

# Making the Very Most of Classroom Read-Alouds to Promote Comprehension and Vocabulary

Lana Edwards Santoro, David J. Chard, Lisa Howard,  
Scott K. Baker

Strategically enhancing read-alouds has been shown to improve student's comprehension. This article provides a detailed description of a study on the efficacy of read-alouds.

**M**elissa Duarte (all names are pseudonyms), an experienced first-grade teacher at Kennedy Elementary School, started the school year with the important goal of teaching her 24 students the decoding skills needed to become independent readers. Evidence from her progress monitoring throughout the year suggests that she is likely to accomplish this goal. However, Melissa and her fellow first-grade teachers are frustrated because their comprehensive reading program (with small-group instruction and intervention for English-language learners) is time consuming and leaves little opportunity to address important content areas such as science and social studies, or to teach students how to think about the ideas they read.

Melissa considered using more read-aloud opportunities to teach vocabulary and comprehension. Her literacy coach was supportive but requested that she identify specific studies documenting the effectiveness of read-aloud instruction for teaching vocabulary and comprehension. Melissa could not find support for such practices in the professional journals to which she had access.

Because many teachers share Melissa's frustrations, we studied the daily use of read-alouds to introduce content not addressed in core reading material and to explicitly teach comprehension skills and vo-

cabulary in first grade. We recognize that there are different approaches to classroom read-alouds. Sometimes read-alouds are used without instructional interruption for the purpose of enjoying and listening to a story. Although there certainly isn't anything inherently wrong with using read-alouds for student enjoyment, like Melissa, we wanted to find ways to use read-alouds to make the most of precious instructional time. Would there be ways to maintain enjoyment while instruction was purposefully incorporated with read-alouds?

There is considerable interest in this topic despite the few specific studies on read-aloud practices. Recent research has established that effective read-alouds contribute to students' comprehension development (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004). Beck and McKeown (2001) also describe read-aloud activities that build background knowledge, language, and listening comprehension skills. For many students who struggle with decoding skills or who are just learning to read fluently, it would seem reasonable that comprehension strategies be taught through oral language opportunities (e.g., read-alouds).

Hickman et al. (2004), Fisher et al. (2004), and Beck and McKeown (2001) provided support for reading aloud as an important part of early reading instruction. Extending previous research, we developed and empirically evaluated the effectiveness of specific read-aloud practices with first-grade children. We wanted to incorporate instruction to improve comprehension skills and strategies, enhance vocabulary knowledge, and introduce content that addresses standards in science and social studies. A more extensive

description of the analysis of the study's data is available from the lead author (Santoro).

This article describes the curriculum used in our research and discusses general strategies for building comprehension when reading aloud to children. We used existing research to help us enhance daily classroom read-alouds for more powerful instruction. Text structure, text-focused discussions, and vocabulary are three primary areas where the research demonstrates links between instruction and student comprehension. Specific principles that guided our work are presented in Table 1.

## Text Structure

"Text structures" are frames that identify important information and connections between ideas (Dickson, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998; Englert & Mariage, 1991, 1992; Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Williams, 2005). The early elementary grades are an ideal time to teach text structure (Adams, 1990). Familiarity with narrative text structure gives students a framework for discussing stories and retelling. As a story is read, the teacher can help students discuss *who* the story is about, *what* happened first, *what* happened next, and *what* happened at the end. If these same target elements are routinely used to identify critical features of a story, students have repeated opportunities to discuss them and make text-to-text connections. For example, not only could students identify story elements in Jan Brett's *The Mitten* (1990, Scholastic), but also they could compare characters and story sequence using the same set of story elements for Brett's *The Hat* (1998, Hodder) or Karma Wilson's *Bear Snores On* (2003, Simon and Schuster). Students could also base a retelling on the same set of target story elements.

Read-alouds also provide an ideal opportunity to teach expository, or information, text structure. Expository texts' use of complex organizational patterns, like compare and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution, appears to result in knowledge of text structure and book language that must not be disregarded (Duke & Kays, 1998). At the very least, young children can be taught that reading information texts often involves dual purposes of reading to locate particular information (Dreher, 1993; Guthrie & Kirsch, 1987) and to learn something new. The research on text structure provided a general format for our read-alouds. Students would need to listen for and apply a different text structure or framework depending on whether the read-aloud was a story book or information book.

## Text-Focused Discussions

Despite the general support for using read-alouds, the ideal format for conducting them is not clear (Fisher et al., 2004). Most recently, Beck and McKeown (2001) explored the use of "text talk" in first-grade classrooms. Their findings suggested that text-based discussions as part of read-alouds may increase vocabulary acquisition and comprehension (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997).

Our read-alouds incorporated structured, interactive teacher and student text-based discussions. Rather than simply reading aloud without discussion, we hoped to create opportunities for children to reflect on the storyline (or the text's language) to promote comprehension. For example, a teacher might pause to have students identify the main character, then expand the discussion by asking about specific character clues. In addition to asking students to predict, a teacher could ask *why* students made a partic-

**Table 1**  
**Principles That Guided the Read-Aloud Project**

### We wanted to...

- Challenge students to develop more complex comprehension strategies than would be necessary for the relatively simple narrative and information texts typically used in first grade
- Use both narrative and information text with lessons to explicitly make text-to-text connections
- Deepen student comprehension and facilitate dialogic interactions both between students and among students
- Use independent student retellings of texts as the primary outcome

ular prediction, then ask them to explain whether the prediction was correct after reading the story. In this way, students become true partners in discussions about the text.

## Vocabulary

The importance of vocabulary to comprehension is widely documented (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998). Read-alouds can provide an ideal “teacher-centered” approach for introducing and talking about new words (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Elley, 1989; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Sénéchal, 1997). Reading aloud and facilitating text-based discussions about words provide contexts and opportunities for children to learn new words before they have the reading skills necessary to acquire vocabulary independently (Biemiller, 2001). In addition to generally discussing vocabulary within the context of a read-aloud text, vocabulary must also be taught directly (Biemiller, 2001). Before reading Carle’s *The Grouchy Ladybug* (1996, HarperTrophy), the word *grouchy* could be explicitly defined and discussed in context, by saying something like the following.

The title of this book is *The Grouchy Ladybug*. Grouchy means grumpy or angry. Someone who is grouchy is not happy. What does grouchy mean? Show me, with your face, what grouchy looks like. Look at the book cover again. How would you describe the ladybug on the cover?

When later discussing story elements, like main character, grouchy would be used to describe the ladybug. “The grouchy ladybug is grouchy, mean, and not polite.” Finally, to promote additional discussion and interaction, prompts can be used to extend student word knowledge (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002), such as “Who can tell me a time when you felt grouchy?” “When you’re grouchy you’re really unhappy. Tell me how that feels.” or “If someone is grouchy, how are they acting, what do they do?”

## Read-Aloud Project Overview

Our federally funded project was to design and evaluate a framework for teaching comprehension of complex narrative and information texts to first-grade students in general education classrooms during read-aloud time (Baker, Chard, & Edwards, 2002). Table 1

outlines the principles guiding our curriculum development. To determine whether our instruction affected comprehension, we assessed the performance of those students who were *most* at risk for overall reading and comprehension difficulties, as well as students who were on track for successful reading development. We compared the performance of students who participated in the read-aloud curriculum with students from classrooms where teachers used their own read-aloud texts and procedures. Our results indicated that enhancing read-alouds with comprehension strategies and text-based discussions made a positive difference in student performance. Students from classrooms using the read-aloud curriculum demonstrated higher levels of comprehension and vocabulary knowledge and included more accurate, higher quality information in retellings. Participating students could also speak with more depth and metacognitive awareness about comprehension (e.g., articulate why it would help you understand better if you identified the type of book that you would be reading). We found no differences in comprehension and vocabulary between the at-risk and average-achieving students in classrooms that used the read-aloud curriculum (Baker, Chard, & Edwards, 2004; Baker, Chard, Santoro, Otterstedt, & Gau, 2006; Santoro, Baker, Chard, & Howard, in press; Santoro, Chard, & Baker, 2005).

## Read-Aloud Curriculum Organization and Structure

We considered several issues when deciding how to structure read-alouds and incorporate comprehension instruction with a series of lessons. To maintain the integrity of a read-aloud experience, optimize instructional time, and make the lessons feasible, we tried to keep daily lessons to between 20 and 30 minutes.

We began our project by reviewing national guidelines such as the National Research Council standards (Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998) and state standards to identify skills and strategies for read-aloud focus. For example, the National Research Council lists “connecting information and events in text-to-life and life-to-text experiences, predicting and justifying what will happen next in stories, and describing new information gained from text in your own words” (pp. 80–81) as instructional priorities in kindergarten and first grade. Because both state standards and the National Research Council emphasize the importance

of expository text in K–3 instruction, we recommend using information and narrative texts together to address early elementary comprehension goals. We incorporated state standards for first-grade science and social studies into our lessons and selected books that would address standards for content knowledge. We integrated language arts and comprehension standards—along with specific content area standards—with our instruction.

We next considered curriculum structure, constructing lessons around a set of week-long “units” consisting of one narrative text and one information text on a common science or social studies theme or topic. The curriculum alternated between a series of science units and a series of social studies units. We designed the curriculum to correspond to holidays often discussed in elementary school curricula. Despite slight differences in the alternating sequence between science and social studies (to align with holidays), our goal was to build connections between texts, themes, other curricula sources, and common activities and events.

Science units were grouped into three-week themes focusing on animals. An example of a theme from the curriculum was “insects.” The first week and unit focused on the general animal category and included an information book about insects and a narrative book featuring many different kinds of insects as story characters. The next two weeks and units in that theme contained specific examples from the general animal category, in this case butterflies and ladybugs. Planning thematic connections created opportunities to build background knowledge and make intertextual connections.

We organized our social studies units into two-week themes focusing on famous people and holidays. For example, the first week of the Presidents’ Day theme was about George Washington, and included an information book about George Washington and a narrative book about a character that reflected some of the traits or issues discussed in the information book. The second week of the Presidents’ Day theme focused on Abraham Lincoln. We created a total of 15 science and social studies units for our read-aloud intervention (see Table 2).

We also wanted to scaffold instruction from more teacher-directed classroom discussions to more independent student responses. In units 1–5, the lessons emphasized teacher demonstration of comprehen-

sion tasks using think-alouds, models, and explanations. In units 6–10 the emphasis was on guiding student responses. Teachers asked questions and elicited answers with prompts and support as necessary. Units 11–15 emphasized guided and more independent student responses with less teacher support and prompting. For example, students did retellings with minimal prompting from teachers.

We included four lessons in each unit, two featuring the narrative text and two featuring the information text. This system provided flexibility to implement the curriculum each week and review content, especially given that school calendars are often disrupted with holidays, assemblies, testing, and snow days. On the “extra” or fifth day of instruction, teachers were encouraged to reread one of the texts, do writing-based retelling activities, complete an unfinished lesson, or conduct a review by comparing and contrasting texts used in prior weeks.

## Book Selection

Criteria we considered when selecting books and determining the themes for read-aloud instruction included the book’s topic, target audience, length, cost, availability, representation of diversity, text coherence, and potential for connections with other texts and topics addressed in first-grade curricula. Table 3 summarizes book selection considerations.

Texts can be selected based on topics that interest young children. For example, we selected several different types of animals for our science units because of the relative ease in comparing and contrasting critical features of general animal categories—it would be fairly easy to compare and contrast what makes an animal a mammal versus what makes an animal a reptile. We also selected books about specific types of animals within each category. Within the general category of reptiles, for example, we sought books about lizards, snakes, and crocodiles. For the social studies units, we focused on books about holidays and famous people because holidays are often introduced in the early grades in the United States as anchors for thematic topics within the curriculum, and because “famous people” was included in state standards for both states where our read-aloud intervention was implemented. We considered books on topics including Thanksgiving, Pocahontas, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln.

**Table 2**  
**Scope and Sequence of the Read-Aloud Curriculum Units and Texts**

Unit	Content	Theme	Topic	Information text	Narrative text	Vocabulary
1	Science	Mammals	Mammals	<i>A True Book: Mammals</i> (Stewart, 2000, Children's Press)	<i>Bear Snores On</i> (Wilson, 2003, Simon and Schuster)	snores, nibble, slumbering, mammal
2	Science	Mammals	Bats	<i>Bats</i> (Gibbons, 2000, Holiday House)	<i>Stellaluna</i> (Cannon, 1999, Chrysalis)	nocturnal, migrate, hibernate, clutch, dodging
3	Science	Mammals	Elephants	<i>What Is an Elephant?</i> (Crossingham & Kalman, 1997, Crabtree)	<i>How the Elephant Got Its Trunk: A Retelling of the Rudyard Kipling Tale</i> (Richards, 2003, Henry Holt)	species, habitat, herbivore, curious, continued, trickle
4	Social studies	Thanksgiving	Thanksgiving	<i>The Pilgrims' First Thanksgiving</i> (McGovern, 1993, Scholastic)	<i>Gracias, the Thanksgiving Turkey</i> (Cowley, 2005, Scholastic)	gracias, amigos, fragrant, Pilgrims, voyage
5	Social studies	Thanksgiving	Native Americans	<i>Pocahontas</i> (Hudson, 2001, Heinemann Library)	<i>The Rough-Face Girl</i> (Martin, 1998, Putnam)	biography, settlers, portrait, invisible, cruel, swift
6	Science	Reptiles	Reptiles	<i>What Is a Reptile?</i> (Kalman, 1998, Crabtree)	<i>Lizard's Home</i> (Shannon, 1999, Greenwillow)	fairness, grinning, predator, molt, scaly
7	Science	Reptiles	Crocodiles	<i>The Crocodile: Ruler of the River</i> (Tracqui, 1997, Charlesbridge)	<i>Bill and Pete</i> (dePaola, 1996, Putnam)	competition, independent, territory, nickname, famous, adventure
8	Science	Reptiles	Sea turtles	<i>A True Book: Sea Turtles</i> (Lepthien, 1997, Children's Press)	<i>Albert's Impossible Toothache</i> (Williams, 2004, Walker)	protection, extinct, impossible, worry, announced, moaned
9	Social studies	African American leaders	Martin Luther King, Jr.	<i>Martin's Big Words</i> (Rappaport, 2007, Jump at the Sun)	<i>Night Golf</i> (Miller, 2002, Lee & Low)	protest, segregation, golf, caddy
10	Social studies	African American leaders	Rosa Parks	<i>I Am Rosa Parks</i> (Parks & Haskins, 1999, Puffin)	<i>Daisy and the Doll</i> (Medearis & Medearis, 2005, University Press of New England)	autobiography, contest, ashamed, recite, variety

(continued)

**Table 2 (continued)**  
**Scope and Sequence of the Read-Aloud Curriculum Units and Texts**

Unit	Content	Theme	Topic	Information text	Narrative text	Vocabulary
11	Social studies	Presidents	George Washington	<i>A Picture Book of George Washington</i> (Adler, 1990, Holiday House)	<i>Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire</i> (deGroat, 2003, SeaStar)	survey, play, notice, reply
12	Social studies	Presidents	Abraham Lincoln	<i>Honest Abe</i> (Kunhardt, 1998, HarperTrophy)	<i>A. Lincoln and Me</i> (Borden, 2001, Scholastic)	slavery, lanky, clumsy
13	Science	Insects	Insects	<i>A True Book: Insects</i> (Stewart, 2000, Children’s Press)	<i>The Bugliest Bug</i> (Shields, 2005, Candlewick)	antennae, arachnid, pair, bugliest, applauded, clever
14	Science	Insects	Butterflies	<i>Monarch Butterflies</i> (Waxman, 2003, Lerner)	<i>Butterfly Boy</i> (Kroll, 2002, Boyds Mills)	nectar, chrysalis, crimson, sweltering
15	Science	Insects	Ladybugs	<i>Ladybugs</i> (Llewellyn & Watts, 2003, Franklin Watts)	<i>The Grouchy Ladybug</i> (Carle, 1996, HarperTrophy)	oozes, grouchy, encountered

**Table 3**  
**Book Selection Criteria**

Criterion	Considerations
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ High interest for young children (e.g., animals)</li> <li>■ Ability to compare and contrast topics across books</li> <li>■ Connected to district, school, and curricula themes</li> <li>■ Connected to state and district standards</li> </ul>
Target audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Grade level of students</li> <li>■ Interests of students</li> <li>■ Length of books</li> </ul>
Diversity and multicultural connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Male and female characters</li> <li>■ Different cultures and ethnicity groups represented</li> <li>■ Different settings and geographical locations</li> </ul>
Text coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Clear story structure</li> <li>■ Expository information presented with clarity and accuracy</li> </ul>
Text-to-text author and illustrator connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Some books written by the same author</li> <li>■ Some books illustrated by the same illustrator</li> </ul>

We also selected books based on the target audience, 6- to 8-year-old children. We intentionally avoided overly simplistic books in favor of those that included rich context for comprehension and vocabulary instruction. A length of approximately 32 pages

was about right for our planned read-aloud and lesson timeframe of 20 to 30 minutes. We also looked for books that included diverse characters and settings.

Finally, we considered text coherence. We wanted to ensure that narrative texts didn’t include a confus-

ing story structure with multiple plot episodes, and that content in information texts was presented accurately and clearly. The books we selected facilitated connections between topics and other texts. We looked for well-known authors and illustrators so we could make comparisons across units about different books by the same author. We chose books by well-known authors who would likely be familiar to children participating in the project (see Table 2 for a list of texts and how they were paired).

### Vocabulary Selection

When selecting words, we chose those that were

- Functional and meaningful
- Rich, varied, and interesting without comprising the text's overall meaning
- Important to understanding the story (Kuhn & Stahl, 1998)

We selected two to four words from each text to explicitly teach and discuss. For example, for the book *Bear Snores On*, we selected *snores* as target vocabulary because we felt *snores* was central to understanding the meaning of the story and an important word from the story's title. If students didn't know the word *snores* it would be very difficult to understand the story. We used Beck et al.'s (2002) tier selection criteria, selecting tier two and tier three words for our target vocabulary. We looked for high-frequency tier two words that would help students expand their vocabulary knowledge (e.g., *curious*, *sweltering*, and *protect*). The tier three words occurred with less frequency but were important within a particular content domain. In many cases, our tier three words (such as *mammal*, *habitat*, and *predator*) were selected from information texts and were science related.

### Pulling It All Together in Read-Aloud Lessons

We included before, during, and after components in all lessons (Table 4). In the before reading portion of the lesson we identified the book type (narrative or information) and prepared students for either listening to a story or learning from an expository text. For example, a teacher might provide the following introduction, "When we start any new book we want to identify our purpose for reading, so there is an impor-

tant question we always want to ask before we start. That question is, "Is this an information book or a story book?" For narrative books, students made predictions about whom or what the story was about and what they thought would happen. For information books, students were asked to identify "what they knew" and "what they wanted to know" about the topic using a K-W-L chart (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned) (Ogle, 1986). For example, before reading Crossingham and Kalman's *What Is an Elephant?* (1997), a teacher might say something like the following:

Let's start with the *K* part of the chart, "what I know". We'll write down a couple of things we think we know about elephants. We don't need to think of or write everything we might know, just one or two things to get our brains thinking. I remember from our book on mammals that elephants are mammals, so I'll write that down. Does anybody else think they know something about elephants? I'll write two more things.

Concept vocabulary necessary to understand the story was directly taught with "student-friendly" definitions prior to reading the book (Beck et al., 2002).

During reading, the lessons focused on text structure in the narrative texts, such as whom the story was about, what happened first, what happened next, and what happened at the end of the story. When reading about the first main thing that happened in a story, teachers would help students recognize and explain that the first important event happens at the beginning of the story and it gets the story started. In the book *How the Elephant Got Its Trunk: A Retelling of the Rudyard Kipling Tale* (Richards, 2003), a teacher would pause to discuss how the little elephant tries to ask members of her family (her mother, father, sister, brother) and some other animals (the giraffe, the hippopotamus) what the crocodile eats for dinner, but no one will answer her.

K-W-L components were also discussed during reading of information texts. When reading *What Is an Elephant?*, a teacher might pause to make the following comments:

This paragraph contained a lot of information. Let's review what it said and put some facts about elephants on the *L* part of our K-W-L Chart. One of the first things it said was that elephants are mammals. On our K-W-L Chart, we had that as something we thought we knew. Now we can add it to the *L* part of the chart. The book said that because they are mammals, elephants are

**Table 4**  
**Comprehension Strategy Focus for the Before, During, and After Lesson Components**

Before reading	During reading	After reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Identifying the purpose for reading (e.g., information or story)</li> <li>■ Previewing (title, author, illustrator)</li> <li>■ Predicting/priming</li> <li>■ Defining critical vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Using a consistent framework to discuss the text (e.g., story elements, K-W-L with focus questions)</li> <li>■ Using question-asking strategies</li> <li>■ Making connections (text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world)</li> <li>■ Making inferences</li> <li>■ Self-monitoring</li> <li>■ Vocabulary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Retelling</li> <li>■ Introducing, reviewing, and extending vocabulary</li> </ul>

warm-blooded. What else do we know about elephants because they are mammals?

Questioning during reading also included higher level thinking skills (making predictions with text-based confirmations and drawing inferences). For example, when reading *The Bugliest Bug* (Shields, 2005), a teacher might pause to remind students that authors don't always tell us everything, as in the following excerpt.

You know, authors don't always say things directly. This part of the story is talking about the stage where the contest is taking place. It says that "A lacy white curtain hung from the trees" (p. 7). Knowing what you know now, what do you think the lacy white curtain is?

We also provided structured opportunities for students to talk about the text in "book clubs" of two or four students. Book clubs consisted of a small group of students, typically student pairs or "book club partners," matched by the teacher. During read-alouds, teachers would pause and ask students to discuss a particular comprehension question. A focus question was always used to direct the student-to-student discussions. For example, a teacher might ask students to turn to their book club partner to share thoughts about who the main character is in the story. Finally, vocabulary was taught or reviewed it occurred in the text.

After reading, teachers would model a story or information book retelling using a common text structure framework. With a story, for example, teachers used a visual prompt sheet that included icons for the main character, what happened first, what happened next, and what happened at the end. Figure 1 and Figure 2

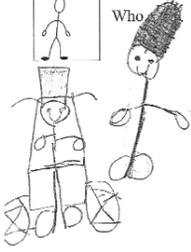
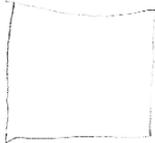
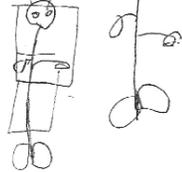
show examples of a story retelling prompt sheet used with the book *Butterfly Boy* (Kroll, 2002). The framework used in this example includes who, problem, solution, and end. In addition to using the retelling sheets to model and help prompt student retellings, many teachers had students write notes or draw simple pictures on their prompt sheets. Figure 1 is an example of a first-grade student's story retelling prompt sheet from the beginning of the year. Figure 2 shows that by the end of the year, students were able to write more story information on the prompt sheets. When students practiced retellings, they used their own story retelling sheets to prompt them. The K-W-L chart provided the framework for information book retellings. As with the narrative retellings, students practiced as a small group or in pairs.

Vocabulary was discussed and reviewed after reading. When discussing the word *worry* from *Albert's Impossible Toothache* (Williams, 2004), teachers would ask students to practice saying the word, define the word, and then discuss a text-based example of it. For example, consider the following:

One of the other words we learned is worry. Everyone, say "worry." What does worry mean? Why is Albert's mother worried about him? Why is she concerned about him?

If class time permitted, discussions after reading also included vocabulary extension activities with opportunities for students to expand their knowledge and use of target words. For the vocabulary words *slumbering* and *ribbling*, the following questions guided

**Figure 1**  
**Sample of Student Story Retelling Prompt Sheet**  
**From the Beginning of the First Grade**

Story Retell	
<p>Who</p>  	<p>Problem</p> <p>Hector</p> 
<p>Solution</p> 	<p>The End</p>  

**Figure 2**  
**Sample of Student Story Retelling Prompt Sheet**  
**From the End of First Grade**

Story Retell	
<p>Who</p> <p>Amilow and Abralow.</p>	<p>Problem</p> <p>The Dad painted the garage door blue.</p>
<p>Solution</p> <p>Amilow put his white shirt on and the brown box.</p>	<p>The End</p> <p>Amilow was happy again and then Dad inportin new it to he Amilow painted. his new us so</p>

discussions. Students were asked to justify and explain their answers.

- If you are running, are you slumbering? How do you know?
- If you are taking a nap with your eyes closed, are you slumbering? How do you know?
- If you are biting off small bits of cookie, are you nibbling or slumbering? How do you know?
- If you fall asleep during a movie, are you nibbling or slumbering? How do you know?

Overall, read-aloud lessons included making text-to-text and text-to-life connections before, during, and after reading, which were integrated with the lessons and later became connections between books both within and across units. Lessons also addressed literal and inferential comprehension and a range of comprehension strategies. Table 4 highlights the comprehension strategy focus that was targeted in the before, during, and after reading components of lessons.

### Narrative Lessons

The first narrative lesson always included a 5-minute introduction of the book, a discussion about whether the text was a story or an information book, and predictions. During the 10- to 15-minute read-aloud teachers would pause to confirm predictions about the text, use think-alouds to clarify story events or vocabulary, and make connections to other texts. In sum, the read-aloud for the first narrative lesson was centered on story structure and the information students would need for retellings. After the read-aloud, teachers would use a large story retelling chart, or a transparency for an overhead projector, to model a story retelling. Students would each have copies of the retelling prompt sheet. The following lesson excerpt illustrates how a teacher might discuss retelling components and model a retelling by guiding student responses.

Now that we've discussed our book we're going to do a retelling of *Albert's Impossible Toothache* as a class. Look at the overhead (or your retelling sheet). Let's see how clear we can make our retelling. Our goal should be that someone listening to our retelling would have a good understanding of the story. OK, let's see what we can do.

What are the first two things we tell? We describe the book type and its title. So, we might say something like... "We read a story book called *Albert's Impossible Toothache*."

Remember, the next thing we tell is who is the main character, and something about that character. We could say “This story is about, or the main character in this story is Albert Turtle. He is a young land turtle who doesn’t like it that no one ever believes him.”

Then what do we tell? We talk about what happens first, by describing the first important thing that happens in the story. For example, with this story we would want to say something like, “In *Albert’s Impossible Toothache*, the first important thing that happens is that Albert complains, or announces, tells, that he has a toothache. But no one in his family believes him. They say it’s impossible, it couldn’t happen.”

Now what do we tell? We have to talk about what happens next. Because a lot of things usually happen in a story, when we tell what happens next in a story, we pick out just the important things. And sometimes we have come up with one sentence that summarizes or describes many events. So, we might say, “Next, Albert’s mother tries a lot of different things to get him to get out of bed. But nothing works, so Albert’s mother worries and worries—she is very concerned about him.” If we have time or want to tell all the details of what Albert’s mother tried, we could say, “Albert’s mother fixes him a special breakfast, asks him to play catch with her, and has Albert look at pictures of the family in Disneyland.”

The next thing in a retelling is what happens at the end—including describing how the main character feels. So, for this story we could say, “At the end of this story, Albert’s grandmother comes to Albert’s house. The family tells her about Albert and his impossible toothache. Instead of telling Albert his toothache is impossible, Grandmother Turtle believes him and asks Albert where his toothache is. Albert shows her his toe, where a gopher bit him. Albert’s toothache is an ache caused by a tooth! Grandmother Turtle fixes Albert’s “toothache” by wrapping his toe with her handkerchief. Albert is happy. He smiles a big smile—he beams—and gets out of bed.”

The very last part of a good story retelling is giving a personal response. We tell whether we liked or didn’t like the story *and* tell why. For this story, I would say, “I liked this book. One of the main reasons is that I thought it was neat that Grandmother Turtle believed Albert when no one else did.”

During this first narrative lesson, vocabulary was also discussed and reviewed. The modeled retelling and vocabulary activities took approximately 10 minutes.

The second narrative lesson in a unit began with a brief review of the title, author, and illustrator. Students were asked to identify whether the book was a story or information book and to describe the text features that helped them decide. Students reviewed the retelling chart from the first narrative lesson before

the text was read a second time. During the second reading of the narrative text there were more pauses for teacher–student discussion and increased emphasis on inferential understanding. Lessons also featured more book club opportunities during pauses in the read-aloud. The second read-aloud took approximately 15 to 20 minutes because of the increased teacher–student discussions. The after-reading component included a teacher-guided retelling using a chart or overhead projector, and concluded by having students work with a book club partner to practice story retelling using prompt sheets.

First let’s do a quick story retelling for *Albert’s Impossible Toothache* as a class. Look at the overhead or your retelling sheet. The first two things we tell are book type and book title. We read a story book called *Albert’s Impossible Toothache*. The next thing we tell is who the main character is and something about that character. The main character in this story is Albert Turtle. He is a young land turtle who doesn’t like it that no one ever believes him.

Once we’ve told about the main character, we start telling the important things that happen in the story—starting with what happens first. In *Albert’s Impossible Toothache*, the first important thing that happens is that Albert complains or announces to, tells, his family he has a toothache and he won’t get out of bed. No one in his family believes him. Then we tell what happens next. Albert’s mother tries a lot of different things to get him to get out of bed. She fixes him a special breakfast, asks him to play catch with her, and asks him to look at pictures of the family in Disneyland. Nothing works, and Albert’s mother worries and worries—she is very concerned about him.

Then we tell what happens at the end, including how the main character feels. At the end of *Albert’s Impossible Toothache*, Albert’s grandmother comes to Albert’s house. Instead of telling Albert his toothache is impossible, Grandmother Turtle believes him and asks him where his toothache is. Albert shows her his toe, where a gopher bit him. Albert’s toothache is an ache caused by a tooth! Grandmother Turtle fixes Albert’s “toothache” by wrapping his toe with her handkerchief. Albert is happy. He smiles a big smile—he beams—and gets out of bed. The very last part of a good story retelling is giving a personal response—I liked this book because I liked how Grandmother Turtle believed Albert.

Now each of you is going to take a turn doing a complete story retelling for *Albert’s Impossible Toothache* with your book club partner. When it’s your turn, use the words and pictures on the Story Retelling Sheet to help you remember all the parts you need to include, and use the words and pictures you put on the sheet to help you remember what you want to tell about this

particular story. Don't forget to end your retelling with whether you liked the story or didn't like it and why. Each person will have about one and a half minutes, and I will tell you when it's time to switch. Those who want to start first, raise your hand. Those who will be listeners, remember to listen closely to your partner so you can give them feedback when they are done. OK, get ready to start.

### Information Lessons

The first information lesson in a unit began with a 5- to 10-minute topic introduction, identification of the title and author, and a discussion about whether the text was a story or information book. A modified K-W-L chart (Ogle, 1986) helped students prepare and activate background knowledge. Teachers guided students through a brainstorm about what they thought they knew about the text's topic and wrote student responses in the "what I think I know" section of the K-W-L chart. Next, teachers asked students to think about what they wanted to learn about the topic. To help students make connections across multiple texts, we asked that teachers always use predetermined focus questions for "what you want to know" in addition to soliciting one or two student-generated questions. For example, when reading texts on specific animal types like crocodiles, teachers would always ask the following questions. "What does a crocodile look like?" "What does a crocodile eat?" (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
K-W-L Chart With Focus Questions Added to the "What Do You Want to Know?" Column

K-W-L		
What You Think You <b>K</b> now	What You <b>W</b> ant to Know	What You <b>L</b> earned
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does a crocodile look like?</li> <li>• What does a crocodile eat?</li> </ul>	

Reading the information text in the first lesson took approximately 10 to 15 minutes. We selected excerpts focusing on the information in the "what you want to know" component of the K-W-L chart that were of interest to students. The read-aloud focused on confirming student predictions, drawing conclusions, making connections, and learning vocabulary. Unlike the repeated reading format used for narrative book lessons, the information book was read in two parts across two lessons. After the read-aloud in the first lesson, teachers guided students through a retelling and summary of that lesson's excerpts. The classroom K-W-L chart facilitated a teacher-directed retelling focusing on "what you learned." Teachers would spend approximately 5 to 10 minutes concluding the lesson with the retelling and text summary.

The second information lesson began with a 5- to 10-minute review of the topic, purpose for reading, and the K-W-L chart from the previous lesson. Students were instructed to listen for new information to add to the "what you learned" section of the chart. The read-aloud began where the previous lesson ended and again focused on making and confirming predictions, drawing conclusions, and making connections to personal experiences and other texts. Like the first information text lesson, the second also directed teachers to spend approximately 10 to 15 minutes on the read-aloud and conclude with a teacher-directed review of the completed K-W-L chart. Next, students met in book clubs to talk about what they learned by practicing retellings with a fact sheet. The fact sheet highlighted content details from the focus questions that were used in the K-W-L chart's "what you want to know" section. Figure 4 shows an example of the fact sheet that was used for the book *Sea Turtles* (Leptien, 1997). Fact sheets were used as prompts to help students with retellings. The final teacher-directed summary of the K-W-L chart and the student retelling with fact sheets took approximately 5 to 10 minutes.

### Beyond the Read-Aloud Project

Recall the opening example of Melissa Duarte and her colleagues on the first-grade team. These teachers struggled to find time to fit everything into classroom schedules, and were frustrated because their comprehensive reading program was extremely time consuming. Melissa and her colleagues felt they were unable

to fully cover reading, mathematics, and other content areas such as science and social studies, and wanted additional time to teach students how to apply comprehension strategies to what they read. Our project demonstrated that read-aloud time is an ideal opportunity to build comprehension through the use of oral language activities, listening comprehension, and text-based discussion.

Our research showed that read-alouds, with explicit comprehension instruction and active, engaging discussions about text, can promote comprehension and vocabulary even as students are learning to read (Baker et al., 2004; Baker et al., 2006; Santoro et al., in press; Santoro et al., 2005). In terms of overall comprehension, as measured by a composite of all the comprehension measures used in our study, the study benefited the read-aloud project students. In terms of narrative text specifically, students in read-aloud classrooms had longer retellings than students from classrooms that did not follow read-aloud lessons and procedures. Students in read-aloud classrooms also had retellings that reflected a depth of text comprehension. For example, students who received the read-aloud curriculum produced retellings with more text-based examples and elaborate, rich statements. Increased quality and depth was documented when retellings were scored. Components of the read-aloud curriculum that may have contributed to this outcome include the intentional emphasis on text structure throughout lessons, the use of visual prompt sheets to facilitate retellings, daily practice of student retellings, and text-focused discussions.

Incorporating comprehension instruction and read-alouds appears to be a promising way to boost student comprehension. There are certainly times when read-alouds can simply focus on the enjoyment of books; however, read-alouds must be carefully planned if they are to affect students' comprehension. Making the *very* most of read-aloud time requires teaching students to recognize the differences between narrative and information text structure, to know the meanings of target vocabulary, and to become active participants in purposeful discussions about texts.

*Note.* Research on the read-aloud curriculum was supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Grant number CFDA 84.305G.

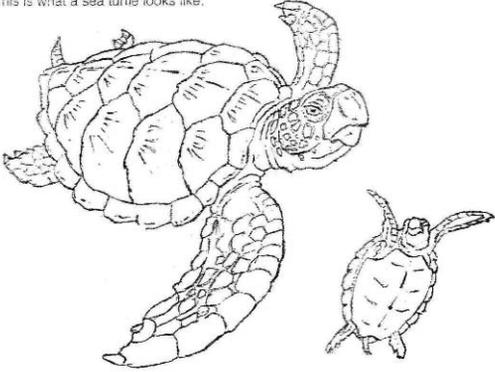
**Figure 4**  
Student Fact Sheet for Prompting Sea Turtles  
Information Retell

Name \_\_\_\_\_

TOPIC: \_\_\_\_\_

Sea turtles are \_\_\_\_\_  
(reptiles)

This is what a sea turtle looks like.



Most sea turtles eat fish, crabs, jellyfish, and \_\_\_\_\_  
(seaweed)

Sea turtles, like all turtles, don't have teeth. They swallow their food whole.

*Santoro is a research associate at the Alexandria, Virginia office of the Pacific Institutes for Research and the Instructional Research Group in Long Beach, California, USA ; e-mail lsantoro@pacificir.org. Chard is dean of the School of Education and Human Development of Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA; email dchard@smu.edu. Howard is a project coordinator at Pacific Institutes for Research at the University of Oregon, USA; e-mail lhoward@pacificir.org. Baker is the director of the Pacific Institutes for Research at the University of Oregon; e-mail sbaker@uoregon.edu.*

### References

- Adams, M.J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- Anderson, R.C., & Freebody, P. (1981). Vocabulary knowledge. In J.T. Guthrie (Ed.), *Comprehension and teaching: Research reviews* (pp. 77–117). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Anderson, R.C., & Nagy, W.E. (1991). Word meanings. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 690–724). White Plains, NY: Longman.

- Baker, S., Chard, D.J., & Edwards, L. (2002). *The story readaloud project: The development of an innovative instructional approach to promote comprehension and vocabulary in first grade classrooms*. Research funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (CFDA 84.305G). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
- Baker, S., Chard, D.J., & Edwards, L. (2004, June). *Teaching first grade students to listen attentively to narrative and expository text: Results from an experimental study*. Paper presented at the 11th annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Reading, Amsterdam.
- Baker, S., Chard, D.J., Santoro, L.E., Otterstedt, J., & Gau, J. (2006). *Reading aloud to students: The development of an intervention to improve comprehension and vocabulary of first graders*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Baker, S.K., Simmons, D.C., & Kame'enui, E.J. (1998). Vocabulary acquisition: Research bases. In D.C. Simmons & E.J. Kame'enui (Eds.), *What reading research tells us about children with diverse learning needs: Bases and basics* (pp. 183–218). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Beck, I.L., & McKeown, M.G. (2001). Text talk: Capturing the benefits of read-aloud experiences for young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 55, 10–20.
- Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., Hamilton, R.L., & Kucan, L. (1997). *Questioning the author: An approach for enhancing student engagement with text*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: Guilford.
- Biemiller, A. (2001, Spring). Teaching vocabulary: Early, direct, and sequential. *American Educator*, 25 24–28, 47.
- Dickson, S.V., Simmons, D.C., & Kame'enui, E.J. (1998). Text organization: Research bases. In D.C. Simmons & E.J. Kame'enui (Eds.), *What the research tells us about children with diverse learning needs: Basis and basics* (pp. 239–278). New York: Erlbaum.
- Dickinson, D.K., & Smith, M.W. (1994). Long-term effects of preschool teachers' book readings on low-income children's vocabulary and story comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 29, 104–122.
- Dreher, M.J. (1993). Reading to locate information: Societal and educational perspectives. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 18, 129–138.
- Duke, N., & Kays, J. (1998). "Can I say 'Once upon a time'?: Kindergarten children developing knowledge of information book language. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13, 295–318.
- Elley, W.B. (1989). Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 24, 174–187.
- Englert, C.S., & Mariage, T.V. (1991). Shared understandings: Structuring the writing experience through dialogue. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 24, 330–342.
- Englert, C.S., & Mariage, T.V. (1992). Shared understandings: Structuring the writing experience through dialogue. In D. Carnine & E. Kame'enui (Eds.), *Higher order thinking: Designing curriculum for mainstreamed students* (pp. 107–136). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Fisher, D., Flood, J., Lapp, D., & Frey, N. (2004). Interactive read-alouds: Is there a common set of implementation practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 58, 8–17.
- Goldman, S.R., & Rakestraw, J.A. (2000). Structural aspects of constructing meaning from text. In M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3, pp. 311–336). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Guthrie, J.T., & Kirsch, I.S. (1987). Distinctions between reading comprehension and locating information in text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 79, 220–227.
- Hickman, P., Pollard-Durodola, S., & Vaughn, S. (2004). Storybook reading: Improving vocabulary and comprehension for English-language learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 57, 720–730.
- Kuhn, M.R., & Stahl, S.A. (1998). Teaching children to learn word meanings from context: A synthesis and some questions. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 30, 119–138.
- Ogle, D. (1986). K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text. *The Reading Teacher*, 39, 564–570.
- Pearson, P.D., & Fielding, L. (1991). Comprehension instruction. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 815–860). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Robbins, C., & Ehri, L.C. (1994). Reading storybooks to kindergartners helps them learn new vocabulary words. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86, 54–64.
- Santoro, L.E., Baker, S.K., Chard, D.J., & Howard, L. (in press). The comprehension conversation: Using intentional and purposeful text-based discourse during read-alouds to promote student comprehension and vocabulary. In B. Taylor & J. Ysseldyke (Eds.), *Educational interventions for struggling readers*. New York: Teachers College.
- Santoro, L.E., Chard, D.J., & Baker, S.K. (2005, April). *Optimizing first grade read-aloud instruction*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Sénéchal, M. (1997). The differential effect of storybook reading on preschoolers' acquisition of expressive and receptive vocabulary. *Journal of Child Language*, 24, 123–138.
- Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffith, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Williams, J.P. (2005). Instruction in reading comprehension for primary-grade students: "A focus on text structure". *Journal of Special Education*, 39, 6–18.



## Lesson Link

For related lesson plans, visit [ReadWriteThink.org](http://ReadWriteThink.org) and click Lessons to find

- ▶ [Catching the Bug for Reading Through Interactive Read-Alouds](#)
- ▶ [Teaching Shapes Using Read-Alouds, Visualization, and Sketch to Stretch](#)
- ▶ [Thundering Tall Tales: Using Read-Aloud as a Springboard to Writing](#)