The Art of the Reading Workshop

A workshop-based approach to reading instruction provides a framework for teachers to meet the needs of all readers.

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Even the most experienced teachers can struggle to meet all students' reading needs. From specialized literature studies to whole-group anthologies, from response groups to flexible-group instruction, teachers integrate many materials and methods into their instructional practice to facilitate their students' learning. When I taught 5th grade, I sought a manageable way to provide direct reading instruction to and practice for each student at his or her own level.

With the assistance of my building's reading specialist, I developed and refined the Reading Workshop program over five years. This program supplemented our literature studies and ensured that I had one-on-one instructional time with each student every week. Reading Workshop worked well for my students and me; other teachers might wish to adapt the program to meet their specific needs and purposes.

Why Use Reading Workshop?

When working with intermediate-grade readers, we often assume that because all of the students can read chapter books, all students should read the same book and receive whole-group instruction. But, even in the rare case that all students are reading at approximately the same level, each student has his or her own strengths and needs. The workshop approach is not based on ability groups but provides a venue to focus on the strengths and needs of each student.

In her book *Variability Not Disability: Struggling Readers in a Workshop Classroom*, Cathy Roller (1996) writes:

> Rather than view children as capable or disabled, workshop classrooms assume that children are different, that each child is unique and has special interests and abilities, and that differences are normal. (p. 7)

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for implementing a workshop program is how easily teachers can accommodate the needs of all of their students.
Research on effective reading instruction has shown that the classroom environment and daily routine must encourage reading as a primary activity integrated with writing, speaking, and listening. Lucy Calkins discusses the idea of a supportive classroom community and its significance to student achievement in *Living Between the Lines* (1991):

> Teachers of writing and reading throughout the world have come to care passionately about workshop teaching, in part because reading and writing are ways in which human beings find significance and direction, beauty and intimacy, in their lives. (p. 23)

In Reading Workshop, students spend their time reading and writing to construct meaning. Students respond to their reading verbally or in writing and serve as sounding boards for others to share their responses to reading. By regularly conferring with students, the teacher can create opportunities for regular demonstrations of reading strategies, for sharing in the reading process (including responding to books), and for evaluating individual reading progress.

**Components of the Reading Workshop**

Reading Workshop consists of five components: teacher sharing time, focus lessons, state-of-the-class conference, self-selected reading and responding time, and student sharing time.

*Teacher sharing time (5–10 minutes).* The teacher builds excitement about literature and motivates children to read. For instance, I notice that many of my students have been reading adventure books. During teacher sharing time, I might conduct a focus lesson around the theme "If you like these books, you might want to try . . ." and read aloud some compelling excerpts from one or two of my favorite adventure books.

*Focus lesson (5–10 minutes).* Focus lessons are short, address a specific topic, and are directed at the whole class or a small group of students, depending on the topic and student need. During this time, the teacher can instruct students in procedures, describe literary elements, and teach strategies and skills. For example, students can learn how to give a book talk, keep track of the books they read, perform self-evaluation, or take care of books. Some literary elements that students might study include the difference between fiction and nonfiction books; the role of the setting in a story; characteristics of different literary genres; and the development of plot, theme, and mood. Strategies and skills that students could focus on include choosing a book, making predictions, summarizing a story, and distinguishing fact from opinion.

*State-of-the-class conference (5 minutes).* The teacher determines what each child will do during the remainder of the day's workshop. During a typical session, the teacher would poll the class and might assign students to either work on their book responses, meet in pairs or small groups to discuss a book, work on individual teacher-designed goals alone or in conference with the teacher, or read silently. In addition, certain students might meet briefly with the teacher for direct instruction to work on a previously determined need.

*Self-selected reading and responding time (40–60 minutes).* During this time, students read and respond to books. Three different activities take place: self-selected reading; literature
responses, such as projects, literature circles, or writing in a journal; and individual reading conferences.

Independent reading and responding are the heart of the Reading Workshop. Every day, students should read for an extended time period at their own reading levels. The workshop approach differs significantly from the sustained silent reading model in that the teacher directs students to books appropriate for each student's reading level, and the teacher holds daily instructional conferences with students.

For students to select appropriate books, teachers must prepare in two ways. First, teachers must be aware of the students' independent reading level, which can be assessed informally. I found a combination of running record and retelling effective and efficient: a student reads a short passage aloud, providing the teacher with information on the student's fluency and miscues. Then the student retells, verbally or in writing, the main idea and supporting details of the passage. Teachers should instruct students in specific strategies for determining whether a book is too easy, too hard, or just right.

Second, teachers should categorize the books in their classroom libraries. Teachers can group books according to reading level and genre, but students must be able to easily determine whether or not a book is appropriate for them. Many resources for assigning levels to books exist. In my own library, I categorize books using the reading levels determined by the Follett book company. Once you determine the reading levels and interests of students, identify several "prototype" books for each student. Each student can have a book baggie with several appropriate titles inside. This strategy ensures that when the student completes one book, he or she moves on to another.

While some students are reading independently, the teacher confers with other students. When conducting a student conference, the teacher has three main objectives: research (What kind of information did I gather about the reader?); decide (What was the theory I formed about the reader?); and teach (What was the one essential thing I chose to teach the reader about reading? How did I communicate to the reader my faith in the reader's ability to be an amazing reader?).

At the end of the conference, the student should walk away with a goal. The student knows that the teacher expects him or her to work on this goal and that consequences similar to those issued for incomplete assignments exist if the student fails to follow through. During individual instruction, the teacher should encourage each student to take risks in reading. To help facilitate goal achievement, I developed a chart with each student’s name on it. After each conference, we wrote on a sticky note what the student would be working on. The student put the sticky note under his or her name. This allowed other students to easily see whether other students were working on the same goal. In that case, the students knew which classmates might offer support or collaboration. In addition to teacher conferences, students talk with one another as they attempt to create meaning from the texts they are reading.

The last activity that can occur during the self-selected reading and responding block of the workshop is student literature responses. Teachers can have students respond to what they're
reading in many ways. Students must respond in a meaningful way that helps extend their thinking beyond the literal to the personal.

With younger students or those who are struggling with reading, ask students to create a short response—such as a story map listing the main idea, setting, and characters—after every book. This allows you to check for comprehension and for students to feel successful more often as they share their responses with the class. More capable student readers could create a more detailed response after every two or three books, with just a conference in between.

Teachers must always make clear to students their expectations for the types and quality of responses. I required that students create a three-paragraph book review in addition to a creative response. For the book review, students needed to tell what the book was about and what they liked about the book, describe the book's theme, tell why they thought the author wrote the book, and identify the message the author wished to share with his or her readers. Some creative response activities have included writing a radio announcement to advertise the book, making a time line of events, creating a book jacket, comparing the book to others by the same author or with a similar theme, or creating a dictionary defining the specialized language or facts in the book. I also gave each student a copy of the criteria I used to evaluate book responses and discussed these criteria with the class during one of our procedural focus lessons. One of my objectives when developing options for book responses was to tap into students' multiple intelligences to make reading more a part of their everyday lives.

Student sharing time (5–10 minutes). Students share books they have read, report their progress on literature projects, or participate in other response activities. This activity promotes excitement for literacy learning and defines the class as a community of readers. During sharing time, we might see students presenting advertisements for their favorite books or hear from a student who is struggling with a particular reading strategy and who would like input from her peers.

Assessment and Record Keeping
Finally, and perhaps most important, the workshop approach offers opportunity for regular and ongoing individual assessment. Through individual and small-group conferences, the teacher can determine students' specific strengths and needs. The reading responses provide evidence of students' comprehension and ability to summarize in writing the main ideas. Additionally, responses illustrate whether or not students are able to move from literal to personal connections with the text.

Much of the assessment can be documented in the form of anecdotal records. I have seen many different management systems for this type of record keeping—everything from index cards to large binders. The key to effective record keeping is to experiment until you've found the system that provides the most valuable information in an easily accessible format. My system included anecdotal records of conferences, goals set and achieved, genres and numbers of books read, reading levels, and reading response evaluations. My students also shared responsibility for record keeping by documenting each day the names and genres of books and the numbers of pages they read.
Meeting our students' needs and helping them to progress should be our primary goal as educators. Teachers can easily adapt the Reading Workshop to fit into an existing curriculum, while at the same time providing individualized instruction and assessment.

References


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