

# BEST PRACTICES IN READING

## A 21st Century Skill Update

*Kathleen Roskos ■ Susan B. Neuman*

For years, the field of reading education has been engaged in thinking about best practices. The term “best practice” is generally used to describe those instructional approaches and techniques that improve children’s reading development. In short, these practices have acquired evidence over time that if used with fidelity, children are likely to become proficient in reading. The National Reading Panel Report (2000), now over a decade old, was perhaps the most ambitious effort to synthesize this literature in reading, highlighting key best practices in the field.

Best practices, as most of us recognize, however, are not necessarily easy to implement in day-to-day instruction. Consider for a moment the best practice of explicit phonics instruction. Effective implementation of this best practice can get complicated pretty quickly on several levels: It requires teachers to know a good deal about the sound structure of our language, about students’ abilities to segment and blend a word’s phonemes beyond the first sound. It also requires access to high-quality instructional materials and the ability to differentiate instruction to those children who may need it. Finally, it demands good pacing and classroom organization carefully calibrated to maximize the use of instructional time. If any these requirements break down, the best practice may no longer become best practice. Consequently, another key feature of best practice is that it needs to be implemented well with considerable intention, deliberate practice, and reflection for teachers to be successful at it.

Drawing on current research and professional wisdom, in our final column, we identify a number of best practices seen from our own research perspective. Certainly, they are not all inclusive. Rather, our efforts here are to highlight a set of practices that have amassed a significant body of work to demonstrate their usefulness in improving children’s motivation for learning to read, proficiency in reading, and their likelihood to become lifelong readers and writers.

### **Children Need Explicit Instruction in Vocabulary Development**

As most reading professionals recognize, vocabulary plays a fundamental role in learning to read. As learners begin to read, they map the printed vocabulary encountered in texts onto the oral language they bring to the task. Understanding text, therefore, depends on being able to translate letter–sound correspondences into known words and comprehensible concepts (Kamil, 2004). Consequently, word knowledge (e.g., oral language) seems to occupy an important middle ground in learning to read. It makes a critical contribution to beginning readers’ transition from oral to written forms and is crucial to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Numerous studies (Stahl &

---

The department editors welcome reader comments. Kathleen Roskos is a professor at John Carroll University, University Heights, Ohio, USA; e-mail [roskos@jcu.edu](mailto:roskos@jcu.edu). Susan B. Neuman is a professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA; e-mail [sbneuman@umich.edu](mailto:sbneuman@umich.edu).

---

Nagy, 2006) have shown that the size of a student's word knowledge is strongly related to reading proficiency both in the primary and later grades (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

Vocabulary, or the labels that we use, are merely the tip of the iceberg. Rather, these words relate to a network of concepts that children develop early on. For example, teaching the word *kiwi* and identifying as a "kind of fruit" helps the child begin to develop an understanding of the category in which it belongs. Categories are essential to concept building (Neuman, Newman, & Dwyer, 2011; Neuman & Wright, 2013). They enable children to build knowledge networks—connections between concepts that are meaningful and enduring in their longer-term memory and are primary in comprehension development. They become the background knowledge that we know needs to be activated when children are trying to make sense of new ideas. Teaching words in meaningful semantic clusters enhances children's reading development.

### Children Need to Develop Knowledge Through Text

Early in our years in the reading profession, we used to hear the common phrase, "I don't care what the child reads, as long as he or she reads." But now we know that this is a bit of a misnomer. We do care what children read. Having children engage in books of high quality introduces them to new words, ideas, and events outside of their daily experience. Even in the very early years, children gain a tremendous

*"The size of a student's word knowledge is strongly related to reading proficiency both in the primary and later grades."*

storehouse of knowledge through their interactions with books.

Related to the Common Core State Standards, efforts to increase children's exposure to information texts has now taken center stage. Studies suggest that the information genre may elicit more cognitively demanding teaching interactions around vocabulary than narrative. Pellegrini and his colleagues (1990), for example, reported significantly more utterances of high cognitive demand during expository texts reading (16%) compared with reading storybook texts (4%). Similarly, children have been reported to use a greater numbers of initiations, book-relevant responses to questions, and text-external response (e.g., text to life) with expository texts than storybook reading. Therefore, given the substantial differences in the accumulation of words among low- and middle-income children's vocabulary before school entry, information books could serve as a potential resource for promoting vocabulary development.

Although we applaud the attention to information books, it would be wrong to discount the enormous amount of information that children acquire through narrative and storybooks as well. Conveyed through rich characters, events, and plots sequences, these stories can often convey information in ways

that spark children's imagination and thought processes not possible through information texts. Therefore, it is important to consider multiple genre and how these different genres may contribute to children's knowledge and desire to learn.

### Rereading Helps Children to Reinforce, Deepen, and Consolidate Learning From Reading

More rigorous English language arts standards worldwide are revitalizing the longstanding but too often overlooked instructional technique of rereading. An integral part of the directed reading lesson, rereading typically occurred toward the end of the lesson for the purpose of extending comprehension of content. Students were guided to reread excerpts for new purposes, such as investigating a concept, generalizing, and thinking critically or creatively, *after* reading and discussion. When Ms. Wilson says, for example, "Reread the section on eating disorders and, based on the facts, decide which one is most dangerous," she sets a new purpose different from that established in the before-reading phase—read to learn facts about eating disorders.

Today's version of rereading is focused on intensive reading or *close reading*, which involves multiple readings for purposes of text analysis *during and after* reading (Shanahan, 2012). This is no cursory return to the text for a different purpose, but rather a careful consideration of how the text works to communicate concepts, principles, themes, arguments, and so forth.

*"Consider multiple genres and how these different genres contribute to children's knowledge and desire to learn."*

Students reread to develop an aggressive, probing, analytical approach to what the text says and how it says it—the function of details, for example, or logical order and relationships in text organization. When Mr. Madrid asks his third graders to first reread to identify topic sentences in a set of related paragraphs, then to examine how supporting details clarify the topic within and across them, next to search for any inconsistencies in the information, and finally to discuss how the paragraphs are ordered to build a chain of reasoning (temporal order, spatial order, or some other system), he is engaging them in close reading.

Two primary sources of evidence support the instructional technique of rereading as intensive reading. One is the research base, which shows the benefits of rereading for increasing comprehension. Research shows, for example, that rereading improves meta-comprehension accuracy, that is, the ability to monitor and assess one's own comprehension in learning new material—a critical strategy when reading to learn complex material (Rawson, Dunlosky, & Thiede, 2000). The other is expert opinion based on scholarly thought and work. This is well illustrated in the classic text, *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren (1972; first published in 1940), in which the authors explain how to be a demanding reader who rereads to “x-ray” a text and determine the author’s message. *How to Read a Book* is a teacher’s manual no teacher should be without when implementing rereading as close reading in best practice.

### Children’s Motivation to Read Is Enhanced Through Digital Texts

Make no mistake about it, the transition from paper textbooks to digital

textbooks is at full throttle. It is unstoppable and will advance at a swift pace into the immediate future (Colaner, 2012). Know this from the start: A digital textbook is not the static version of a print book. Rather, as currently defined, it is “an interactive set of learning content and tools accessed via a laptop, tablet or other advanced device” (*The Digital Textbook Playbook*, 2013, p. 5). A digital textbook is lightweight (literally), Internet connected, and personalized. It enables collaboration and provides instantaneous feedback to student and teacher. It changes how students read.

Research evidence is mounting that digital textbooks give students a reading edge. Studies report that reading in a digital learning environment is an incentive in younger and lower performing students and that feedback in e-books and apps plays a powerful role for staying engaged and motivated (Grinshaw, Dungworth, McKnight, & Morris, 2007; Zucker, Moody, & McKenna, 2009). Digital features like animation, hotspots, and audio facilitate comprehension and aid recall of story plots and content information (Shamir & Korat, 2009; Verhallen, Bus, & de Jong, 2006). Most promising are built-in tutors or virtual assistants that focus attention and provide on-the-spot teaching of reading skills, such as decoding and word meanings (Smeets & Bus, 2013).

Using digital textbooks in reading instruction, therefore, is no longer an *if-no-maybe* proposition. It is a best practice that can personalize student learning, increase relevant instructional

time, and support differentiation to meet students’ specific needs. Digital textbooks provide teachers with opportunities to apply proven practices (the best ones) more often with all students that in turn increase student opportunities to engage in meaningful and appropriate learning experiences.

Because teachers have access to timely data (embedded in digital textbooks), the ability to connect students with the content and activities that meet their individual learning styles and needs, they can personalize learning for more students at any given time and ensure that all students are reaching their full learning potential. That’s revolutionary!

### Children Need to Pay Attention to Syntax to Strengthen Comprehension

Grammar is back! Attention to syntax or sentence structure has not been a high-priority best practice for many years, although parsing sentences as an aid to comprehension has a long history in reading instruction. To read complex, challenging texts, students must become familiar with increasingly complex sentences of written language. They need to cultivate a syntactic awareness of sentence structures used in the more formal language of books. Written text requires more words than talk; it uses more conventions; it is more precise; it is more abstract. The wording of writing is learned through reading, even as its comprehension depends on the oral language the reader brings to the task (Adams, 2011).

*“Using digital textbooks in reading instruction is no longer an if-no-maybe proposition. It is best practice.”*

*“Reviving the close inspection of sentences is a new priority in reading instruction.”*

Research reveals the strong link between students’ syntactic awareness and their reading achievement. Better readers, in brief, demonstrate higher syntactic awareness than poorer readers (Tunmer & Bowey, 1984) and also possess more grammar knowledge that supports comprehension than their less skilled peers (Waltzman & Cairns, 2000).

Reviving the close inspection of sentences is a new priority in reading instruction—reading punctuation, locating core parts and modifiers, keeping track of pronouns, reading for sentence meaning, and the like. Consider this rather dense sentence: “Since many lakes and waterways in this country are unfit for recreational or practical use, the federal commission responsible for them recently drafted critically needed water pollution control measures, which may, if they become law, force major polluters to clean up some of the mess they have made” (Niles, Fitzgerald, & Tuinman, 1977, p. 159). To comprehend its full meaning, students need to (a) keep track of when measures were drafted, by whom, and what must happen for them to be effective and (b) track the referents for the pronouns *them* and *they* or run the risk of confusing the “what” (lakes and waterways) and “who” (polluters) at the heart of the sentence’s meaning.

The even denser sentence that follows further makes the point about the need to directly instruct students in how to read a sentence for meaning. “His eyes were black and piercing, their sharpness, the rapidity and keenness

with which they darted from one object to another, taking in apparently everything with a few lightning-like glances, signaling cunning, remorselessness, and selfishness to an extreme degree” (Anderson, 2013, p. 91). Here the punctuation (many commas) along with the unusual word order makes the sentence difficult to understand and demands readers to parse it to visualize those *black and piercing eyes*.

Drawing students’ attention to the sentence structures and conventions of written language and illuminating differences between speech and writing helps them to grasp the elaborated structures of written language and learn from reading. Teaching students how to parse sentences for meaning is not a new instructional technique, but doing so more deliberately with greater intensity and frequency definitely is, thus affirming its enduring worth in best practice.

### Final Words

In this column, we have attempted to highlight a number of best practices in reading that either are or should be implemented in the classroom. Clearly they reflect our own biases and research perspectives. Kathy, in most recent years, has worked closely with teachers in professional development to bring e-books and technology to the classroom, recognizing the enormous potential that these books can have on children’s motivation to read. Susan has focused on vocabulary development and its linkage to conceptual development and comprehension. Both of these areas,

as you will surely recognize, are well represented in our preceding list of best practices.

Our goal in writing this column, however, is not to create a static list of best practices. Rather, we wish to engage you in the reading community to consider best practices, and how we may promote their uses, with high fidelity in classroom instruction. We see this list as dynamic, ever growing, and based on powerful evidence of children’s achievement as we continue to grapple and to improve reading instruction for all in the 21st century.

### REFERENCES

- Adams, M.J. (2011). Advancing our students’ language and literacy: The challenge of complex text. *American Educator*, Winter 2010–2011, 3–11.
- Adler, M., & Van Doren, C. (1972). *How to read a book*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Anderson, S. (2013). *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly And The Making Of The Modern Middle East*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Beck, I., & McKeown, M. (2007). Increasing young low-income children’s oral vocabulary repertoires through rich and focused instruction. *Elementary School Journal*, 107(3), 251–271.
- Grinshaw, S., Dungworth, N., McKnight, C., & Morris, A. (2007). Electronic books: Children’s reading and comprehension. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(4), 583–589.
- Colaner, S. (2012, January 16). *On Digital Textbooks: Fun facts, projections, and possibilities*. Retrieved from <http://hothardware.com/News/On-Digital-Textbooks-Fun-Facts-Projections-and-Possibilities/> October 20, 2013.
- Cunningham, A.E., & Stanovich, K. (1997). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(6), 934–945.
- Kamil, M. (2004). Vocabulary and comprehension instruction: Summary and implications from the National Reading Panel findings. In P. McCardle & V. Chhabra (Eds.), *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp. 213–235). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- National Reading Panel Report (2000). Teaching children to read. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Development.
- Neuman, S.B., Newman, E., & Dwyer, J. (2011). Educational effects of a vocabulary intervention on preschoolers’ word knowledge and conceptual development: A cluster randomized trial. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(3), 249–272.

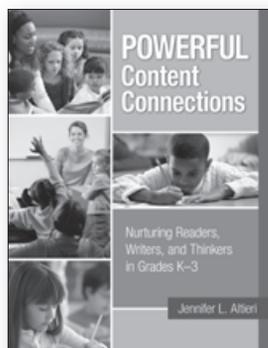
- Neuman, S.B., & Wright, T.S. (2013). *All about words: Increasing vocabulary in the Common Core classroom, preK-grade 2*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Pellegrini, A., Brody, G., & Sigel, I. (1985). Parents' book-reading habits with their children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77(3), 332–340.
- Rawson, K.A., Dunlosky, J., & Thiede, K.W. (2000). The rereading effect: Metacomprehension accuracy improves across reading trials. *Memory and Cognition*, 28(6), 1004–1010.
- Shanahan, T. (2012, June 18). *What is close reading?* Retrieved from [www.shanahanonline.com/2012/06/what-is-close-reading.html](http://www.shanahanonline.com/2012/06/what-is-close-reading.html)
- Shamir, A., & Korat, O. (2009). The educational electronic book as a tool for supporting children's emergent literacy. In A.G. Bus, & S.B. Neuman (Eds.), *Multimedia and literacy development* (pp. 168–181). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smeets, D., & Bus, A.G. (2013). Picture storybooks go digital: Pros and cons. In S.B. Neuman & L.B. Gambrell (Eds.), *Quality reading instruction in the Age of common Core Standards* (pp. 176–189). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Stahl, S., & Nagy, W. (2006). *Teaching word meanings*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- The Digital Textbook Collaborative (2012, February 1). *The digital textbook playbook*. Retrieved from [transition.fcc.gov/files/Digital\\_Textbook\\_Playbook.pdf](http://transition.fcc.gov/files/Digital_Textbook_Playbook.pdf)
- Turner, W.E., & Bowey, J.A. (1984). Metalinguistic awareness and reading acquisition. In W.E. Turner, C. Pratt, & M.L. Herriman (Eds.), *Metalinguistic awareness in children: Theory, research and implications* (pp. 144–168). Berlin, Germany: Springer.
- Verhallen, M.J., Bus, A.G., & de Jong, M.T. (2006). The promise of multimedia stories for children at risk. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(2), 410–419. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.98.2.410
- Waltzman, D.E., & Cairns, H.S. (2000). Grammatical knowledge of third grade good and poor readers. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 21(2), 263–284.
- Zucker, A., Moody, K., & McKenna, M. (2009). The effects of electronic books on pre-kindergarten- grade 5 students' literacy and language outcomes: A research synthesis. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 40(1), 47–87.

# Powerful Content Connections

## Nurturing Readers, Writers, and Thinkers in Grades K–3

Jennifer L. Altieri

**EXPECT MORE,  
ACHIEVE MORE—  
Make powerful  
content  
connections  
with your  
early learners!**



© 2014 | 200 pp. | ISBN 978-0-87207-085-1  
IRA Members \$23.95 | Nonmembers \$29.95

**T**he implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) means we have to rethink what we are teaching and how we teach it. This book shows you how to create powerful connections that can strengthen primary-grade students' literacy skills while deepening their content knowledge. Included are practical strategies you can use to incorporate the reading, writing, and thinking skills inherent in the CCSS across content areas and throughout the school day.

**GET YOUR COPY TODAY!**



**Order your copy online: [www.reading.org/PowerfulContent](http://www.reading.org/PowerfulContent)**

For priority processing, enter promotion code PCC

Call toll free 800-336-7323 (outside the U.S. and Canada, call 302-731-1600)

Join IRA and pay the member price—a 20% savings!