could be devoted to having students read self-selected material—newspapers, magazine articles, Web-based materials, etc., as well as textbooks—on the topic. With teacher assistance in selecting materials provided to students who need it, this approach provides students opportunities to “read texts that they can negotiate without a struggle and to deepen their knowledge of topics of personal interest that are related to the larger unit of study” (Ivey 2002, 23).

Guidelines for a Read-Aloud Program with Secondary School Students

- Read the book first, to be sure that it is something you personally like and want to share with others. Students are more likely to be interested in the material if you are interested yourself.
- Select passages that are powerful (suspenseful, gory, hilarious, or romantic).
- Before beginning the read-aloud session, relate the work to something that your students already know about.
- Stop reading before students stop listening—the oral reader should constantly monitor the interest of listeners and their body language. At the first sign of boredom, either move on to another activity, increase the drama in your voice, or skip some passages to get to the “good parts” quickly.
- Give listeners an opportunity to respond to what has been read, and create an accepting, nonthreatening atmosphere while they are responding.

Read Aloud

Although reading aloud to students is a common activity in elementary schools, many secondary school teachers view this activity as a time waster that is not suited to adolescents (Ecroyd 1991). On the contrary, by reading aloud to students, you can model the reading process, demonstrate your own excitement about

literature, and get teenagers enthused about reading. Reading aloud is especially beneficial for at-risk students. It can provide these students, some of whom have never finished a book, with the sense of enjoyment that comes from reading and completing a book.

Talking about Texts

Adolescents are highly motivated to seek social interaction with their peers. Build on that motivation by incorporating instructional activities that highlight the social nature of reading.

In addition, several studies have shown that small student groups assembled to discuss works of literature (or other reading materials) can be highly effective in enhancing reading comprehension and interpretation (see Nystrand, Gamoran, and Heck 1993; Sweigart 1991). Here are some tips for designing and supporting discussion groups:

- Group size should ideally be between four and eight—large enough to bring diversity of opinion, but small enough to ensure that all students can participate fully (Wiencek and O’Flahavan 1994).
- Consider factors such as reading abilities, willingness to participate in discussion, etc., when developing the membership of the groups.
- Keep in mind that students will need time to establish their group dynamic and interactive norms, but monitor the activity of the groups to ensure that the groups’ activities are providing good learning experiences for all members.
- Accept that not all discussion will be focused on higher-level thinking. Sometimes enthusiastic conversations that are only superficially related to the text serve the purpose of providing an “easy entry into the discussion” and putting teenagers in an “active evaluative role” (Roller and Beed 1994).

Discussion groups are particularly appropriate for at-risk and remedial readers. Too often, these students are viewed from the perspective of their weaknesses, and it is assumed that the personal experiences that they bring to the classroom have little merit (Gentile and McMillan 1994). Discussion groups call on the firsthand knowledge of these students to interpret a text, underscoring the value of their personal experiences.

When designing small-group work specifically for at-risk students, you may want to assign shorter amounts of text for discussion. If the students have had little experience with small-group instruction, discuss expectations when introducing the activity. Finally, you can help below-grade-level readers develop their discussion skills by initially modeling both

questions and answers, which provides these students with critical exposure to comprehension processes and clarifies the discussion task. After ample modeling, gradually diminish the support and transfer responsibility to students.

Helping Students Develop Metacognitive Strategies

Many struggling readers have a poor command of the kinds of learning strategies that effective learners use every day. From the perspective of these students:

. . . classroom learning poses a mystery—not a positive mystery with the positive features of suspense and discovery, but rather a mystery that perplexes, confounds, and in time renders it difficult to maintain attention and engagement (Palincsar and Ransom 1988, 786).

Another way to describe these students' problem is to say that they lack effective metacognitive strategies. Metacognition is the process of being aware of and having control over your own thought processes—knowing when, how, and why to use the skills and knowledge that you possess. The metacognitive individual has learned how to learn (Garner 1987), and research studies have suggested that metacognitive skills are a key to student achievement (see Biemiller and Meichenbaum 1992; Walberg and Paik 2004; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg 1993/1994).

Some of the basic skills that underlie metacognitive strategies are:

- **Predicting.** Predictions encourage students to read with a purpose and to confirm or correct their predictions as they construct meaning.
- **Self-questioning.** This allows learners to actively check how much they understand while reading, by asking questions such as “What is the main idea?”
- **Paraphrasing.** Model this by putting the concepts of a passage or section into your own words, or by summarizing the main points. (When students do it, it may help them get a sense of how much they understand.)
- **Lookback.** Encourage students to refer to what has already been read in order to increase understanding of the material.
- **Changing reading speed.** When good readers encounter obstacles, such as unusual writing style or too many unknown words, they modify their reading speed.

The good news is that effective learning strategies can be taught, even to students who do not develop them automatically on their own.

By building a metacognitive classroom environment, you will help students develop the ability to plan for, monitor, and evaluate their reading process. Four specific strategies that reading researchers agree are essential to students' success in “learning how to learn” are: 1) calling on prior knowledge; 2) making valid inferences; 3) understanding text structure; and 4) effective approaches to vocabulary development and acquisition.

Sample Small-Group Discussion Format

- Choose a short selection to be read.
- Activate students' prior knowledge (elicit from them what they already know about the topic) and introduce key vocabulary words.
- Ask students to read the selection and write responses to these three questions:
 1. What have you learned from reading this selection?
 2. How does the information connect to the other things you know about this subject?
 3. List the words in the selection that you do not fully understand.
- Have the students discuss their written responses to these questions in small groups.
- Finally, join the discussion yourself, either by moving from one group to another, or by assembling the students in a whole-classroom discussion (Gauthier 1989).

Calling on Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge is the background knowledge that a reader brings to the text (Gunning 2000). As students read content-area texts, they will be aided by their prior knowledge about the topic, about the structure and organization of text, and about vocabulary. Research has established that “students learn and remember new information best when it is linked to relevant prior knowledge” (Beyer 1991).

Ways to Teach Metacognition

Teachers in all content areas can facilitate a metacognitive classroom environment by using the following approaches:

- Model and discuss your own reading processes.
- Ask students to make and test predictions.
- Help students practice, using contextual analysis to decode unfamiliar terms.
- Assist students' comprehension by identifying the organization and structure of the text.
- Set aside time for reflection on what was read.
- Ask for a summary of major ideas in the selection.
- Provide after-reading applications.
- Plan a lesson to teach metacognition. Actually use the terms "metacognition" or "learning strategy" after the strategy has been introduced and while teaching occurs.
- Display some metacognitive strategies on bulletin boards and classroom walls.
- Present a warm-up activity at the beginning of the lesson.
- Interview students individually as they read to assess their use of strategies.
- Allocate time for discussing the problems students encountered in reading text.
- Talk aloud as you think through a problem or attempt to understand a task.

Here are some techniques that you can use to help your students build on their prior knowledge before, during, and after reading:

- **Before Reading**—Preview the content-area material to be read. As a class or in small groups, look at the cover, pictures, title of chapter, and text. Discuss what students know about these elements. Connect personal experiences, observations, and knowledge obtained from various sources with new knowledge to be taught and learned. Look for familiar vocabulary words. Examine ways in which the text is organized and structured.
- **During Reading**—Assist students in applying their prior knowledge. Brainstorm ideas regarding where, how, and when students' prior knowledge can be accessed. Model how prior knowledge can be applied to unknown material and information to assist in learning new information and concepts. Correct inaccurate prior knowledge.

- **After Reading**—Evaluate how effectively students are able to use their prior knowledge to make connections between what they know and what they are trying to learn. Have students write, create graphic organizers, or make oral presentations to demonstrate their understanding of a designated learning task.

Making Valid Inferences

When we read, the text provides clues to meaning, which we use in conjunction with our prior knowledge of the topic and with the text to make inferences (Cook 1989). Some students are more adept at inferencing than others, and so are more able to draw information from text.

You can help students develop more effective inferencing skills by modeling and providing opportunities for students to practice approaches such as associating, relating, and describing. For instance, after students read a passage, ask them to complete this exercise:

Facts I Read	What Can I Infer?

One useful strategy in helping students read expository text is to step back from the specific content of the reading material and focus on its structure (see examples that follow in the box below). Often, a better understanding of the structure provides cues for the reader.

Here are some additional approaches you can use to facilitate your students' understanding of what text is and how to apply its organization and structure to their daily learning tasks:

- Activate students' prior knowledge about the structure of the text. For example, tell students to ask: When have I read text similar to this? What techniques worked well—or not so well—that time?
- Model for students how to scan the text for key concepts and other aids.
- Engage the students in making "educated guesses" about the structure of the text.

Jacobs (2002) suggests that teachers explicitly organize instruction to include steps that will help all

students—but especially students having difficulties—more successfully navigate the process of reading to learn. Prereading activities such as brainstorming, graphic organizers of students' background knowledge, or the development of questions prior to reading can help to better focus students on the purpose of the reading.

This should be followed by guided reading through activities such as study guides, response journals, or collaborative problem-solving activities. These activities are intended to help students look for what is important in the text instead of merely getting lost in the words. Finally, Jacobs discusses the stage of post-reading, during which students “step back and test the validity of their tentative understanding of the text” (2002, 59-60).

Some of the common structures of expository text include:

- Description/simple listings/collections—a listing of items, ideas, or attitudes, where the order of presentation is not significant.
- Time/temporal sequence—a sequential relationship between ideas and events reflecting the passage of time.
- Definition and example—a definition of a key word or concept followed by an example.
- Cause and effect—an interaction between at least two ideas or events, one considered a cause and the other an effect or result.
- Problem and/or solution—interaction between at least two factors, one citing a problem and the other a solution (Riggs and Gill-Garcia 2001, 49-50).

Vocabulary Development and Acquisition

Vocabulary is often viewed as a low-level skill, yet its continued development and refinement is crucial to comprehension. In addition, Wilson (2004) points out that, at the middle school level and beyond, there are two kinds of vocabulary development—general and content-area—both of which should receive attention through instruction.

Research has shown that traditional methods of teaching vocabulary are often not effective. For example, some textbooks highlight pre-selected words in a

sidebar. Students are then expected to focus on these words and to memorize them, even though there may be many other new words that require their attention.

Instead, you need to give your students learning tools that they can use to cope with new vocabulary, especially in more complex content-area texts and other learning materials. Here are some instructional strategies you can use to help students develop vocabulary acquisition skills:

- Introduce key vocabulary related to content-area specific concepts.
- Activate students' prior knowledge using, when possible, language that is used in the text.
- Examine relationships among the words to form categories to help students make connections.
- Point out root words, prefixes, and suffixes.
- Provide direct instruction on selected words.
- Encourage and guide students to create their own vocabulary lists.
- Link new and unfamiliar words to existing knowledge of words.

Conclusion

Reading instruction, especially for at-risk students, should be integrated into every content area. Such instruction need not take time away from teaching students content-area knowledge. On the contrary, engaging students in active reading and giving them the strategies to comprehend text will enhance their achievement in all subjects.

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Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Think about the various topics that you are scheduled to cover. Select some additional materials (newspaper articles, magazine articles, etc.) to supplement this curriculum. Add these selections to your classroom library of materials from which students may choose during their free reading time.
- Take a closer look at one section of text in material you plan to cover. Scan over the “Helping Students Develop Metacognitive Strategies” portion of this article (calling on prior knowledge, making valid inferences, understanding text structure, vocabulary development and acquisition). Discuss and brainstorm specific ways to implement these suggestions in your classes.
- Develop a suggested reading list that students in your class may refer to and choose books from during their independent reading time. Keep in mind the range of reading abilities in your class as well as student interests. Compare these lists with fellow teachers.

The following publications are related resources available from ERS. These titles are just a few of the many documents ERS has available to help educators improve instruction at the middle and high school levels.

What We Know About: Reading and the Middle and High School Levels: Building Active Readers Across the Curriculum, Third Edition (#NT-0340)

Do your students have the strategic reading skills they need to succeed? Do your teachers effectively integrate reading instruction into their classes? What do your teachers do if they have students who have difficulty reading? This publication addresses these questions and much more, such as: approaches to help poor readers develop good reading habits; ways to increase student interest in reading for pleasure; how to effectively incorporate reading into subject areas such as social studies, science, and math; examples of what works according to school personnel in regard to reading instruction; and how to motivate students to become engaged readers.

Base price: \$20.00. Subscriber discounts available.

What We Know About: Helping Middle and High School Readers, Teaching and Learning Strategies Across the Curriculum (#NT-0448)

This report emphasizes that middle and high school teachers do not need to be reading specialists nor take time away from essential content-area instruction in order to help their students become more proficient in this critical skill. Instead, they can integrate the teaching and learning strategies described in this report into their content-area instruction.

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