

Going Beyond the Read-Aloud in Secondary Classrooms



Read-alouds are just as important for middle and high schoolers (in every subject*) as they are for younger kids. All readers need strong models of prosody in order to build their inner voices and support comprehension as they tackle more and more challenging texts. Modeling the kind of thinking effective readers in your discipline do is also a key way to teach the skills of comprehension necessary for them to succeed in your subject area.

Additionally, hearing you read aloud can be an excellent scaffold for struggling readers and English learners, as it relieves some of the cognitive load associated with decoding and allows them to focus their efforts on meaning-making. This puts them closer to the same starting point as their less-challenged classmates when they move into meaning-making activities.

When educators intentionally extend read-alouds into writing, play, conversation, and hands-on experiences, students are given multiple ways to process ideas, build understanding, and express their thinking—all of which shift reading from a passive activity to an active, cognitively demanding learning and thinking process. Rather than simply receiving information from a text, students are required to engage with both language and content, determine what is important, work to revise their developing understandings, and make decisions about how to represent their thinking.

By planning your read-aloud with extension activities in mind, texts become sites for rich language development and deep thinking, as well as meaningful learning in all content classes. This guide offers practical ways to move beyond the read-aloud and transform all types of text into active, multimodal literacy and learning experiences that support comprehension, language development, and joyful learning.

**Each content area has its own ways of representing knowledge in text and its own ways of thinking. Content area teachers should think about how experts in their fields communicate and offer students explicit instruction and scaffolding that allows them to play in and with these roles. Envisioning Knowledge: Building Literacy in the Academic Disciplines by Judith A Langer is an excellent overview of ways of thinking and communicating in various disciplines. Additionally, Read Alouds for All Learners by Molly Ness offers structures for thinking about offering read-alouds in content classes.*

ACTIVITY #1

Use a Guiding Question to Help Students Monitor Their Evolving Thinking



ILA

PREP: Create a guiding question. Think: What themes are we exploring? What content are we learning? What text/genre elements are we examining? (No matter what, it should require students to go beyond a summary of the text.)

Examples

- *How does photosynthesis relate to cellular respiration? How is photosynthesis important to all organisms, not just plants?*
- *How do the themes of gender and class show up in Mr. Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth and what message does the text seem to be sending about them at this point?*
- *How did tax laws play a role in the relationship between Britain and its American Colonies in the lead up to the American Revolution?*
- *How does Edgar Allen Poe use rhythm and rhyme to develop mood and how does it contribute to meaning in "The Raven"?*

READ (and annotate): As you read, return frequently to the guiding question, modeling the kind of thinking you do when making meaning and modeling annotations to help students capture that thinking. ("How does this paragraph/chapter/section help us answer ...?")

WRITE: After the read-aloud, instruct students to do a quick-write with the guiding question as their prompt. Tell them to capture their initial thoughts immediately and then take a moment to skim back through their annotations and add anything else that feels important.

DISCUSS: Have students share their thinking in a class discussion—use pairing/grouping as a scaffold. Encourage students to note down any ideas from their classmates that they thought were especially interesting and to support their ideas with reference to the text.

REVISE: After the discussion, have students do another quick-write: How did your thinking change as a result of our discussion? What are you even more convinced of? Why? (Possible sentence frame: "At first I thought ..., but now ... because ...")

ACTIVITY #2

Use the Read-Aloud as a Way to Scaffold Lessons on Expository Paragraphs



Prep: Focus your read-aloud on a guiding question that you would like students to write an expository paragraph about.

Quick Write: After the read-aloud, have students do a quick write on the one big idea they want to take away. (This can be paired with Activity #1, above.)

Mini-Lesson: Offer a mini-lesson on the difference between claims and evidence (or opinions vs facts from the text) and have them revise their big idea statement to ensure it fits the definition of a claim (or opinion).

Optional: group students with similar ideas and have them co-develop a more sophisticated or nuanced claim and then work collaboratively on the next step.

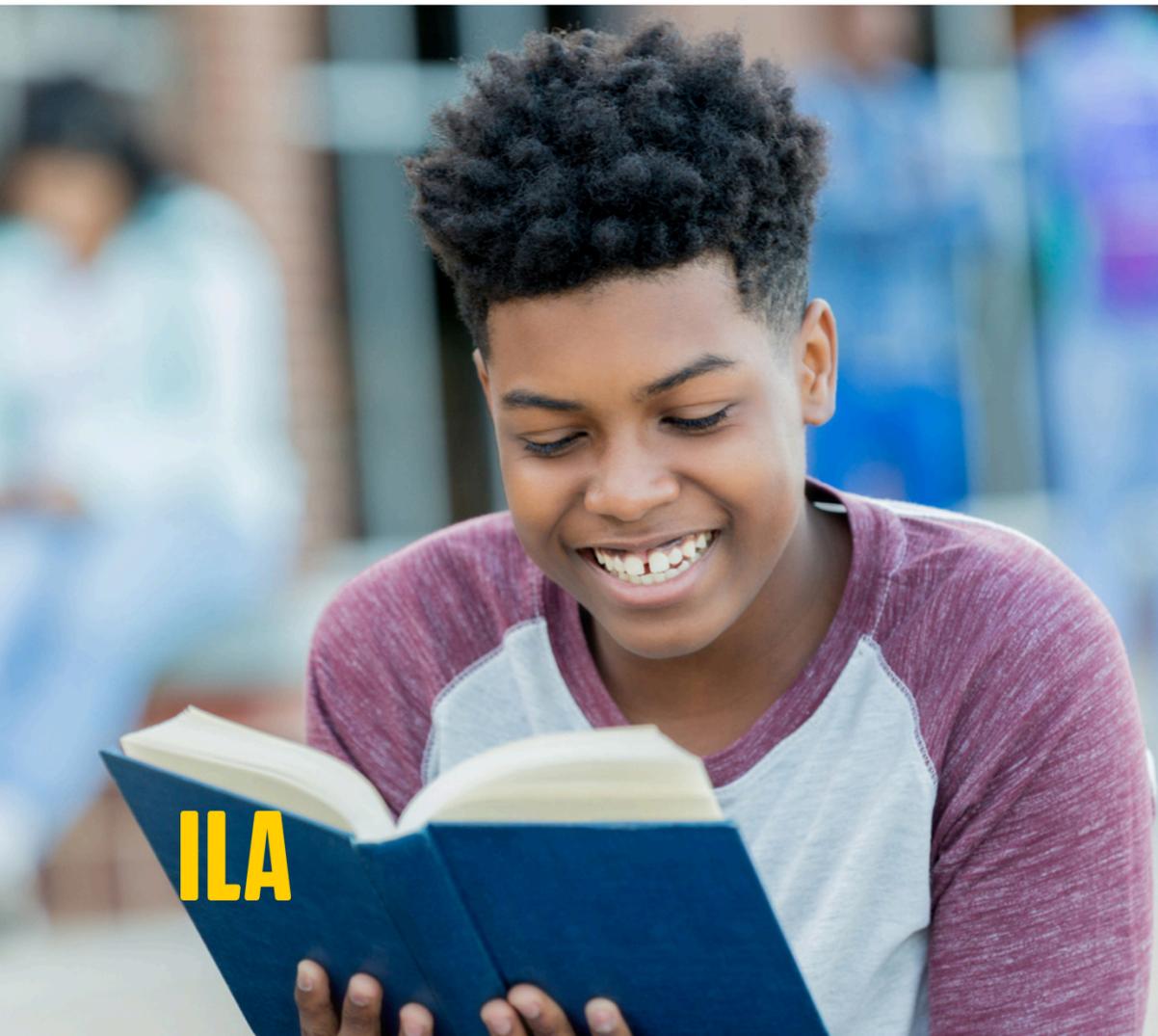
Review Annotations: Have students review their annotations and re-read the text, as necessary, with the purpose of collecting evidence/facts to support their claims/opinions.

Complete Paragraphs: Then have them turn their claims and evidence into paragraphs, using whatever form you teach (I'm partial to TEA/Schaffer)

Once they are comfortable writing claims, repeat this lesson but move the mini-lesson to the evidence-gathering stage (What makes for strong evidence? Which evidence is best?) and then to the analysis/commentary stage (How can I show that this evidence connects to my claim? What is my warrant?).

ACTIVITY #3

Read With a Writer's Eye (Sentence Analysis and Imitation)



ILA

Focus your lens: Choose one meaty or beautifully crafted sentence from the read-aloud text and tell students you'll be looking closely at it and reading it "with a writer's eye" to determine what different elements are *doing* and what *effect* they have on the reader.

Teachers often shy away from teaching syntax and sentence analysis because students don't know grammatical terms, but all you really need is to help them focus on function.

Identify core meaning: Start with asking students to identify: Who is doing something? What are they doing? (This gets them to identify the subject and verb.)

Identify other information: Pick another word or groups of words (phrase or clause) in the sentence and ask students what other questions it answers (To whom? How? When? Where? Why?) and what information it gives about those questions.

Think about order and connections: Depending on the sentence, you might ask: What order is the information given in? How are relationships between information shown (punctuation, various types of conjunctions)?

Think about other stylistic choices: Ask students what else they notice, such as repetition, sound (rhyme, assonance, etc.), types of words used, what is stated and unstated, etc.

Label and Imitate: Have students label the different parts you've identified based on function and then model writing a new sentence that imitates the style and structure but says something different. Then have students do the same. (Encourage them to keep using this structure and others you analyze in their own writing.)

*Nina Schuyler's newsletter [Stunning Sentences](#) has so many great examples of this kind of close reading (for an adult audience) that you might use for inspiration. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* by Loretta S. Gray and Martha Kolln and *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers* by Brock Haussamen with Amy Benjamin, Martha Kolln, and Rebecca S. Wheeler are both helpful resources for getting more comfortable teaching the art of sentence imitation.*

ACTIVITY #4

Visualization + The Two-Page Spread (Supporting the Creation of Mental Models)



Simple Visualization: Bust out the art supplies and encourage students to represent what they are seeing in their mind’s eye as they listen to a scene from a narrative, a short poem, or a section from an expository text.

Let them know that their drawing ability isn’t important, what is important is that they capture key details and represent their connections within a larger whole.

This can be a low-stakes, informal way to get a sense of their comprehension—some students may focus on certain details but misunderstand how they fit in, others may focus on gist (correct or not) but miss important details that are key to full comprehension.

Two-Page Spread: In *4 Essential Studies*, Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher have an extremely effective, open-ended practice in which they ask students simply to show their thinking about a text by filling up a two-page spread in their notebooks.

It can be helpful to say, “This should not just be a collection of notes or a list of annotations you made. Show that you have gone back and thought again about the text/topic.”

It can also be helpful to offer things to think about (which will depend on your subject, [here are some ideas for English](#)) as well as ways to organize (lists, charts, key terms, images and diagrams, categories, maps, mind-maps, etc.). Encourage them to create an organizing scheme of some sort and to show the connections they see in some way.

Kids get better and better at this with practice, so make it a repeated activity and put excellent or thought-provoking student examples under the document camera or in your slideshows!

ACTIVITY #5

Vocabulary and Background Knowledge Collages



Prep: Review your text for words and key terms that might trip students up and are worth teaching. (Take a peak at *Read Alouds for All Learners* by Molly Ness for her take on how to determine potential stumbling blocks.)

Collect: Give students a list of words and simple definitions that are appropriate to the reading and have them cut up magazines or print images from the internet that represent the new words or concepts.

Collage: For each word/concept, post a piece of paper around the room and have students walk over and affix their image. Ideally, you'll end up with a variety of images for each word that reveal nuances in meaning.

Gallery Walk: Print out copies of empty Frayer Models (1 per word per kid) and have them walk around and use the group collages to fill in the various boxes (examples, non-examples, characteristics)

Vocabulary work is very helpful when done BEFORE the read-aloud. Being pre-armed with the knowledge lowers the cognitive load as students read/listen.

ACTIVITY #6

Act it out!



Have small groups of students turn the read-aloud text into a play that they perform.

They will need to look closely at the text to determine how best to convey meaning through

- dialogue
- stage directions (blocking, facial expression and body language, etc.)
- props
- costumes
- scenery

You might consider having them draft “artist’s statements” in which they use evidence from the text to support the decisions they made.

ACTIVITY #7

Theatre of the Oppressed (-ish)



Theatre of the Oppressed is a book by Augusto Boal that describes a form of interactive theatre where members of the audience can “tap in” to replace characters onstage in order to act differently and change the outcome of oppressive situations.

If you are reading something that depicts incidents of oppression, bullying, or even just unhealthy interpersonal interaction, this is a great way for students to practice healthy social-emotional skills they have learned.

Group: Break students into small groups. Each group should have enough students to act out a scene from the read-aloud text AND to sit as audience-member “plants” who will interrupt the action on-stage.

Plan: Each group will plan a performance of their scene (See Activity #6) AND use their prior social-emotional learning to plan when and how some members could interrupt the action and change the behavior, resulting in a different outcome.

Perform: During the performance, the students chosen to be interruptors sit initially with the audience. At the appointed time, they step onstage, tap the character whose actions they want to change and take their place on stage (or add themselves to the scene as a bystander/upstander/ally), and perform the healthier actions. The original actor steps to the side.

Debrief: After each scene, debrief with the class about the effectiveness of the techniques portrayed, possible challenges they might see in real life, and what it felt like to take the healthier action.

Important: Make sure to pair the text with sufficient learning about healthy ways of interrupting whatever it is they will be dramatizing. You must also be mindful of your specific students’ backgrounds, needs, and circumstances so that you can avoid causing harm or duplicating oppression within your classroom community through the dramatization.

ACTIVITY #8

Hexagonal Thinking

Hexagons are a fun way to practice making connections between ideas in a text because, when tiled, regular hexagons meet up in threes and each hexagon can connect on multiple different sides.

Prep: Cut out a whole bunch of regular, identical paper hexagons and decide on the categories you want students to focus on (for example, characters, settings, themes/ideas, motifs, objects, character traits, etc.). Optional: Cut out paper arrows.

Collect Words: Each small group of students creates a list of words from the read-aloud text. You might have them include at least 5-10 in each category.

Narrow them Down: Each group then discusses and comes to consensus about the twelve most important words (make sure they come from multiple categories!) and write them one per hexagon.

Find and Visualize Connections: Each small group discusses how best to tile their hexagons to show important relationships that appear in the text.

Put the Connections into Words: Each group then chooses the two or three most important connections (optional: lay the arrows on top of their pattern pointing to those intersections and have them photograph the layout) and puts them into writing (1-2 sentences per connection. For example, if I had a set of hexagons about Disney movies, I might note a connection at the intersection of Tia Pepa from Encanto, Weather Powers, and Big Feelings. My sentence could be: “Tia Pepa’s power over the weather emerges out of big feelings she has.”)

Tip: These statements could become topic sentences or thesis statements for writing assignments, and the hexagons support students in determining what kind of evidence and/or reasoning will be needed.

Bringing it All Together

Going beyond the read-aloud means honoring the full pathway through which students develop as readers and writers and getting explicit with them about the messy, sometimes abstract, behind-the-scenes work that goes into expert reading, writing, and thinking.

Supporting students to move through reading and hearing text to thinking and talking about ideas to expressing and revising their own thinking requires intentional planning. When educators intentionally support comprehension through read-alouds and then extend student thinking about those texts to conversation, hands-on experiences, writing, and metacognitive reflection, they create collaborative classrooms in which students are encouraged and supported to dig deeper and not to be content with “first draft” thinking. Thinking is modeled and taught explicitly and reflected on. Writing becomes a part of a rich meaning-making experience, rather than an isolated task or a mere assessment.

The strategies and activities shared here are not meant to be followed in sequence or built into every unit. Rather, they should serve as flexible invitations to get creative about how you are modeling the kinds of layered reading, writing, and thinking that experts in your field do and how you are supporting students to joyfully and playfully apprentice into its discourse. They really do want to, even though they sometimes play it too cool.

