

### The Importance of Reading Aloud

By Lisa Frase

How does one find time to read aloud? Teachers often put reading aloud to the side, as something nice, but lacking in instructional value. If we can't find time for anything else, we should find time for reading aloud. It is a powerful teaching tool that directly affects our students.

Reading aloud opens up doors to the possibilities. Children hear magical words that take them to far away times and places. They listen to information that intrigues them. They come to realize that books are filled with endless adventures and amazing journeys. It is through reading aloud that children come to know the power and beauty of learning to read. Consider the toddler who sits on his mother's lap, and listens to the same story over and over again as he claps his hands with glee, and begins a journey into the imagination. The joy of listening to stories should not end when a child enters the classroom door, instead, it should just begin. Teachers have the opportunity to fill in the gaps for children who do not experience this pleasure at home, and to continue feeding the mind with reading's many rewards. Spinning tales and weaving words are a timeless and a classic motivational tool that entices the developing reader to search for more.

Reading aloud is the golden key to unlock the windows of success. Every time you read aloud, you are exposing your students to new vocabulary in context, to information, to different places and times, to the emotions and traits of various characters, and to the many different genres. When you read aloud to your students, you are giving them a precious gift to be treasured forever.

Our time in the classroom is valuable, and we don't have a minute to waste. Consider reading aloud the foundation for all that you teach. Take advantage of every opportunity to read to your students. Let each day be a new adventure awaiting you and your students. The rewards of reading aloud are priceless, and the instructional value is tremendous.

I remember a time when I fantasized of a classroom where we began the day reading aloud. The picture in my mind's eye was one of harmony, as lovely little children readied for their day and then came to the carpeted area with their excitement barely contained. They would sit wide-eyed and not utter a sound as I entranced them with stories in books. My rocking chair would be as a mother's chair when she rocks her newborn baby. And then, I was hired to teach fifth grade.

During my first year of teaching, I failed to read aloud everyday. The one chapter book that I started was never finished. In fact, an occasional read aloud was a sacrifice of precious time. There were skills to be taught. D.E.A.R. time (Drop Everything and Read) was meant for silent reading. There was just not enough time, not that it really mattered, because after all, reading aloud is nice, but not necessary. The problem with this picture is that I still had that fantasy in my head. I loved reading aloud. The drama queen inside of me was dying to come out. At last, I gave into my intuition and began reading aloud during my second year of teaching, however, I did not sacrifice each day to what others thought to be such a frivolous waste of time.

When you feel in your heart that what you are doing in the classroom is right, and that it works, search out the research, and consult the experts, chances are...you will be validated. Direction came to me when I read Patricia Cunningham's, *Classrooms That Work*. Cunningham explains (in a step by step structure) how the reluctant reader comes to be, and most importantly, how teachers can use reading aloud to model and motivate. The best thing that I ever did was take reading aloud to heart. Everyday.

My eyes widened ever so slightly as I began to see the transformation take place among my students. I watched in fascination as children sought out the very book that I had just finished reading aloud. The books that were shared made their way around the room throughout the year. Discussion, disagreements, recommendations about literature became a natural part of my classroom environment. At the end of a chapter, children would beg for more. The tide was turning...and this was only the beginning.

Over time, I have made many discoveries about reading aloud. Children enjoy hearing books of all genres. They clamor to hear picture books as well as chapter books. They are enthralled with nonfiction books. Magazine and newspaper articles grab their attention as well. Poetry tickles and surprises, and my own writing totally delights and

amazes them. It is with great joy that I seek out a highly recommended book from a trusted colleague that I can read for first time for myself, as well as for my students. Together, through laughter and tears, we discover the joy of reading.

In this article, we will explore the elements of reading aloud that will bring text to life in the minds of your students. Reading aloud with passion will transfer to hearts and minds, opening windows of discovery. Consider yourself a new member of acting class, and for those who feel out of their element, challenge yourself to stretch outside of your comfort zone, to take a risk, for the sake of your students, and the knowledge that you are building a foundation to create lifelong readers.

Reading poetry will move your students beyond hearing to doing. Envision the power of the language of poetry, the rhythm, and voice...and even if you reject the poet within yourself, embrace it for the poet within your students. Continuously seek out new stories to share, both real and make-believe. When you read aloud everyday, you will catch your most reluctant readers motivated to try out reading on their own. As you model fluency for your students through reading aloud, they will be able to practice their listening skills while following along. And most of all, you, the teacher, will be sharing the joy of reading.

#### Basic Guidelines for Reading Aloud

1. *Read aloud texts that you enjoy as a reader.* Enthusiasm is the first factor in reading aloud. If you do not like what you are reading, the kids will pick up on it and tune out. Why should they listen to something that the teacher doesn't even enjoy? Outwardly display your excitement for the text that you are going to read in order to generate interest. Students will sit up and take notice when the teacher suggests that the text is something that they are going to want to hear.
2. *Read the text before reading it aloud.* This suggestion appears to be quite obvious, however, I know that I am not the only teacher who ever attempted to read a book aloud that I did not read first. Reading levels do not always indicated maturity levels. Some books are intended for a more mature audience. Other books deal with complicated issues that may not be appropriate for your classroom. No one knows the children in your classroom the same way that you do, so you must take into consideration how the text will affect your students. You will also want to look out for inappropriate words or

sections that you may need to skip or gloss over. It is better to make a decision about a word or section before you read it aloud than to find yourself perplexed when you come to it. Reading a text yourself before reading it aloud also gives you a chance to search out the teachable moments to which the book may lend itself.

3. *Select texts that are 1 to 2 years above your student's independent reading levels.* The rule of thumb is to read aloud books that are just above your student's reading level. This creates an opportunity for children to hear new vocabulary, and it gives you the opportunity to introduce and discuss these new and perplexing words. Reading aloud should not be a vocabulary lesson, but instead, a natural introduction to new words. When you run across a word that you believe your students do not know, stop and explain the word, and then move on. Keep in mind that it is easy to perceive picture books as "baby books," however; many of them are written at higher levels than may appear on the surface. They are also filled with wonderful vocabulary and beautiful plays on language. Picture books are full of teaching opportunities and are enjoyed by children (and adults) of all ages.

4. *Read aloud a book with many cliffhangers.* Hook your reluctant reader with an exciting book that is full of cliffhangers. One of my favorite books to read to fourth graders is *Running Out of Time* by Margaret Peterson Haddix. This book is relatively unheard of. In all of the years that I have read this book to students, I have only found two that had already read it. It's an exciting mystery with cliffhangers at the end of virtually every chapter. It is always a favorite of my students - they beg me to read more. Leave off at the end of reading a cliffhanger, and keep your students wondering until the next day. Let them experience that feeling of not being able to wait to get back to the book! After you finish the book, place it in your reading center and make it available to your students. You might need more than one copy!

5. *Read aloud exciting parts of a book and then make it available to your students.* Tempt your students into reading by selecting a particularly exciting part of a book, reading it aloud with lots of expression, and leaving off at a critical moment that leaves your students guessing, and then make it available in your reading center. Take a couple of minutes each day to introduce a new book that will motivate even your most reluctant readers.

6. *Read aloud both fiction and nonfiction, and from a wide range of genres.* Expose your students to many different types of books, magazines, news articles, etc. Children are fascinated with the real world - open the doors to the world to them by reading aloud nonfiction. There are many wonderful nonfiction selections available today. Survey your children to find out their interests, and then search out books that will motivate them to read. A reluctant reader who has a passion for basketball may be interested in reading about Michael Jordon or Shaquille O'Neal. Remember that nonfiction is harder to read than fiction. Read aloud nonfiction books on grade level, and make lower leveled books available for the children to read on their own. Consider tape recording nonfiction books and adding the tape and book to your reading / listening center.

7. *Create a listening center with books on tape.* There are many wonderful books already on tape. Increase the power of reading aloud by adding a listening center to your room where taped books are available. There is a wonderful series of children's books by John Erickson called *Hank the Cowdog*. Erickson writes his books to be read aloud. He has read aloud every single one of his books on tape, providing an exemplary model for reading aloud. You can find his books at [www.hankthecowdog.com](http://www.hankthecowdog.com). It occurred to me one day, when a low reader in my fourth grade class expressed the desire to read *Harry Potter* that I could make it available to him. Just like his classmates, he wanted to enjoy this literary work. So I bought the tapes for the first book and allowed him to read and listen for a few minutes each day. Imagine the delight that this reluctant reader felt as he experienced a story that was loved by all of his peers.

8. *Select picture books to read aloud that model reading strategies and writing techniques.* Picture books make excellent teaching tools. The short text is perfect for introducing reading strategies. These delightful books are also filled with a wealth of writing techniques. Master authors such as Cynthia Rylant, Mem Fox and Chris Van Allsburg suddenly become your young writer's private mentors.

9. *Select a book that you have not read (upon the trusted recommendation of a colleague) to read aloud to your students. Enjoy the rewards of discovering a great story with your students.* This statement is contradictory from reading a book first before reading it aloud, so I say it with caution. Search for at least one book each year that you can enjoy for the

first time along with your students. Seek out the recommendation of a trusted colleague. Ask your colleague for a book that they have found to be of great enjoyment for their students. Make sure you ask about any inappropriate words, sections that may require delicacy, basic story line, and if there are any complicated issues in the book. If the book appears to have too many issues, it probably is not the book to select.

10. *Make the text available for students to read on their own.* One of the rewards of reading aloud is watching your students pass around a book throughout the year. After you plant the seeds, make the book available, and then sit back enjoy the harvest. Some books may cause you to have to find extra copies - what a wonderful problem to have!

11. *Read aloud to classical music that compliments the rhythm of the text.* By now, most teachers are aware of the brain-based research that suggests that Baroque classical music helps to improve reading, writing and math. It certainly doesn't hurt. Have you ever watched a movie that did not have music in the background? Music sets the tone, the mood, and compliments the rhythm of the text. Select music to play in the background as you read aloud. For example, I enjoy playing Native American flute music as I read aloud a favorite book by Jane Yolen, *Encounters*. Another favorite read aloud of mine is *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg. Add a new dimension to your read aloud by playing the music from *The Nutcracker Ballet* in the background. And then, obtain a wooden train whistle to blow when the train whistle in the story is blown!

12. *Incorporate read aloud across the curriculum.* Today, there are many wonderful books available on science, math, and history topics. There is at least one historical fiction book on every time period in American history. Science and history topics provide excellent opportunities to pair fiction and nonfiction selections. Comparing and contrasting across texts, and making text to text connections is a higher order thinking strategy. It is also becoming a test item on standardized tests across the country. Many books have come out in recent years that relate to math concepts. Reading aloud a book that matches up with the math skill that you are teaching is a wonderful way to connect children who excel in language, yet struggle in math, with the concept that is being taught.

13. *Periodically ask questions or stop to "think out loud."* Reading aloud is an important part of strategic reading instruction. Daily read alouds offers you the chance to reinforce

and spiral the strategies that you have already taught. There are books that you read aloud with a teaching goal in mind, and then there should be at least one book that you read for pure enjoyment. During joyful reads, there are natural times to stop and think aloud, or to ask a question. Don't overwhelm your students by stopping constantly, but instead, select moments that are natural to you as a reader and then share your thinking.

*14. Read everyday, throughout the day, for a bare bones minimum of ten minutes per day.*

Begin your morning with a poem, a quote, or a short current event. The ultimate sponge activity is a quick read aloud. Plan your lessons with read alouds that connect to your curriculum. Choose a time in the day for reading aloud a longer text (chapter book) each day. Many teachers like to read aloud a book after lunch - it has a calming effect that gets the afternoon off to a good start. The one thing to avoid is beginning a chapter book at the tail end of the day. Children are anxious for the bell to ring, causing their listening comprehension to fall by the wayside. Students in my classroom always have books on their desks. The answer to the questions, "What do I do when I'm done?" is to READ, READ, READ.

After students are packed up and ready to go, silent reading is the perfect (and quiet) way to end a day.

*15. Read with lots of expression and enthusiasm, modeling intonation, pitch, and rate (vocal variety). Make your voice sound different, even exaggerated, for different characters.* Hold onto your hat, in the next section, you will experience Acting Class - 101. There isn't a person alive who will listen attentively to a boring, lifeless, voiceless read aloud. You are the model. It is imperative that you read with expression and enthusiasm. Your students will be enraptured by the sound of your voice when you change the intonation, pitch and rate to suit the words. Dramatic pauses and character voices will have students sitting up, listening for more. One time I was reading aloud *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume. Now for those of you that know the book, the character Fudge is two-year-old tyrant. How can you read Fudge's voice and NOT read like a two-year-old? Upon my return to my classroom after being out one day, I was immediately informed by my students that I absolutely had to reread the chapter that was read aloud by the substitute teacher - *she* didn't read Fudge's voice like a baby!

Well, we certainly couldn't have that, so of course I reread the chapter. The moral of the story is - students *want* you to read aloud with expression and character voices!

### Acting Class 101 - How-to Read Aloud

When I was a little girl, I was one of those students who enthusiastically raised my hand and volunteered to read aloud. This led me down the path of participating in drama club and speech contests. I was a struggling student in many areas. The stage was my one place to shine. I spent my first two years in college studying acting, and then I went on to graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Speech Communication. In fact, I even met my husband in Toastmasters, a public speaking organization. You never know where reading aloud will lead you!

I must confess that I am a living contradiction. Despite the fact that public speaking is considered the number one fear over death, this is an area in which I excelled. The funny part is that I am painfully shy in social situations. I can't even begin to explain myself. So yes, I do understand the feeling of shyness.

For those of you who are struggling with the idea of reading aloud, and in particular, reading aloud with expression, trust me when I say that you will do yourself more good, and develop more self-confidence when you tackle your fears head on. Keep in mind that when you read aloud with expression, you are modeling for your students, and modeling is one of the most powerful things that a teacher can do for her students.

I will address the following critical attributes of reading aloud in the next section:

Rate	Tone	Pitch	Volume	Expression
Character Voices				

#### Rate

Rate is the pace at which the reader reads. Fast or Slow. The narrator's rate should not be too fast or too slow, but just right. Approximately 120 wpm is a nice, middle of the road rate, however, the pace at which you read should alternate according to the punctuation, action, and characters in the story.

Explode the climatic moment in the text by slowing the rate down. Quicken the pace during exciting action. Vary the rate in places that create dramatic effect. Change the pace for different characters when they speak. Read slowly through parts that might

be complicated or use higher vocabulary. Teach students the power of punctuation by changing your rate for exclamation marks, eclipses, dashes and question marks.

Nonfiction should be read with varying rate as well. Consider the “wow” statements in the text. This is the information in the text where all of the kids will suddenly say, “cool.” Look for the “wow” lines and alter your pace to create excitement. Read with dramatic pause. Reflect with a quickened moment of silence. Help your students see that reading fast does not necessarily equal reading “ speed.”

### Tone

Have you ever listened to someone speak whose voice kept you completely mesmerized? Do you know people whose voices are beautiful to listen to? Do you know people whose voices irritate you and grate on your nerves? Tone is about voice quality. A good tone will ring true with a smooth and soothing sound. You can improve the quality of your vocal tone through proper breathing, speaking from the depths of your stomach instead of through the tightness of your throat, and through singing (even if you are just singing in the shower).

As teachers, especially in the beginning of the year when we have exercised our teaching voices after a summer off, many of us find that our voices begin to crack and croak. Public speakers and actors have a few “tricks of the trade” to help them get their voices back to normal: (1) Drink lots of water. You need to keep your vocal cords moistened. It’s hard to talk, much less read aloud when your throat is dry. (2) Peppermint has always been soothing medicine for the vocals. A peppermint candy or a cup of hot peppermint tea can do your voice wonders .(3) When the frogs are threatening to stay, fill a bowl with hot water. Add lemon slices and peppermint sprigs. Cover your eyes with a washcloth; put a towel over your head and breathe in the aroma of the hot water. It acts as a humidifier with medicinal power. The side benefit is that this technique also cleans out your pores!

Your vocals need exercise in the same way that your body needs exercise. Stretch, rub and exaggerate your facial muscles to loosen them up. Sing to warm up your voice and to enrich its tone. Say tongue twisters slowly, with great articulation, to make your vocal cords limber. Put a wine cork between your side teeth and practice articulating each sound in a word.

Now you must be wondering if you are expected to do this before reading aloud in your classroom - only if you want to give your students a good belly laugh! These are things that speakers, actors, and singers do to strengthen the tone of their voices. They can be done in the shower, or in the car. No one needs to know...

### Pitch

As I think of pitch, I am reminded of those old black and white filmstrips that I used to watch in school - you know, the one's where the speaker talks like a drone. The voice is monotone and boring. Flat as a pancake. The audience is snoring.

Pitch refers to the high and low sounds of the voice. When you are reading aloud, changing the pitch to match the characters or events adds drama to the act of storytelling. For narration, avoid flat or shrill pitches. These sounds will make a greater impact when assigned to a character. Change your pitch for different characters. This will add character recognition, and oftentimes, humor to your reading.

Go up on your inflection at the ends of sentences. This technique keeps you from swallowing the ends of your sentences and strengthens the impact of the words. Change the pitch to show excitement, or other emotions. Change the pitch for a man, woman, or child. A grandparent's pitch will sound different from a toddler. Vary your pitch to correspond with the author's voice. Consider the difference in the pitch for *Junie B. Jones* in Barbara Park's series against the pitch for Brian in Gary Paulson's *Hatchet*. The pitch, tone and rate will be dramatically different between these two texts.

### Volume

Volume refers to how loud or soft you speak. Certainly, you must speak loud enough to be heard. Gather children on the floor in your classroom so that you can turn your teacher voice off and match your volume to the text. As you are reading, drop your volume during intense moments in the text to pique interest. When you are reading narrative text, change the volume to match the character's voice. If the character is yelling - yell (loud enough to be yelling, but not so loud that the teacher next door comes knocking). If the character is whispering - whisper. If you picture the character as loud and boisterous, change your voice to suit the character. Another character may be soft and demure - make your voice soft and sweet. A sad voice will be softer than an angry

voice. Keep your volume relatively strong, but vary it where it will make a difference in how the text is expressed.

### Expression

Expression is heard in the voice, and seen in facial and body movements. Vocal variety (rate, tone, pitch and volume) can convey emotion, which is the cornerstone of expression. Your voice, facial features, and body language expresses exhaustion, shock, anger, happiness, surprise, indecision, fear, jealousy, enthusiasm, pleasure, pain, and many, many other emotions. Widened eyes. A shrug of the shoulders. Rolling eyes. Open mouth. Big smile. A shiver. All of these facial and body movements enhance the text that you are reading. They add drama. Expression is the difference between the storyteller who just tells the story, and the storyteller who acts out the story. You don't have to jump up and totally act things out, but you can exaggerate your voice, face and body to add new layers to your read alouds. Surely you have heard a librarian, another teacher, an author or a storyteller who kept you enthralled with the way they expressed themselves during a read aloud. Watch them closely to see what they do, and then try it yourself.

### Character Voices

Reading with character voices brings together rate, tone, pitch, volume and expression with the added twist of accent. Each voice can be accented to sound different and distinct. Dad sounds different from Mom, just as Grandpa sounds different from little sister. A voice may be deeply southern, or English, or totally teeny bopper. Character voices helps children to distinguish the difference between characters. It adds an element of fun and humor to your reading. Creating unique voices for different characters takes the read aloud to a whole new level, one that will have your students begging for more!

### A Final Thought

If you read aloud with expression and vocal variety, children will copy cat your model when they read independently. See this as a process to begin teaching your students to develop oral fluency, not to mention speaking skills. All of the elements for reading aloud also apply to speaking in front of a group. They will sharpen their listening skills as they work to pay attention to the diverse sounds that launch them into exciting adventures. Their attention span will increase as they hang onto your every word. The

rewards of reading aloud with expression will be seen in their faces and actions when they pick up the book to read for themselves, by themselves.