

SHORT Texts, BIG Impact

35 Strategies for Strengthening Reading and Writing Skills



Shell Education

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PART 1: READING





USING SHORT TEXTS FOR READING

A short text provides opportunities to practice multiple reading skills and makes that practice easier to approach. In an era full of teaching challenges, getting students to turn the page and pick up the pen can be a first win. While the goal of this section is to show how the strategies can be used with short texts, they can be used with texts of any length.

Selecting Short Texts

A short text can be a section of a longer text, a short article, a headline, an infographic, or even a visual. I have used billboards, text messages, monologues from movies, letters to the editor, sudden fiction, and six-word memoirs to teach everything from inference and evidence to figurative language and research skills.

I often used a short section of a longer work to think about big ideas and practice important skills. One of the best teacher feelings is when a student wants to read more than what you share in class. According to Wright, “Short texts invite interested readers to read more” (2020, para. 9). Sometimes I handed out the whole text but had students focus on just a portion. Other times, I provided the text as an excerpt.

A BRIEF WORD ABOUT READING ENTIRE BOOKS

Reading short texts or excerpts does not replace reading full novels or student-selected independent reading. Both long and short texts are important to the literacy life of students. Recent studies show that the number of books students are reading for pleasure has dropped substantially over the last generation (U.S. Department of Education 2024). Classrooms can strike a balance between short, instructional jaunts of reading and writing to build skills and stamina, and the rich joy of finishing a self-selected chapter book or novel. There is space for both. When we start a workout regimen, we don't start by running marathons. Working with shorter texts for both reading and writing provides a foundation for independent reading and builds the stamina needed for reading longer texts in and out of the classroom.

Even classic literature can use a little condensing from time to time. If you studied Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in high school, you may remember Mark Antony's "friends, Romans, countrymen" speech.

But you've likely long forgotten the drawn-out battle scenes in Acts IV and V. (If you forgot there even was a battle in *Julius Caesar*, no shame!) With limited instructional time, and a long list of important skills students needed to master, I often provided a quick summary of a section of text that didn't have an instructional pay-off. I would rather spend that extra time going deeper into the work that matters.

First Reading of the Text

It is difficult, if not impossible, for students to analyze a text accurately without first having a general overview of what the text is about. More than skimming or previewing the text, a first read prepares students for what's to come.

With any text, we want to introduce key terminology and activate background knowledge. The Science of Reading calls our attention to these components. Louisa Moats emphasizes the importance of activating and building background knowledge: "Everything we comprehend through listening is filtered through the lens of what we already know and believe" (2020, 217). We know that students who have a wide vocabulary and deep background knowledge on a topic will have an easier time comprehending text. We also know that reading widely helps build the very background knowledge and vocabulary needed to read more complex texts.

WAYS TO DO A FIRST READ

- Modeled read-aloud by the teacher
- Paired reading
- Silent/independent reading
- Playing an audio recording

Many of the strategies in this section are conducted *after* a first reading of the text. Teachers may opt to conduct that first read in a variety of ways: a teacher-modeled read-aloud for the whole class, a paired reading where partners take turns, an independent silent read, a recording or audiobook, or some combination of these.

Reentering the Text (Second Readings and Beyond)

I like to use the phrase "reentering the text" instead of "rereading." Many students have a misconception of rereading as something you only do when you are not a strong reader. When asked to reread, students will often go back to the first word of the first line, instead of digging into the sections where comprehension breaks down. Kelly Gallagher refers to "second draft reading," or helping students learn that "meaning can be found beyond the surface layer of the text" (2004, 82). Lemov, Driggs, and Woolway use the term *layered reading,* the idea that students reread the text "strategically to engage it in different ways that make a difference" (2016, 64). Each of these terms suggests that we gain more when we return to the text a second or third time. They also honor the deep work of comprehension that often follows a basic understanding or first read of the text.

We can reenter the text multiple times, looking for different things with each reading. Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher explain that incorporating repeated readings "requires that students have expanding purposes" (2013, 47). Since we have already done our first read, we are returning to the text to uncover more meaning. When we return, we don't always start with the first word. We can hop to a specific section or ask students where they would like to reenter the text. We can move directly to the main idea or a section that is dense and tangled with complex syntax and vocabulary.

Exploring Choices Authors Make

Reading and writing are inextricably linked. When we read, we think about the author's meaning and intent. When we write, we are working to share meaning with others. To read a text critically, we have to think beyond the words on the page and notice the moves that an author makes to impact the reader.

Author's craft encompasses a wide variety of choices that authors make when writing. Everything from the details that are included and the way the text is structured to the use of a specific word or punctuation mark reflects a decision that an author made deliberately. According to Lester Laminack in *Cracking Open the Author's Craft: Teaching the Art of Writing*, "Craft is an intentional use of techniques…to create a desired impact upon the reader and to evoke a response from the reader" (2016, 17).

As a reader, examining the intentional choices an author made can be part of comprehending the text. By closely reading a text, looking at the author's craft, we can better understand why the text was written and how it is structured. Penny Kittle notes, "You will open a window into how reading and writing are intimately connected, both in teaching and learning. When we intentionally connect them [reading and writing] in our teaching, we strengthen students' abilities in both" (2022, 13).

Examining an author's craft is both a reading and writing strategy. When students see an author's choices as intentional, they are more likely to consider the small moves they get to make as writers. Katie Wood Ray calls these "crafted places" or "those places where writers do particular things with words that go beyond just choosing the ones they need to get the meaning across" (1999, 28).

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