
INTRODUCTION

Read Alouds are a core component of the GirlSMART Literacy Program. Experts in the field of literacy recommend reading books to children as part of any literacy program. A well crafted read aloud fosters a love a reading, builds children’s vocabulary, expands their knowledge of the world, and improves their critical thinking (Armbruster et al., 2003). Research has repeatedly shown that read alouds improve students’ ability to comprehend stories, as well as their written, oral and auditory skills. Jim Trelease (2006), an expert in read alouds affirms, “We read to children for all the same reasons we talk with children: to reassure, to entertain, to bond, to inform or explain, to arouse curiosity, to inspire. But in reading aloud, we also: condition the child’s brain to associate reading with pleasure; create background knowledge; build vocabulary; [and] provide a reading role model” (p. 4). Children who are skillfully read to should understand the story and be able to generate appropriate questions about the story.

Since the purpose of reading is to understand what we read, teaching students strategies that improve their understanding should be the primary focus of literacy instruction. In order to conduct read alouds that ensure that all students understand, teacher should read the book carefully at least two times before lesson planning in order to decide which comprehension strategy is most appropriate for the book, which qualities of strong, smart and bold are addressed in the book, and what vocabulary or concepts are unfamiliar to students. An easy way to approach creating an effective lesson is to think of the lesson as having three parts: **pre-**, **during-** (called “read aloud” in the lesson plan template) and **post-** reading. Teachers should use the revised lesson plan template (Appendix C) to organize and record their lessons.

Pre-Reading: Setting the stage for reading a book is essential. Teachers should begin by identifying ways to pique students’ interest, tap into their prior knowledge or build knowledge they will need to understand the story. An activity or discussion that better prepares girls for understanding what they are reading will improve girls’ comprehension. Examples of **pre-reading strategies** include:

- ☞ Pre-teaching key vocabulary
- ☞ Previewing the text (also know as a picture walk)
- ☞ Asking students to make a prediction
- ☞ Setting a purpose for reading
- ☞ Asking students if they have ever done anything or felt something similar to what the character does or feels

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- ☞ Telling your own story that is related to the read aloud story
 - ☞ Bringing in “artifacts” or pictures related to the story

During Reading: The during reading phase (called “read aloud” in the lesson plan template) requires a balance between pausing enough to ensure girls understand the story and not interrupting the flow of the story. GirlSMART teachers should pause to allow students to ask questions, in order to define or explain a word and to pose questions that will deepen girls’ understanding of the story. Teachers should plan on reading the story at least 2 times, and it is recommended that they read it aloud once without stopping so that girls can enjoy the story. Before reading the story, the teacher should give girls a purpose or focus and ensure that comprehension strategies are implemented: making connections, asking questions, visualizing, and drawing inferences. These strategies will be discussed more in depth below.

Post Reading: The after or post-reading phase is extremely important and easy to overlook. Post-reading strategies allow students to “repair” serious breakdowns in understanding and solidify their understanding of the text. Research-based activities that improve understanding include: summarizing the text, retelling the story, confirming predictions, evaluating the story, and connecting/comparing texts to other texts. Students can draw their favorite scene, explain why they agreed or did not agree with the actions of a character, fill out Venn diagrams comparing two stories, sequence the events of the story, or discuss the qualities of strong, smart and bold that the characters exemplified.

COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

True comprehension goes beyond literal understanding and involves the reader’s interaction with the text. If students are to become thoughtful, insightful readers, they must extend their thinking beyond a superficial understanding of the text. ~Harvey & Goudvis, 2000

Literacy experts agree that one of the most effective means of improving children’s reading comprehension is by explicitly teaching comprehension strategies. The GirlSMART program redesign addresses the need to explicitly teach comprehension by using strategies developed by Stephanie Harvey and Ann Goudvis (2000). In their book, *Strategies that Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*, Harvey and Goudvis (2000) recommend teaching the following strategies to students: **making connections, questioning, visualizing, inferring**, determining importance, and synthesizing. See Appendix D for graphic organizers that can be used to reinforce some of these strategies during the post-reading phase. Due to the time constraints and issues of complexity, the GirlSMART literacy program teachers are not required to explicitly teach the strategies of determining importance and synthesizing information. It

is important to note that post reading activities such as comparing and contrasting, summarizing and retelling the story are highly recommended and these strategies are synthesizing strategies. It was also decided not to teach inferring in kindergarten although teachers may ask questions that would encourage students to make an inference or explain to students a part of the story that may be confusing to them because it requires making an inference.

The teaching of comprehension strategies includes two major components: mini lessons that teach the strategies and teacher guided questions during read alouds that focus on one or more reading comprehension strategies. Teachers should make sure that they model using the four comprehension strategies as they read to students. In order to do this, teachers need to identify parts of the book where they can apply one of the comprehension strategies and then “think aloud” to students, explaining to the girls how they used the comprehension strategy. Teachers should post the names and definitions of the strategies in their classroom so that the students can refer to them. Below in italics are definitions for the four strategies quoted directly from *Strategies that Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* (2000):

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Readers pay more attention when they are able to relate to the text. Readers naturally bring their prior knowledge and experience to reading, but they comprehend better when they think about connections they make between the text, their lives, the world and other texts.

Text to self – a personal connection to the book

Text to text – one book to another

Text to world – around current events and issues

Students naturally make connections when they are reading; however, making connections between text and self is by far the easiest. Making connections between the text and another text and between text and the world are much more difficult. It is important for teachers to keep this in mind as they conduct read alouds. All girls, grades k-3, are expected to make connections, however the expectation is that in kindergarten the focus will be on text to self connections especially during the first part of the year. For mid year 1st graders and above, it is essential that the 3 types of connections are explicitly taught and that lessons are planned and books are selected that will encourage girls to make text to text and text to world connections.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Questioning keeps readers engaged. When readers ask questions, they clarify understanding and forge ahead to make meaning. Asking questions is at the heart of thoughtful reading.

All questions are not equally as powerful in enhancing understanding and developing critical thinking. For this reason, teachers should be aware of the types of questions that students are asking and the types of questions that they ask students. GirlSMART has adopted a question tree based on Reciprocal Teaching (see Appendix E). There are above the surface questions such as who, what, where, when, how and why, that in most cases, require a superficial understanding of text. Below the surface questions include how, why, would, could or should questions that usually require students to make conclusions and inferences. How and why questions are included in both above and below the surface because, depending on the book, answering them may require little thinking or may require students to make conclusions and inferences. For example, if the author is explicit in motive such as in, “Johnny was so jealous of his sister that he broke her doll,” then a why question (Why did Johnny break his sister’s doll?) would be an above the surface question. If the author does not state why something occurred and requires the reader to make an inference, then a why question in this scenario would be a below the surface question. Kindergarteners and first graders may tend to ask questions that are only above the surface, and as the year progresses, teachers should model asking questions that are below the surface.

VISUALIZING

Active readers create visual images in their minds based on the words they read in the text. The pictures they create enhance their understanding.

Good readers visualize, which makes reading much more enjoyable and enhances comprehension. Teachers can foster visualization by choosing books that are rich in description and by reading aloud to students without showing them the pictures. Using poetry is excellent way to teach visualization.

MAKING INFERENCES

Making inferences requires the reader to use clues from the text and what they already know to make a judgment about what, why or how something has happened.

Readers who cannot make inferences miss important information about a story. Teachers should expect to model making inferences as much as possible and should choose books that lend themselves to inferring. Chris Van Allsburg’s books require the reader to make inferences often.

COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES MINI LESSONS

GirlSMART staff created mini lessons for the four comprehension strategies in order to explicitly teaching each of the strategies before asking them to apply these strategies during read alouds. Below is an example of a mini lesson for teaching how to make inferences. Additional mini lessons for the other comprehension strategies can be found in Appendix F.

MAKING INFERENCES

Grade	2 – 3
Kid Friendly Definition	When you infer you are taking clues from the text (or pictures) and what you know from your experiences to figure out something that the author doesn’t tell you. When you make an inference you need to be able to identify the clues you used to make that inference.
Example	<p>Read passage and have on board/chart paper:</p> <p>“Clarissa called Yazmin Tuesday afternoon and invited her to come to her house after dinner to watch a movie. After dinner, Yazmin hopped on her bike and road over to Clarissa’s house. When she got there the house was dark and no one answered the door when she knocked. Yazmin hopped back on her bike and rode home.”</p> <p>From this story I can infer that no one was home at Clarissa’s house when Yazmin went over. I used the clues “the house was dark” and “no one answered the door” to come up with my inference. Underline clues in passage as you go.</p> <p>I could not infer that Clarissa ran to the store because she forgot the popcorn. This is a guess; the author did not give any clues to support this guess.</p> <p>Also show the girls a picture from a story and model how to make inferences using illustrations.</p>
Extend	<p>Have the girls get into groups of three. Give them each a short story or picture and instruct them as a group to come up with an inference and the clue(s) that helped them to make the inference. Have the groups then act out their scenarios in front of the class to see if the class comes up with the same inferences as the small groups.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Achoo!” Patti sneezed. She sneezed again and then a third time. She felt very

	<p>weak, and her head hurt. She dragged herself out of bed and called her boss. She told her boss she wouldn't be going to work.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Zolak boarded his spaceship and blasted off planet Vartog on his way to planet Earth. His spaceship landed in a desert and he walked around looking for earthlings. Then he looked down and saw a dark creature lying down right next to him. In fact, the creature's feet were touching Zolak's feet. Zolak tried to run away, but everywhere he went, the creature followed him. At noon, Zolak realized that the creature had shrunk to a very small size but was still right next to his feet. However, during the afternoon, the creature grew longer and longer! Then the strangest thing happened. Night came and the dark creature completely disappeared! 3. Sarah woke up and the sun was already shining. She quickly changed into her bathing suit, put on her sandals, and ran downstairs. Once she found her towel, shovel, and bucket she ran to find her mom so they could leave.
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VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Vocabulary instruction is the other major component of the GirlSMART read alouds. A reader's knowledge of vocabulary is one of the greatest predictors of reading comprehension. Students who have small vocabularies will most likely have difficulties understanding grade level texts.

There are two ways to learn new words: incidentally (indirectly, through conversations or reading) or directly, through explicit, teacher-facilitated instruction. Research shows that the major means of learning new vocabulary is incidentally by reading or in conversation. Research also shows that weaker readers and non-native speakers of English are less likely than strong readers or native speakers of English to learn words incidentally. For this reason, the lesson plan for the read alouds includes a section, "Cool Words" (see Appendix C). Teachers should identify approximately 5 words to explicitly teach students for each lesson. Teachers should focus on words that are essential for understanding the text and/or are high frequency words. They should create a kid friendly definition and include a gesture to help girls remember the word. Appendix G includes many approaches to teaching vocabulary. Teachers should try to instill a joy of language and word learning in their girls; interactive, playful activities are encouraged. More formal ways to teach vocabulary are more appropriate for students in first grade and above. All teachers should read "Repeated Interactive Read-Alouds in Preschool and Kindergarten" (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007) which provides an

excellent framework for conducting effective read alouds and how to best teach vocabulary to kindergarten aged students.

As teachers create activities for read alouds, centers, and vocabulary time, it is important to plan all activities around research based best practices in vocabulary instruction. *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read Through Third* (Armbruster, Lehr and Osborn, 2003), is a free, online publication that all GirlSMART site coordinators and teachers should read. This publication was written for teachers based on an exhaustive meta-analysis of research on reading instruction conducted by the National Literacy Panel. *Put Reading First* dedicates an entire chapter to vocabulary instruction. In this chapter, its authors emphasize that children learn the meanings of most words indirectly through everyday experiences with oral and written language. They learn word meanings through conversations with other people, especially adults. The more oral language experiences children have with people who use rich and varied vocabulary, the more words they learn. Children also learn word meanings from listening to adults read to them. Read alouds are most effective if the reader pauses to define an unfamiliar word and engages students in conversations about the book after reading. Lastly, children learn words indirectly, by reading on their own. These findings highlight the powerful impact the teachers can have on girls' vocabulary development. Teachers should choose their words carefully, striving to expose students to new words. Break free from common words like happy or sad and replace them with words like jovial, ecstatic, content or morose, melancholy and disappointed.

Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read (2003) provides a framework for teaching words explicitly (directly). Its authors' recommendations are quoted directly below in italics (pp. 30-31):

Although a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly, some vocabulary should be taught directly: *Direct instruction helps students learn difficult words, such as words that represent complex concepts that are not part of the students' everyday experiences. Direct instruction of vocabulary relevant to a given text leads to better reading comprehension.*

Direct instruction includes:

- *providing students with specific word instruction; and*
- *teaching students word-learning strategies.*

Specific word instruction

Specific word instruction, or teaching individual words, can deepen students' knowledge of word meanings. In-depth knowledge of word meanings can help students understand

what they are hearing or reading. It also can help them use words accurately in speaking and writing.

In particular:

Teaching specific words before reading helps both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. Before students read a text, it is helpful to teach them specific words they will see in the text. Teaching important vocabulary before reading can help students both learn new words and comprehend the text.

Extended instruction that promotes active engagement with vocabulary improves word learning. Children learn words best when they are provided with instruction over an extended period of time and when that instruction has them work actively with words. The more students use new words and the more they use them in different contexts, the more likely they are to learn the words.

Repeated exposure to vocabulary in many contexts aides word learning. Students learn new words better when they encounter them often and in various contexts. The more children see, hear, and work with specific words, the better they seem to learn them. When teachers provide extended instruction that promotes active engagement, they give students repeated exposure to new words. When the students read those same words in their texts, they increase their exposure to the new words.