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## Guiding Struggling Readers in Upper Grades

*It's 15 minutes into independent-reading time in Charlie's Grade 5 classroom, but Charlie has yet to open a book. He has spent the entire time at the bookshelf, ostensibly selecting a book, but actually making funny faces at anyone who will look at him.*

*Like three out of every four children with reading difficulties, Charlie is a boy. He started school with limited experiences with print, struggled through activities with letters and sounds, and was usually off-task during reading time. By Grade 3, when most of his classmates were fairly fluent, Charlie was still guessing at words, relying on pictures, and avoiding books whenever he could. Now, in Grade 5, where the books are longer and the illustrations gone, Charlie is in obvious trouble.*

It is often said that in primary grades we learn to read and in upper grades we read to learn. A catchy phrase, if only it were true. In reality, we never stop learning to read. Even if a reader has developed a repertoire of strategies for certain texts at manageable reading levels, there's always the unfamiliar text form, the unique language structure, the deeper theme—all presenting new reading challenges.

Most readers in Grade 4 and beyond have enough competence and confidence to tackle texts with some degree of difficulty. But that doesn't mean they no longer need guided reading. Even with skilled readers, there remains a place for small-group reading instruction as an opportunity to scaffold students as they extend their reading reach. We might pull groups together to work on a unique text form, such as website reading. We might gather students to apply familiar strategies to more sophisticated texts or build deeper layers of inference. We might work with groups to enrich the quality of their written responses to reading. These small-group opportunities enable us to support and stretch even our best readers.

Not only do small-group structures enable us to make the most of instructional time, they make assessment easier. It's much easier to judge each student's understanding, application, or metacognitive awareness when we're observing a group of four to eight students than with a whole class.

As well, guided reading can play an important role in both Tiers 1 and 2 of the Response to Intervention model (see box on page 117). This model advocates differentiated classroom instruction at its core, with layers of increasingly intensive intervention for those who struggle. The report *Academic Literacy for Adolescents* (2007) stresses that small-group interactions and active discussion of

content and strategies are not merely important, but critical for underachieving readers.

**Response to Intervention (RTI)** is a multi-tiered approach for supporting *all* students in their reading progress. It is generally described as three tiers, though there may be more layers of intervention.

Tier 1: At its foundation is strong, differentiated classroom instruction.

Tier 2: For students who don't thrive on the classroom instruction (generally no more than 15% of the population), short-term small-group instruction, targeted at the learners' specific needs, is implemented.

Tier 3: A very small percentage of students (3–5%) will require intensive, individual intervention, usually sustained for a longer period of time.

In *Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006), recommendations for adolescent literacy instruction include scaffolded instruction in which teachers provide high support for students practicing new skills, and then gently withdraw support as students gain independence. Guided reading is one structure for providing that important gradual release of responsibility.

Small-group reading structures and policies for students in Grade 4 and beyond vary in different jurisdictions. Some districts implement regularly scheduled guided reading throughout the grades, right through to middle and high school. Others have replaced guided reading with other grouping structures, such as literature circles or reading workshop (see chapter 6). I believe there is an important place for guided reading in upper grades, along with a range of other grouping structures. For students reading at grade level or beyond, occasional small-group lessons or sequences of lessons might be appropriate for supporting them in coping with a new text form, a higher-level strategy, or a more-challenging text. For students who are struggling, regular guided reading sessions should be a part of both the classroom and the intervention process.

## What Do We Know about Struggling Readers?

Obviously, there is no single mold from which all struggling readers are cast. Some students struggle with reading because of deficits in vocabulary and background knowledge. Some students are just learning to speak the language of the classroom. Some can read the words, but not infer between or beyond the lines. Some students have succumbed to the cycle of failure and have just given up on reading. Others have identified cognitive, physical, psychological, and emotional issues that can interfere with learning in general and reading in particular.

Let's face it, we're *all* struggling readers at some time or another. I'm a struggling reader when I try to make sense of the Italian newspaper or a technical manual full of unfamiliar terms. But I have many strategies up my sleeve, the motivation to tackle tough text, and the confidence to know that I will be able to grasp most of the material if I put my mind to it. That's because I'm an *independent* reader, even when I'm struggling. *Dependent* readers, on the other hand, assume that reading always comes easily—even magically—to others; they don't realize that everyone has to do some reading work sometimes. The chart below depicts some of the common differences between dependent and independent readers.

<i>Independent Readers usually...</i>	<i>Dependent Readers often...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• know that some reading is harder than other reading, and have confidence that they will be able to negotiate even a tough text and keep trying, even when the going gets tough</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are dealing with long term failure as readers and often give up before they even try</li> <li>• assume that “good readers” never have problems with comprehension</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a repertoire of strategies for making sense of text, and an awareness of deliberately and purposefully using those strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have limited access to comprehension strategies and often give up when reading doesn’t make sense</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• read fluently and at an appropriate pace to maintain comprehension, slowing down and speeding up as appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• read word by word, which interferes with overall comprehension</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have a strong vocabulary and background-knowledge base from which to draw when making connections during reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack an adequate vocabulary and knowledge base or fail to draw on the knowledge they have to aid in comprehension</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• know when something doesn’t make sense and draw on a range of strategies to fix their comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• often don’t even know when they don’t understand and simply read on</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• choose to read, and read a lot, further building their background knowledge and reading skill</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• avoid reading as much as possible, and might behave inappropriately during reading time</li> </ul>

Although every struggling reader is unique, there are a few characteristics that have in common. For one thing, they tend not to monitor their own comprehension effectively. Independent readers hit clunks (see page 99) in comprehension all the time—but they know when they don’t get it and have a repertoire of strategies to fix up the mix-ups; dependent readers often don’t even realize that they don’t understand what they’re reading, and plow right on, compounding their confusion. Or they might identify where their difficulty occurs and just stop reading, with neither the skill nor the will to correct the misunderstandings. As well, struggling readers don’t choose to read and, in fact, will often avoid it at all costs. But the research on reading volume is clear: the more you read, the better you read. Not only that, the more you read, the more you know about the world around you. For many of our struggling readers, a lack of background knowledge (especially vocabulary) is one of the biggest impediments to reading comprehension. Finally, I have never met a reader—dependent or independent—who isn’t fully aware of the importance of being an effective reader. They might pretend otherwise, but deep down, *every* reader wants to be a *good* reader.

#### **The Research on Reading Volume with Grade 5 Students**

- Students scoring at the 90th percentile on standardized tests read an average of 40 minutes a day, for a total of over 2 million words a year.
- Students scoring at the 50th percentile read an average of 13 minutes a day, for a total of 600,000 words a year.
- Students scoring at the 10th percentile read an average of less than 2 minutes per day, for a total of 50,000 words a year.

(Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988)

It’s estimated that only about 10% of struggling adolescent readers need work on decoding.

In the past, we’ve assumed that readers who struggled simply needed more drill on skills. So while our struggling readers pored over worksheets on decoding, our independent readers read books. And what happened? The students who needed reading the most got the fewest opportunities to read. In other words, the

rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Yet most adolescents reading below grade level actually can read the words on the page with reasonable accuracy and fluency. It is generally estimated that only about 10% of striving readers need intervention in decoding skills (Snow & Biancarosa, 2006). In most cases, they can read the words; the problem is that they don't always understand the ideas behind the words.

There are many different reasons why readers don't comprehend what they read. That's why it's important to thoroughly assess the needs of striving readers in order to provide instruction to meet those unique needs.

And what should that instruction look like? The report *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents* states that "the content of effective literacy instruction for students reading below grade is very similar to that recommended for students reading at grade level and above." In other words, struggling readers need the same good teaching that all readers need. But they need it even more. (Torgeson et al. 2007: 89)

The strategies described in previous chapters, particularly those for developing and fluent readers, can all be adapted for struggling readers in upper grades, using text appropriate to their reading levels. As well, in this chapter we will look at three keys for supporting struggling readers: choosing appropriate texts; using assessment to guide instruction; and implementing teaching routines to reinforce reading skills and strategies.

## Choosing Appropriate Texts

Perhaps the most important role teachers can play in supporting readers is to provide them with reading materials that match their abilities and their interests. Most struggling readers have already spent too much time with books that are simply too hard. Research tells us that it is not only ineffective, but also *damaging* for struggling readers to be continually confronted with texts that are too difficult for them (Allington, 2006). In fact, when selecting texts for struggling readers (and, perhaps, all readers), it is better to err on the side of too-easy than too-hard. Remember that these students have often experienced several years of school reading failure—and, with it, loss of confidence in themselves as readers. This can take a toll, not just on their reading growth, but also on their willingness to even try.

## Readability Formulas

At upper-elementary years and beyond, leveling systems have limited usefulness for making the reader-text match. Many of the criteria that distinguish one level from another—illustrative support, predictability, print size and placement—just don't apply to upper-level texts. That's where the science of readability comes in. The traditional tools for measuring the degree of challenge in a text are mathematical readability formulas. There are many different formulas—Fry, Flesch-Kincaid, and Dale-Chall, to name a few—that assign a readability score, described as a grade-level equivalent, generally based on the length of the words and the length of the sentences. Most formulas have no way of judging the difficulty of a particular word for a particular reader, so they use syllable count to determine the average word length, on the assumption that longer words are more difficult to read. The Lexile system uses similar criteria, as well as a

"There is little evidence that children experiencing difficulties learning to read, even those with identifiable learning disabilities, need radically different sorts of supports than children at low risk, although they may need much more intensive support. Excellent instruction is the best intervention for children who demonstrate problems learning to read." (Snow et al., 1998: 3)

Instructional-level texts for struggling readers should present no more than 3–5% challenging words and concepts. Books for independent reading should contain no words or concepts to challenge the reader.

There is little discernable difference between a passage leveled at grade 3.5 and one at grade 3.7. It is more useful for classroom instruction to think of materials as "mid-Grade 3" or "beginning-Grade 5."

Your computer will measure the readability of a passage for you! In Word, go to Options, and in the section where you can ask for spelling or grammar check, check the box beside *Show readability statistics*.

Another technological tool is the Juicy Studio website, which provides information on readability tests for print and websites: [juicystudio.com/services/readability.php#readweb](http://juicystudio.com/services/readability.php#readweb)

Readability statistics can tell us only what challenges the book brings to the reading experiences. It takes a wise teacher, with good knowledge of his/her students, to factor the reader into the equation.

measure of the percentage of familiar or unique words in a text. It provides a numeric score between 200 and 2000, which also correlates in a general way to grade-level reading.

We all know that there are numerous limitations to these formulas. Many multisyllabic words, such as *transportation*, *computer*, and *electricity*, are common and quite decodable. On the other hand, if you toss the name of my home town of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, into a 100-word passage, the readability shoots through the roof! Yet it shouldn't present any great challenge even to struggling readers who live in that city.

So how can we use this information to match readers with appropriate books for guided reading instruction? Let's say, for example, that you have conducted an oral reading record and determined that a passage at Grade 3.5 readability is appropriate instructional level (in other words, at least 95% support and no more than 5% challenge) for a particular grade 6 student. However, that doesn't mean that just any passage at mid-Grade-3 reading level will be appropriate for that student. We need to use our professional judgment to determine whether it is really the right book for that reader. For example, we need to ask ourselves

- How many challenging words is this reader likely to struggle with? (For example, are the words *Saskatoon*, *Saskatchewan* likely to be a breeze or a bugaboo?)
- What is the concept load of this passage? Is the reader likely to have the necessary background knowledge to understand the material?
- Are the text structure and features likely to add an additional challenge for this reader? For example, are there charts and tables, maps, or other text features that might be unfamiliar? Are there flashbacks, foreshadowing, or other literary elements that could be confusing to a literal reader?
- Is the reader likely to be interested in the topic and motivated to read this material? (Boys, for example, are largely unwilling to get anywhere near a text if it has a girl as the main character.)

Fortunately, there is much to choose from in the world of children's and young-adult print literature, the Internet, and the many forms of functional text in the world around us. As long as we understand a bit about the art and science of readability, the features of a text that make it more or less challenging, and the needs and interests of our students, we will be able to make that sensitive reader-text match.

"Leveled" little books have even been published for adolescent students. However, no one is more sensitive about the "baby book" than our struggling readers! If it's too thin to have a spine, they probably will be reluctant to read it, even in the safety of the guided reading lesson, much less in the more-public setting of independent reading. However, resources like magazine articles, texts printed from (or read on) the computer, or directions on how to program your PVR can be adapted for any reader.

Novels and chapter books have the advantage of looking like the books that all the other kids are reading. However, their technical readability is likely to rise and fall several times throughout the book. Some publishers will print a grade level on the back of a book (the kiss of death for a struggling reader). However, this usually means that they've taken an average of all the words and sentences in an entire book. Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, for example, is frequently used in Grade 5 classrooms. The Flesch-Kincaid grade level readability is 4.4—sounds pretty manageable but, in truth, it likely means that there are some

sections as easy as Grade 2 readability and some that might be as high as Grade 8. Of course, we never read an entire novel in guided-reading groups. But if we decide that reading *Bridge to Terabithia* is important for a below-grade-level guided-reading group, then we need to find an excerpt that is within the reading range of those students.

### Hi-Lo Texts

Most novels and other trade books were written to provide interesting content and literary quality, not supports for struggling readers. *Hi-lo* books are designed to offer readers high interest and low vocabulary (or difficulty).

Some materials are written specifically to be engaging but easy to read. At best, these hi-lo books contain interesting stories (or information), written in an appealing style, with controls on vocabulary and other text features to support struggling readers. Unfortunately, as with any other product, some books are better than others. There are many books professing to be hi-lo that are neither interesting to kids nor easy to read.

When looking for high-interest/low-vocabulary reading materials for struggling readers, probably the two most important considerations are content and appearance. The stories and nonfiction should be on themes of interest to the age of students; just because a fifth grader is reading at Grade 2 level doesn't mean that he wants to read the same things that seven-year-olds read. And we want to find books that don't look different from the books that other students are reading. This is where the Goldilocks principle comes in: the book has to be long enough to look like a regular novel, but not so long as to intimidate striving readers. Publishers have different tricks for padding out an otherwise short novel: occasional illustrations, starting each chapter halfway down the page, slightly enlarged spaces between lines. However, be careful to avoid books with oversized print and unusual fonts: large print might appeal to those of us beginning to suffer from presbyopia, but it might as well flash "*special*" in neon lights in the eyes of adolescents.

Some other considerations in choosing good hi-lo books include

- consistent readability throughout the book; no peaks and valleys in degree of difficulty
- appealing covers that grab attention
- action in the first few pages of text; cliffhanger chapter endings that motivate readers to keep reading
- age-appropriate illustrations that make the book longer without making it harder, and provide visual support for understanding the text
- characters that are older than the readers
- limited numbers of challenging or unique words
- few or no literary devices and figurative language

A discussion of struggling readers would be incomplete without some mention of the unique challenges of finding books for boys. Most boys won't touch a book with a girl as the main character. Boys tend to prefer action (preferably with some degree of violence) to literary language and character development. But the reality is that the majority of our struggling readers are boys and we need to make that extra effort to find books that our boys can and want to read.

Author Paul Kropp reminds us to BEAR these things in mind when choosing fiction for boys:

- **Boys** (or men) as main characters
- **Episodic** (a series of events rather than a long drawn-out plot line)
- **Action-oriented** (rather than introspective or descriptive)
- **Rebellious** (focus on the outsider, the misdeed, the event that pushes the boundaries of social conventions)

## Using Assessment to Guide Instruction

So we know the relative difficulty of a particular text. How does this help us match that text to a group of readers? The best assessment is an individual oral reading record. Many teachers take an oral reading record “on the run” (hence the term “running record”), but there are also many published assessments with graded reading passages. Testing with grade-level reading materials might be necessary for report cards or large-scale assessments, but we rarely need a formal test to tell us which students are not coping with grade-level materials. Furthermore, this information is not particularly useful in planning instruction. We already know what kind of text is *not* appropriate; we need to know what types of texts *are* appropriate.

The term *miscue* refers to words that the reader has omitted, inserted, or substituted for words that are actually in the text. These are clues that the reader is not using his or her cueing systems effectively. Keeping track of the miscues readers make helps us plan instruction that meets their needs.

Here’s a simple oral reading record process: Choose a 100-word passage that you have estimated to be at appropriate reading level. Sit beside the student as he/she reads the passage out loud, and keep track of the errors, or miscues, that the reader makes. If the student has made 3–5 mistakes in 100 words, conduct a quick comprehension check—either a retelling or response to a few questions. If the student demonstrates adequate general, but not insightful, comprehension, then this is likely an appropriate instructional-level text for the student. Use this text as a benchmark to select other texts for guided reading. If the student makes only one or two errors—or none at all—and demonstrates thorough comprehension, this text is at that student’s independent reading level. This is useful information for helping that student choose texts for free-choice reading. Try the oral reading check again with a slightly more challenging text. If the student makes six or more miscues, then the text is simply too hard. Don’t even bother with a comprehension check. Choose a less-challenging text and try another oral reading assessment. Keep trying till you find the right level.

The great thing about an oral reading record is that it provides us with much more information than the reader–text match. We can hear whether the student is reading at an appropriate pace, with expression and fluency. We can determine whether the reader is comprehending at a superficial or deeper level. We can analyze what types of miscues the reader is making: Is he/she over-relying on sounding out? Does he/she self-correct, or keep on reading even when the errors interfere with the meaning of the passage?

The time taken to conduct a brief oral reading record with every student at least once per reporting period—more frequently with our struggling readers—is well worth it.

## Lesson Routines

I said it before and I’ll say it again: Our struggling readers need the same good teaching that our capable readers need—but they need it even more. The principles and elements of good guided reading instruction outlined earlier in the book are even more important for reluctant readers:

- texts that offer at least 95% support and no more than 5% challenge
- many opportunities for connected reading
- plenty of talk about text and reading processes to develop metacognition
- explicit teaching, guided support, and independent practice of strategies and skills

Most independent readers don't need external incentives to read. The reading is the reward in itself. But many dependent readers have already experienced enough failure to perceive that reading is a punishment to be avoided at all costs. We might never convince them that reading is fun, but we can offer engaging and interesting experiences that teach them that reading is something they will be able to do. That's why so many of the teaching routines in this chapter involve jokes and riddles, games and movement. We use sticky notes and bookmarks rather than journals, foldables instead of graphic organizers, active games instead of seatwork.

Our guided reading instruction should focus on helping students build strategic independence, not just helping them tackle today's text.

There are many ways that, as teachers, we can mitigate the challenge of tough texts. Preteaching vocabulary, building background knowledge with anticipation guides, and providing study guides or outlines to follow are some of the techniques we use to support students in content-area reading. But these routines help with understanding only one particular text. Our job is to provide struggling readers with the competence and confidence to read when we're not around to support them.

See page 130 for a sample lesson plan for guided reading for struggling readers.

We're not doing our students any favors with band-aids like "week-ahead reading," where a learning-support teacher simply reads the whole-class passage to a student ahead of time so that student can "read" it with the rest of the class. We've got to rethink the prevalence of whole-class instruction with one common text. One size doesn't fit all in tennis shoes or T-shirts; why would we presume that one size would fit all in learning? Struggling readers are already functioning behind their age-level peers; their growth needs to be accelerated if they are to catch up. The following routines for comprehension, word-solving, fluency, and reader response are appropriate for any readers, but they have been teacher-tested and pupil-proven to work with many struggling readers.

### **Comprehension Strategies**

The guided-reading structure provides opportunities for both individual strategies and flexible use of a range of strategies. In reality, we never use just a single strategy during reading. But independent readers have a repertoire of strategies on which to draw. Sometimes struggling readers need to master a single strategy at a time to stock their comprehension toolbox.

Many sticky-note comprehension strategies are discussed in chapters 5 and 6. They are every bit as appropriate for struggling readers as for independent readers. Here are some additional comprehension routines.

### **Comic Strip Inferences**

You have to infer in order to understand what you read. All of us, even our struggling readers, are always drawing inferences. So the first step is to make our students metacognitive about what they do when they infer. Readers infer by combining the information that we read with what we already know from our background knowledge to come up with an understanding that is implied, but not explicitly stated, in the text.

Learning Goal: Students will be able to identify inferences required to understand humor.

See The Inference Equation on page 98.

### Sample of the Inference Equation

What I Read: “When I woke up in the morning, there were leaves and branches all over the yard.”

What I Know: Storms cause leaves and branches to blow off trees.

What I Infer: There was a big storm overnight.

One of the most engaging routines to help any readers think about what they do when they infer is reading cartoons. Appreciating humor always requires inference. In most cases, we’re amused by what is *not* directly stated, but what we fill in from our background knowledge. Take, for example, a silly joke: “What do prehistoric creatures do when they sleep? Dinosnore.” In order to appreciate the fine level of humor, you have to combine what you just read with the background knowledge that prehistoric creatures are called dinosaurs and many people snore when they sleep. *What I read plus what I know equals what I infer.*

Cartoons add a visual element to the process, making it easier and more fun to read. Your local newspaper can be a source of many age- and family-appropriate comic strips. Keep a file of cartoons for practicing the inference process.

Display a copy of some easy jokes or cartoons. Make a two-column chart on a piece of paper: in one column, note all the things you observe in the illustration and the text. In the second column, indicate the background knowledge necessary to “get” the joke. For example, here’s what we observed from the illustrations and text of a cartoon from the newspaper: A dentist is standing in front of a display stand full of marbles with a sign that says, “*Bite down on a marble, 25 cents*”; the caption reads, *When Dentists Drum Up Business*. In order to appreciate the humor, we need to know the following: what happens to your teeth when you bite a marble; what kind of work a dentist does; and what it means to “drum up business.”

#### **Must-Do**

Provide students with individual copies of jokes or riddles and have them work with a partner (or independently) to complete a two-column chart like the one created in the lesson.

#### **Remote-Control Reading**

One of the biggest challenges for struggling readers is monitoring their own comprehension. Too often, our striving readers don’t even realize that they don’t understand what they’re reading and plod painfully on, compounding their confusion. Other times, they know they don’t get it, but don’t know when they stopped getting it. Sometimes, they simply stop reading and give up.

On page 98, we described Clicks and Clunks, a self-monitoring routine in which readers practice tabbing points of confusion with red flags, then replacing the red flags with green flags when they are able to correct the confusion.

Another way to teach students about self-monitoring while reading is to compare it to using a remote control to watch TV or a movie. Just as we press the Play button to start our show, we press the Play button in our brains to start reading. However, every now and then (let’s say, every page), we need to hit the Pause button in our brains and ask ourselves, “Is this making sense to me? Do I understand all of this? What did I just read?” If we answer ourselves, “Yes, this makes sense!” then we hit that mental Play button again and keep on reading. But if our

Learning Goal: Students will be able to pause in reading to monitor their own comprehension.

### Remote Control Buttons

- ▶ Play
- Pause
- Stop
- ◀◀ Rewind
- ▶▶ Fast Forward

Learning Goal: Students will be able to navigate complex sentences by breaking them into phrases and clauses.

answer is no, then we need to hit the Stop button and hit either Rewind or Fast Forward to use our strategies to fix up the mix-up.

Some teachers provide each student with a bookmark, labeled with the symbols in the box in the margin. But it's easy to find inexpensive remote-control devices at a dollar store and add the labels to the back. That way, fidgeters can actually feel like they are physically hitting the buttons as they use the "clickers" in their brains.

### **Must-Do**

Provide each student with their own controller and a passage to read on their own using remote-control reading to monitor their comprehension.

### **Chunk the Sentence**

As we have seen in readability research, sentence length has a big impact on the degree of challenge a passage presents for readers. This is particularly true for our dysfluent word-by-word readers, who often have trouble remembering the beginning of a sentence long enough to get to the end. We can teach readers to negotiate convoluted sentences by chunking those sentences into clauses and phrases, using punctuation marks and signal words. Here are some signals we can teach students:

- **Colons and Semicolons** are the most obvious signals, as they generally attach two related sentences to one another.
- **Commas** often separate clauses and phrases (with the exception of commas that separate words in a list).
- **Conjunctions**, both coordinate (*and, but, or, so*) and subordinate (*when, because, although, if*), indicate the separation of clauses in a sentence.
- **Prepositions** start phrases that usually indicate time or place, such as *after, in, to, over, without*.

Take this example from Paul Kropp's novel *One Crazy Night*:

Back in Grade Five, I was rinsing some paint brushes in the sink when the fire alarm went off. I told Mrs. P. that I couldn't turn the faucet off, but she ignored me, so I just lined up with the other kids and we all marched outside in single file.

That second sentence is 32 words long! But looking at the conjunctions, we can chunk the very long sentence into four short sentences:

I told Mrs. P that I couldn't turn the faucet off. She ignored me. I just lined up with the other kids. We all marched outside in single file.

Technically, we might even consider "that I couldn't turn the faucet off" another clause, but this might make the text more, rather than less, confusing.

Gather sentences from the guided reading passage—or, better yet, send students into the text to find sentences that they consider formidable. As a group, practice chunking these sentences into phrases and clauses. You might find it helpful to write the sentences on sentence strips and have the students physically cut them apart to break them into chunks. Then go back into the sentence and practice reading it with fluency and phrasing, attending to punctuation and meaning.

### **Must-Do**

Provide students with a set of sentences from the current guided-reading text or past guided-reading texts. Have them use slash marks to break each sentence into manageable chunks.

### **Visualizing: Story Wheels**

The ability to generate mental images during and after reading is considered to be a key comprehension strategy (Pearson & Duke, 2000). For many readers, this process is automatic; reading is almost like watching a movie running through in their minds. For others (myself included, I confess), visualization is a strategy that must be activated deliberately and purposefully. Graphic organizers are excellent tools for helping students organize information that they read in a visual way.

One way to reinforce visualization during reading is to teach students to pause periodically and “Click!” with their mental cameras, thinking aloud or to themselves about the images that are generated. Start by selecting two or three pause points in the reading. When students reach those points, they stop and describe the picture in their minds. Sometimes I will have students place two or three large sticky notes in strategic places in the text they are about to read. As they come to these stickies in their reading, they are to pause and sketch the image the comes to their minds. Labeled diagrams, such as the mind map described on page 141, provide opportunities to put their images on paper.

### **Must-Do**

Create circular foldables by folding thin paper plates into six sections. (See page 161 in the Appendix for instructions.) Fold up the point to make a hexagonal shape in the middle when it’s unfolded. Write the title of the book or passage in the centre shape. In the first section, sketch and caption the beginning of the story and add a caption. In the next four sections, sketch and caption four key events. In the final section, sketch and caption the end of the story. During the next guided reading lesson, have students share and explain their circle stories to their reading partners.

### **Mapping the Page**

Informational text often has a mixture of print and visuals on a page, and reading in a linear fashion from top to bottom and left to right virtually guarantees that some key information will be missed. Readers often miss captions or labels on pictures and even text boxes that do not follow a top-to-bottom left-to-right orientation. This routine teaches students to locate where the all the information can be found on a page.

Use a guided-reading text that has captions, labels, or other information in addition to the illustrations and print. Clip a clear acetate sheet (e.g., an overhead transparency) over the page. As students point out where the different bits of information are found, use markers to draw boxes or circles around the sections in different colors. Be sure to box every label, caption, heading, etc. When you remove the clear sheet, you have a visual map of the different places you need to read in order to get all the information on the page.

After working through the process together, give each student a piece of acetate to clip to a designated page in their books, and have them chart their own maps of information. Then, as they read the page, have them use the markers to check off each piece of information as they read it. You might even suggest that

Learning Goal: Students will be able to generate visual images to retell a story.

“There is an old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. When it comes to comprehension, this saying might be paraphrased, ‘a visual display helps readers understand, organize, and remember some of those thousand words.’” (Duke & Pearson, 2002: 218)

Learning Goal: Students will be able to navigate nonlinear text by mapping the organization of the page.

If water-soluble markers are used, the acetate sheets can be cleaned and reused.

they number each box (or circle) as they read it, then go back and compare the order of reading with a partner. This could generate a good discussion about the difference between reading styles for fiction and nonfiction visual texts.

Most large-scale reading assessments contain some visual text. If students are permitted to mark the reading passages on large-scale assessments, this is a good strategy to ensure that they are getting all the pieces on visual texts.

### **Must-Do**

Use another text or a different excerpt from the guided-reading text for students to go through the page-mapping process independently.

## **Fluency Routines**

Fluent oral reading does not guarantee strong comprehension. But dysfluent reading pretty much guarantees that a reader will run into comprehension difficulties. Readers who call out every word often fail to understand a lengthy sentence, much less the overall text. Helping our struggling readers build fluency can be a key to smoothing out many reading problems.

The only way to build fluency is to practice reading aloud, and there are several ways to support fluent, expressive oral reading. Round-robin reading is not one of them. No one ever became a better reader by listening to someone struggle painfully through a text that was too hard, but plenty of people learned to hate reading even more than they already did. Never ask any reader—particularly a struggling reader—to read publicly unless he or she has a chance to practice reading the text first.

Guided repeated oral reading has been identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) as one of the best techniques for building fluency. This technique has several variations, but generally involves modeling the reading, then having the student reread the same passage several times, each time receiving specific feedback on how to improve the reading the next time.

Offer specific suggestions for students:

- Say each word clearly and not too quickly, as though you're talking to someone who might not understand.
- Don't stop at the end of the line unless there is punctuation.
- Pay attention to punctuation marks. They are the traffic signals of reading.
- Read in groups of words rather than word by word. Think about which words go together.
- Change the expression of your voice to match the meaning of the text, especially when there is a question mark, exclamation mark, or special print.
- Don't make your voice dip down at the end of each sentence.

Choral reading can be a great support for struggling readers, as it pulls them along in expression, tempo, and phrasing. Performance reading, such as readers theatre, provides purpose for rereading to build expression, clarity, and fluency. (See chapter 5 for ideas for readers theatre lessons.)

### **Must-Do**

- Telling jokes is a motivating way to get students to rehearse a reading passage. Have students research and print out jokes (be sure to screen it first for class-appropriateness). They should read their jokes several times to practice when

- to pause and when to speed up, when to speak loudly and when to use a quiet voice, etc. in order for the joke to have the most impact.
- Provide pairs of students with a short poem that you have read together. Have them practice reading the poem to perform it for the group. They should decide which lines each will read and which they will read together, when their voices should be loud and when soft, etc.

## The Reading–Writing Connection

Let's face it: just about all our struggling readers are also struggling writers. So when we assess their reading proficiency based on written responses, we're hitting them with a double-whammy. That's why so many struggling readers don't get credit on tests for what they do know. If we want accurate classroom assessments of what our students know and can do as readers, perhaps we need to make accommodations, allowing them to respond orally or to have their responses scribed. Also, maybe this is the time to overlook issues with spelling and conventions and instead focus on the content of the response.

Many students simply don't know how to respond to reading beyond "I liked it" or "It was boring." The small-group setting is an appropriate place to model and practice written responses. Kylene Beers (2003) suggests that often we need to teach students the words they need for responding to reading, both orally and in writing, such as in an anchor chart.

Words that make you sound smart when you're talking about reading:

- A realistic/unrealistic situation
- A suspenseful/predictable plot
- An authentic/unbelievable character
- A powerful/weak message
- Descriptive/mundane words
- A fast-moving/plodding storyline
- Unique/overdone descriptions
- Elaborate/sketchy ideas

Graphic organizers are particularly useful for struggling writers. For one thing, they are less intimidating than a blank piece of paper or journal page, because they limit writing space to a chart or box. As well, they help struggling readers organize their thinking by putting the information into a visual framework.

Responses that transform what was read into a different text form can support both reading comprehension and writing proficiency. For example, students might be asked to reframe elements of a story as a

- newspaper article
- how-to (procedure)
- anagram poem (e.g., using the letters in a character's name)
- letter or diary to/from a character
- Craigslist or E-bay ad
- character's Facebook page

Asking struggling readers to write in response to reading might seem like adding insult to injury. But according to Michael McKenna,

By asking students to use the information they find in sentences and paragraphs to complete charts, build diagrams, write summaries or engage in similar tasks, they must process and understand what they read. (McKenna, 2002: 8)

Small-group guided writing instruction not only supports struggling learners in transferring their ideas to paper, it also helps them become more competent readers.

# Sample Guided Reading Lesson Plan for Struggling Readers

<p><b>Title</b> <i>Choose Your Bully</i>, chapters 3-4</p>	<p><b>Learning Goals</b> Comprehension: Drawing inferences from text Word Study: similes Vocabulary: research, solution, various, target Fluency: Readers Theatre script of Ch 3-4</p>
<p><b>Text/Book Introduction</b></p> <p><b>Preview:</b> <i>This is a book about two kids, Ling and Richard, who are being bullied by a guy named Chuck. They need to do some research to find a solution to their problem. Read p. 18 together to establish context; think aloud, modeling inferences; e.g., I'm inferring that Chuck pushed Ling to the ground and the ground is wet because she said the back of her pants were wet and she is embarrassed.</i></p> <p><b>Prior Knowledge:</b> TTYN – What's the best thing to do if you're being bullied?</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b> <i>Today as we read, we're going to talk to our brains about what we know in our background knowledge that helps us understand this text.</i></p>	
<p><b>Day 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Book Introduction: read p. 18 aloud while students follow in their texts</li> <li>• Pause Point: end of p. 19 – any inferences? Prompt with questioning if necessary: <i>Did Ling beat Chuck up? How do you know? Why did Ling say, "aggh!" Why was Chuck eating Richard's lunch?</i></li> <li>• Introduce "how to" list on p. 20. Pause point on p. 20. Predict which solution they will pick. TTYN: Which solution would you choose and why?</li> <li>• Continue reading as time permits</li> </ul>	<p><b>Must-Do</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read all of chapter 3 independently</li> <li>• Complete a graphic organizer—They Think/I Think (independently or in pairs)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share must-do/reread text in pairs</li> <li>• Summarize: main idea, key points</li> <li>• Predict: How do you think their solution will work?</li> <li>• Review vocabulary</li> <li>• Word study: find examples of similes (Note sarcasm in "nice as a pit bull")</li> </ul>	<p><b>Must-Do</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a picture glossary for two of the similes in the text</li> <li>• Read next two chapters in text independently</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share must-do</li> <li>• Introduce readers theatre: script format, roles, etc.</li> <li>• First read, sharing roles</li> </ul>	<p><b>Must-Do</b> Practice readers theatre to perform at next GR session</p>