

Seven Classroom Routines that Promote Content Literacy Skills



By Amy Benjamin



Eye On Education
6 Depot Way West
Larchmont, NY 10538
www.eyoneducation.com
(888) 299-5350 phone
(914) 833-0761 fax

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Everyone knows the story of the young man carrying a violin case, walking down the street in Manhattan. He stops a fellow pedestrian and politely asks, “Excuse me, but could you please tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?” And the man replies: *“Practice! Practice! Practice!”*

Yes, that’s the story, and we’re sticking to it. To get better as readers, our students need to practice. The more practice they get, the more words and information they will absorb. New words and new information form background knowledge, the secret sauce of comprehension. Practice leads to familiarity with phrases, and that results in the ability to chunk words into phrases, rather than reading word by word. The ability to “inhale” phrases as single units of meaning is what fluency is all about. Fluency is the capacity to read effortlessly and with comprehension.

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We could, of course, simply request that our students practice reading at home. Why not? Can't they just step away from their video games, their social media pages, their texting, their spending time with friends and family? Can't they simply turn off their televisions, unplug their computers, forego their iPads and iPods for an hour a day while they read?

Well, yes, that could happen. What could also happen is that we could wake up tomorrow morning to find that electricity was never invented and so there's not much else in the world to do *but* read. In the meantime, while we're waiting for an imaginary world, let's preside over some reading practice in our real classrooms, classrooms in which the students who need reading practice the most are the least likely to engage in it on their own. And remember: The Common Core (as well as common sense) requires that all teachers, not just English teachers, incorporate literacy strategies along with content instruction.

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What follows are seven classroom routines that, if done consistently, will provide the needed practice in the meaning-making decoding activity called reading. You will find that some of these routines appeal to you as a teacher, but others don't. Whether you settle upon one of these routines, several of them, or all of them, any time that you spend presiding over practice sessions in reading in your classroom is time spent making your students better readers.

But, remember the violinist: Just carrying around his violin isn't going to make him a better player. A master musician telling him all about the properties of the violin and the wonderful sounds it can produce is not going to make him a better player either. He has to actually play, and the more he plays, the more he will control the instrument.

Practice has to be guided by instruction, which is what these routines are all about. Each of these seven routines should take only a few minutes of class time. But it's class time that serves two purposes: 1) making students better readers through practice and 2) giving students the *content-related* information that is contained therein. Rather than thinking of the reading practice routines as being something that subtracts from content-learning time, think of the practice routines as being delivery systems for the information in the first place.

Following are the seven ways to have students practice reading informational text in class. As you read these, keep in mind that they apply to students at all levels of reading proficiency, not just those reading below grade level. "Our job is to continually challenge students to read at a higher level than they thought they could, and to provide the class time and place for them to socialize the learning process" (Benjamin, *Big Skills for the Common Core*, 9).

1. **The Last Word:** A reading fluency activity

Procedure: Everyone in the class has the same text. Teacher reads aloud the text, with students following along: Taking turns around the room, one student reads aloud the last word of each sentence.

Purpose: This exercise gets readers accustomed to the pace at which fluent readers read; it motivates them to pay close attention to the text and punctuation; it reinforces their sense of sentence completeness; it gets them to attend to content and academic vocabulary.

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Suggestion: To prevent students from “counting off” to locate “their sentence,” switch the order frequently (skipping rows, reversing the order, etc.).

2. **Cloze:** An activity for context and vocabulary

Procedure: In the cloze activity, you give students text with every seventh (or, alternatively, 10th or 12th) word omitted. Students, working together or alone, supply what they think is a sensible word to fill in the blanks.

Purpose: Cloze exercises have been used for generations both as practice and assessment for attending to text meaning and context clues. When you reveal the answers, you have an opportunity to evaluate, along with the students, whether the blank could have been filled in by a synonym, or whether only one word would make sense.

Suggestion: You can bridge to a lower level by providing a partial or complete list of the missing words, or by offering multiple choice or word endings, where applicable. You can bridge to a higher level by increasing the number of blanks.

3. **Outlining:** A summarizing activity

Procedure: Given well-organized informational text (not a story), students compose a classic outline. A classic outline uses phrases or single words (not complete sentences); a classic outline requires that there be at least two sub-headings or no sub-headings (not just one).

Purpose: Classic outlining disciplines students to find main ideas and supportive details, and also to follow a formula.

Suggestion: You can bridge to a lower level by supplying the shell of the outline; you can bridge to a higher level by having students use their outlines to write summaries, without referring to the text again.

4. **Pattern-Finding:** A categorizing activity

Procedure: Given informational text, students identify which of the following patterns best describes how the text is organized:

- Narrative (*tells a story*)
- Descriptive (*gives visuals, explains features*)
- Classification (*delineates the parts of a system or the members of a group*)
- Cause and effect (*gives reasons for a result*)
- Definition and examples (*tells what something is*)
- Comparison/Contrast
- Process analysis (*explains how to do something*)

Note: Most informational text consists of one of these patterns as the dominant organizing structure of each paragraph. It may be possible to justify more than one of these for a given paragraph.

Purpose: Research on reading comprehension supports the practice of paying attention to how the text is organized.

Suggestion: You can bridge to a lower level by telling students that the organizing pattern is either _____ or _____; you can bridge to a higher level by having students create graphic organizers representing the pattern.

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5. **Skim, Scan, Sample, Read, Study:** A gradual approach to complex text

Procedure: Go through the five “gears” of reading comprehension: Skimming is getting an overview; scanning is searching for specific information (requires the teacher to give the students a search target); sampling is reading a small part such as an interesting-looking paragraph or graphic; reading is reading every word; studying is re-reading and perhaps annotating.

Purpose: Using this gradual approach to the text, the reader is able to absorb information by building a mental scaffold to hold it, layer by layer.

Suggestion: Use think-pair-share between each gear.

6. **Get-Inside-the-Test:** A studying activity

Procedure: Have students write one or more of the types of questions likely to be on a reading comprehension test:

- Main idea
- Vocabulary
- Inference (read between the lines)
- Part-to-whole or part-to-part (how a detail fits in: Why is a particular detail included? Is it an example? A reason? An exception? An elaboration?)
- Tone (literary and persuasive text only)
- Cause and effect

Purpose: Creating a test is the best way to prepare for a test.

Suggestion: You can bridge to a lower level by focusing on one type of question for several weeks. You can motivate students by offering to use their questions, if they are good enough, on an actual test.

7. **Re-Assemble:** Present students with the sentences or paragraphs in scrambled order. Have them re-assemble them, in accordance with what they think is a logical order. (Electronic whiteboards work well for this.)

Purpose: This activity elevates awareness of transitional words, cause-and-effect statements, and logical progressions.

Suggestion: You can bridge to a lower level by isolating and removing just one sentence and having students figure out where it should go in the paragraph and why. You can bridge to a higher level by using multiple paragraphs, and having students determine the paragraph breaks as well as the order of the sentences.

This is a partial list. You can think of other ways to have students read content-specific material for just a few minutes at the start of class. I recommend placing the reading practice time at the start of class first because it can buy you time to do what you have to do, take attendance, chat with students who were absent, distribute papers, etc. Also, I've always found that asking students to work on their own for a few minutes at the end of class ends up with them thinking that the party's over and it's time to gather by the door and await the bell.

Ideally, teachers in a school would enact a variety of these routines so that the benefits of each of them could achieve critical mass. For example, the “Last Word” routine is good for pacing, expression, and decoding. It is not as good as some of the other strategies are for comprehension. The Cloze strategy is excellent for the skill of attending to context, while the Re-Assemble strategy gets readers to focus on transitional words.

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The Common Core Standards require that every teacher incorporate literacy instruction as a means for learning content. That is why we can't dismiss subject-area reading as something we "don't have time for." We have to make simultaneous use of instructional time, infusing actual reading experience (practice) several times a week, if not every day. Schools with teachers who do this are fostering the independent learning necessary for success outside of school.

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