

Ten To-Do's for Successful Read-Alouds



by Christine Boardman Moen

Reading aloud to students is a time-honored classroom practice. Ask many adults their fondest memory of school, and you'll get such remembrances as, I'll never forget the time Mrs. (or Mr.) So-and-So read—insert title here: *Where the Red Fern Grows* or *Charlotte's Web* or any number of other classics.

While reading aloud to students is standard in most lower-elementary classrooms, it's a practice that dwindles as students get older and move into upper-elementary and middle-school grades. Believing strongly that students need to be read to even into the upper grades, I wrote *Read-Alouds and Performance Reading* (Christopher-Gordon, 2004), which describes various ways upper-elementary and middle-school teachers like myself can continue the wonderful tradition of reading aloud to students while also implementing the curriculum, meeting state standards, and "leaving no child behind." I hope the following 10 "to-do's" help you implement or enhance the wonderful practice of reading aloud to your students.

1. *Establish regular read-aloud routines that fit your teaching style and classroom setting.*

By establishing regular routines, you demonstrate to your students

that read-alouds are valuable uses of time. It wasn't until I created lesson-plan sheets that included a column dedicated to regular read-alouds that reading aloud on a daily basis became routine in my classroom. Prior to the new lesson-plan sheets, my read-alouds were fillers for when a lesson didn't take as long as I had planned or, even worse, rewards for my students for doing "real" work. However, after I immersed myself in the research on the effectiveness of read-alouds and their impact on fluency, comprehension, motivation, and vocabulary, I decided to plan and think through my read-alouds like the other parts of my lesson plan. I learned that when I prepared my read-alouds, they had a greater impact on my students.

2. *Establish a purpose for every read-aloud and make sure your students know what it is.*

Good readers always establish a purpose for their reading. You can model this reading strategy every time you read aloud to your students. Begin by telling them what to listen for and acquainting them with unfamiliar words used in the read-aloud. Activate your students' prior knowledge and provide them with the context they may need in order to fully comprehend the read-aloud. A

case in point is the first chapter of Richard Peck's delightful novel *A Long Way from Chicago* (Dial, 1998). Before I read aloud this chapter, I discuss Prohibition, the Great Depression, Jessie James, and Annie Oakley. In addition, I explain what a philanthropist is and what a wake is. Consequently, by establishing a purpose and giving your students background knowledge, you are enabling them to be active listeners.

3. *Preview and prepare every read-aloud, even if it's one you've done many times before.*

Because your read-aloud is a part of your lesson plan, you need to preview and prepare it just like you would any other learning activity. I quickly read any notes I've written about the story, poem, or article and then scan the piece itself. Doing so helps me remember the piece and what I need to explain and emphasize in order for students to get the most from the read-aloud. It's especially important to read any new material before you read it aloud to your students so you're not surprised by language or scenes that may not be age-appropriate. I do not believe in censorship, but I do believe in being sensible. I tell my students that I edit out inappropriate language and scenes just like television programs edit for

language and content. They understand and accept this explanation.

4. *Read aloud a variety of materials—long, short, fiction, and nonfiction.*

Like many teachers, I used to have the bias that fiction was for reading aloud and enjoying while nonfiction was for student research. I've since discovered that many students often read nonfiction aesthetically. In other words, many students prefer nonfiction to fiction. This is especially true of boys who have been identified as reluctant readers.

When I read nonfiction or informational text, as it is currently called, I give my students a variety of graphic organizers so they can document information they feel is important. For example, an easy-to-create and easy-to-use organizer is one based on the alphabet. Have students list the letters of the alphabet on a sheet of paper, leaving room around each letter to record information. As the student listens, he or she records an important fact that begins with that letter. For example, when I read aloud portions of Jane O'Connor's *The Emperor's Silent Army* (Viking, 2002), some students noted that the horses in the terra-cotta army were "Mongolian horses" and wrote this information under the letter *M*, while others wrote the same note under the letter *H*. At the conclusion of the read-aloud, students take turns comparing, contrasting, and explaining the information they recorded.


In addition to reading aloud novels, short stories, and informational texts, it's also important to read aloud short pieces such as newspaper articles, poems, vignettes, and profiles. I keep a collection of books with short pieces in a basket in the front of my classroom. I put sticky notes on the selections I want to read, and once I've read the selection, I turn the sticky note inside the book so I don't read the same selection twice. Some of the

books that I use for shorter pieces include Joanne Mattern's *They Too Were Heroes: True Tales of Courageous Dogs* (Troll, 2002), Charlotte Foltz Jones' *Accidents May Happen: Fifty Inventions Discovered by Mistake* (Delacorte, 1996), and Dennis Brindell Fradin's *The Signers: The 56 Stories behind the Declaration of Independence* (Walker, 2002).

5. *Begin the read-aloud only when everyone is ready to listen and everyone is seated wherever you or they wish to be seated.*

I use a variety of student seating arrangements, depending upon the type of read-aloud I have prepared. Since many upper-elementary and middle-school classes consist of 25 to 35 students, making sure everyone can see and hear can be important to the success of your read-aloud. For example, when I share a picture book with my middle-school students, I make sure I walk across the front of the classroom and circulate around the room so students can see the illustrations. Also with picture books, I sometimes use "stadium" seating by layering students into rows, with some students sitting on high stools in the back of the room, others sitting at their desks, and the remaining students sitting on the floor as part of the lowest tier. At other times when students use graphic organizers during the read-aloud, students remain in their seats. If my read-aloud is a storytelling session during which I use a great deal of gestures and animation, I allow students to grab pillows and bean bag chairs and spread around the room. Finally, to avoid distractions, I instruct students who like to draw during the read-aloud to get out their materials prior to my beginning, and I discourage students from rummaging through their pencil cases and notebooks while I am reading. It is important to try a variety of arrangements to see what works best for you and your students.



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6. *Decide and explain the type of student response you wish from your students before beginning your read-aloud.*

The majority of the time, when I read aloud to my students, I require a written response. For informational texts, I require students to respond using a graphic organizer, one of which I described earlier in this article. For fiction, I usually ask students to make connections to the read-aloud and record their connections on a sticky note. The types of connections I ask my students to make include text-to-self connections, text-to-world connections, and text-to-text connections.

A text-to-self connection occurs when a student makes a personal connection between something in the text and himself or herself. For example, when I read aloud William H. Armstrong's *Sounder* (HarperCollins, 1969), a student wrote on her sticky note, "When I was younger, I used to carry books around all the time just like the boy does in this story."

A text-to-text connection occurs when a student makes a connection between the read-aloud text and another text he or she has read. For example, when I read aloud Terry Trueman's *Stuck in Neutral* (HarperCollins, 2000), a student made a connection between Trueman's story and the book she was reading as part of her independent reading requirements when she wrote, "When Shawn's dad says in his poem, 'Oh, my God, I have a son, he was happy.' It is just like in the book *Where the Heart Is* [Billie Letts, Warner, 1995] when Naomi has a baby and she was very thankful."

A text-to-world connection occurs when a student makes a connection between something in the text and his or her general knowledge about the world. Often these types of connections come out in classroom discussion or general observations after a read-aloud. For example,

although none of my students had ever had the personal experience of having been caught in a whirlpool while swimming, they knew exactly what a whirlpool was when a whirlpool's current drags Kenny to the bottom of the fishing hole in Christopher Paul Curtis' book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Delacorte, 1995). In addition, my students used their general knowledge of the civil rights movement to understand the events that took place in Birmingham in 1963.

7. *Whenever possible and appropriate, provide extra copies of your read-aloud text for those students who want or need to have a copy so they can follow along.*

Some students like to follow along as I read aloud. Other students *need* to follow along so they stay focused. At any rate, it's always good to have extra copies of your read-aloud text whenever possible so those students who are absent can check out a book and read the portion of the text they missed.

8. *Make connections between the various read-alouds you share throughout the year.*

Helping students make connections across texts aids them in their comprehension. For example, when I read aloud Jerry Spinelli's *Loser* (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, 2002), students eventually make the connection between Donald Zinkoff and Penn Webb, a character in *Crash* (Knopf, 1996), another Spinelli book. Both Donald and Penn are unique individuals. In fact, the two characters become so real to my students, they wonder if Penn was a lot like Donald when he was growing up. The more connections we can help our students make between different read-alouds and other texts, the more we aid their comprehension.

9. *Use expression and animation when you read aloud.*

In her chapter “Reading Aloud to Build Success in Reading,” from *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers* (Christopher-Gordon, 1996), Teri S. Lesesne wisely noted that students “do not want us to read books aloud; they want us to act them aloud.” Reading with expression takes practice and preparation. First, I always mark my text to indicate changes of pace and volume. And if there’s a long exchange of dialogue between two or more characters, I try to color code each character’s part so I remember who is speaking.

There is no doubt reading aloud the same story or selection can be draining if you have several groups of the same subject area, such as five sections of seventh-grade reading. There are three practical things you can do to avoid read-aloud burn-out:

- Read different selections and rotate them through the different groups of students.
- Tape record as you read the selection and alternate reading aloud and playing the taped version to different groups of students.
- Purchase books on tape and play the professionally recorded versions to your students.

Regardless of how you achieve your read-alouds, I guarantee that your students will appreciate your efforts to bring text to life. My own experiences as well as current research support the idea that even the most reluctant reader appreciates a good story read aloud.

10. Keep records of the material you designate for your read-alouds and always be on the look-out for new materials to add to your read-aloud collection.

One of my biggest challenges when I decided to implement regular read-alouds in my classes was to

keep track of the various pieces of literature I wanted to use. Although I admit I haven’t completely mastered and tamed the chaos, I have a very low-tech system that keeps me from reading the same selection to the same students more than once. I keep a plastic box of note cards on my desk, and on each card I record the following information:

- The title of the selection and the book in which the selection appears.
- The approximate amount of time it takes to read aloud the selection.
- A brief summary of the selection and its relationship to the curriculum.
- Any prereading instructions, such as vocabulary.
- The dates I’ve read aloud the story.

Although this system will never merit recognition from the American Library Association, it tends to work for me. I recommend you devise some type of tracking system to help you build a repertoire of read-aloud selections and note your uses of each selection.

Reading aloud to your students can be one of the most rewarding classroom activities you can provide. It will impact your students’ comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and motivation and “build community” within your classroom. Try out the 10 to-do’s and see if they work for you!

Christine Boardman Moen is a veteran classroom teacher who currently teaches seventh- and eighth-grade language arts. Her latest book is *Read-Alouds and Performance Reading: A Handbook of Activities for the Middle School Classroom* (Christopher-Gordon, 2004). Currently, she is the president of the Illinois Council for Affective Reading Education.

