

The “Reader’s Workshop” Organizer

★ MINI-LESSON

5-15 Minutes

A mini-lesson is a short piece of direct instruction focused on a single topic. Mini-lessons fall into three categories:

Procedures: Anything readers need to do to participate effectively in the workshop: How and when to get a book; How to use a response journal; How to request a conference; How to conduct sharing, etc.

Strategies Readers Use: This is the “how” of reading, as in “How do I pick the right book?” or “How do I figure out what something says?” These lessons are best organized around the reading process.

Qualities of Good Reading: These lessons are designed to introduce students to models that help them understand what good reading is. They often involve reviewing and analyzing teacher- or student-generated models and the development of classroom criteria. These kinds of lessons often come up naturally during sharing time.

Mini-lessons work best when: 1) They are suggested by the students; 2) They are taught in the context of authentic reading; 3) The teacher models in front of the students as the lesson is delivered.

YOU DON’T NEED TO GIVE A MINI-LESSON EVERY DAY!

★ CONFERENCING

During Reading Time

During reading time you have a chance to work individually with students who need specific help. The keys to successful conferencing are good management and consistent execution.

Management: Put good procedures in place. Students need to be able to: 1) Know when the teacher is available for a conference; 2) Request a conference in an appropriate way; 3) Be specific about what they want help with; and 4) Have all materials ready.

Execution: Keep these things in mind: 1) Model your conferences on whole class sharing; 2) Ask permission and/or start out with questions before you make any recommendations; 3) Work on only one thing at a time; 4) Before you leave the conference, make sure the student knows what to do next.

Conferencing works best when: 1) Students know how to do it; 2) You stay focused on one thing at a time; 3) You keep conferences to less than three minutes; 4) You check back with students from time to time to see if they’re following up on what you conferenced about.

CONFERENCING IS YOUR MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING TIME!

★ STATUS OF THE CLASS

2-5 Minutes

Status of the class is a quick way of finding out what students are doing on a given day. There are several ways to do status of the class:

Out Loud: Students quickly share what they are doing. They can share the title, author, topic, or something else that indicates their reading for the day. They can also indicate that they are working on a project such as a book review or an activity like preparing an interpretive reading.

Visually: Students indicate on some kind of chart in the room what they will be doing that day. Most of the charts I’ve seen allow readers to indicate where they are in the reading process.

Recorded on Paper: Circulate a sheet of paper and ask each student to indicate what they will be doing that day. Some teachers record status even when it’s done out loud.

Status of the class works best when: 1) You do it out loud; 2) You do it regularly; 3) Everyone can hear everyone else; 4) Students choose their own books, forms, genres, or activities, and manage their own way through the reading process.

STATUS OF THE CLASS IS A GREAT WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY!

★ SHARING

5-15 Minutes

There are several ways to do sharing, each has its own advantages and disadvantages:

Whole Class: Gives the reader the best chance for feedback, but it takes a lot of time. On most days, you’ll only be able to listen to a few kids. This is the best tool you have for building classroom community.

Small Group: Time efficient, but very hard to manage. Very noisy. Kids easily get off track. Monitor each group by participating as a member. Give kids specific roles when appropriate.

Partner: Most time efficient but, with only one person in the audience, the interaction is often not that valuable.

Sharing works best when: 1) It is voluntary; 2) Readers know how to talk about books; 3) Each sharing session is focused on something specific; 4) You take an active part as a reader who shares and as an audience member who questions; 5) Students make constructive comments using the language of your classroom criteria; 6) Everyone knows that all comments, even yours, are suggestions only; 7) Students ask questions more often than they make comments.

SHARING MUST WORK FOR BOTH AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE!

★ READING TIME

20-40 Minutes

Reading time is the centerpiece of the workshop and the longest workshop section. During reading time, students read. The teacher can:

Model: Work on your own reading. Allowing students to see you reading is very good for them. You’ll also come up with your best mini-lessons this way because you’ll have to tackle the same problems your students face.

Conference: Work with individual students on their reading. This is your most valuable teaching time.

Small Group Mini-Lesson or Guided Reading: While the majority of the class is reading independently, you can take a small group of students and deliver a mini-lesson or have a guided reading session.

Catch Up: Spend a few minutes on other work you have to do.

Reading time works best when: 1) Students have internalized effective classroom procedures; 2) Students read frequently, and for long periods of time, on a regular schedule; 3) Kids are taught how to pick their own books at appropriate reading levels.

READING TIME IS THE HEART OF THE WORKSHOP!

★ TIPS ★

- ★ Concentrate on classroom management by focusing on procedural mini-lessons at the beginning of the year.
- ★ If you have less than 40 minutes, drop the mini-lesson and sharing; start with a quick status of the class and get right into reading and conferencing. Reading time is the most valuable time.
- ★ Teach the students to run their own workshop, so you don’t have to run it for them.
- ★ Post student-generated lists of ideas that address key topics like: How to choose a book; How to talk about books; How to read expressively; What to do when you don’t understand something; Etc.
- ★ Teach specific strategies for sharing that are closely related to the conferencing strategies you use.
- ★ Have kids keep simple records of what they read and what they like. Help everyone determine their own reading preferences.
- ★ Have fun every day.

IT TAKES ABOUT A MONTH TO GET THINGS RUNNING WELL!

Management Strategies For Reader's Workshop

★ SO WHAT DO I DO WHEN?

If you talk to enough people or you read enough books, you'll probably bump into the idea that Reader's Workshop is a certain thing that has to be done a certain way. In my experience, that's not only not true, it's not valuable. Reader's Workshop is as dynamic and flexible as you choose to make it. And that's the main reason I like it: it gives teachers a variety of ways to manage their classroom within a basic structure that students can easily internalize and come to rely on.

The essence of workshop-style teaching—what makes it “workshop” as opposed to “traditional”—is not in what you teach, but how you teach it and how you relate to your students. If most of class time is spent with kids reading their own self-selected books at appropriate reading levels, if you participate as a reader in the community, if you share regularly, if you follow the kids and teach to their needs instead of following a program, then you've got a Reader's Workshop going.

Directly to the right, I've listed four “approaches” to Reader's Workshop. These are guidelines, not mandates. Use the approaches that make the most sense to you and to your students.

★ READING CONFERENCES

WHY IS CONFERENCING SO HARD?

Many teachers who are new to Reader's Workshop find conferencing very challenging. Mostly, it's the management that they struggle with—it's hard, if you're not used to it to keep the other kids quiet while you focus on individual students. But that's just a matter of teaching style, and not related specifically to reading.

For me, the trick—if there is one—to having a good reading conference is simply to come from a place of curiosity when talking to a reader. I never cease to be amazed at what kids tell me about the books they read, and how revealing of a reader's process such insights can be. Even when I'm conferencing with a student on a book I've read a dozen times, something new always seems to pop up. And if I don't know the book, so much the better, I'm even more curious.

There are many different ways to conference. You'll find a basic conference here. This conference usually takes me less than two minutes and tells me a lot about a reader.

★ CLASSIC ★

★ **Mini-Lesson**

★ **Status**

★ **Reading Time**

★ **Sharing**

This is the way most people start off because it is most similar to traditional teaching. This format gives the teacher the most control. I use it when I need to regain control of the class, set the stage for lesson content or a goal that I feel is particularly important, or start everyone off on a specific type of project. Some people do this every day.

★ SHARE FIRST ★

★ **Sharing**

★ **Mini-Lesson**

★ **Status**

★ **Reading Time**

This is my favorite of the structured approaches to Reader's Workshop. The kids love starting out with sharing, and I get a chance to collect my thoughts about what I want to do. As kids share, I listen for specific things we could work on. When something comes up, I ask the kids if they'd like a lesson on it. That's how I choose my mini-lesson.

★ NO LESSON ★

★ **Status**

★ **Reading Time**

★ **Sharing**

This is a good approach when you're short on time or don't have a lesson to give. It's actually good to do this fairly regularly because it lets kids know that they have to get right down to business as soon as class starts. I find that I use this organization more frequently later in the year after everyone knows the class procedures and has heard most of my best mini-lessons—or when the kids just want to read.

★ DYNAMIC ★

★ **Give a MINI-LESSON when:** 1) There's something you think the class needs; 2) Students request help; 3) You detect via conferencing that 3 or 4 students have the same problem.

★ **Take STATUS OF THE CLASS when:** 1) You don't know where the kids are; 2) The kids don't know where they are; 3) You need to survey for an appropriate mini-lesson; 4) You need to survey for conferencing. 5) You think kids are slacking off.

★ **Go to READING TIME when:** 1) The kids want to work; 2) You want the kids to work; 3) You need to confer; 4) You need a little peace and quiet.

★ **Go to SHARING when:** 1) Readers have something interesting to say; 2) You need to hear what the kids have been up to; 3) You want to check on the effectiveness of a mini-lesson; 4) You need to plan a mini-lesson.

Each of the four sections of the workshop can also be used simply to change the tempo of the class. I often switch from one to the other just to settle kids down.

This is my favorite way to do Reader's Workshop because it allows me the most flexibility and gives me the best opportunity to serve the needs of the students.

THE “BASIC” READING CONFERENCE

① **What are you reading?** Look for the reader to quickly tell you the title and maybe even the author. Don't let students just show you the cover. It's amazing how often kids can't remember what book they're reading. Of course, some adults can't either.

② **Is it any good/Do you like it?** Any comment other than “I don't know” is a good start. If the reader doesn't like the book, he or she should probably get another one. If a reader does like a book, I always want to know why. This can help me track things like decoding and comprehension abilities because often our reading preferences are related to reading level. It's very important to encourage readers to express concrete preferences. This is the beginning of reading response.

③ **What makes it good?/Why do you like it?** If the reader has a feeling about it, he or she should be able to tell you why. Look for students to use the language of your classroom writing criteria to analyze the quality of a book as the year progresses. Encourage students to comment on technique and style in addition to content. You can also ask the reader to show you an example of what they are talking about.

④ **What's your favorite part?/What's the best part?** Most readers can answer in just a few seconds. Kids who can't find a part they like may not be remembering or understanding much of what they read.

⑤ **Can you read me some of it?** I prefer to check kids' decoding skills on passages they like and are familiar with. I have come to realize that cold reads on teacher-selected texts don't give me the best information. The amount and type of expression a reader uses tells me a lot about comprehension. If I want to know about the student's decoding or comprehension strategies I'll look for the hardest word or phrase in the passage and ask: “How did you figure that out?” or “What does that word mean here?”

⑥ **What's going on there?** This is a basic comprehension check. The student should summarize the passage in their own words. If the student simply “re-reads” certain lines, I say “Yes, that's what it says, but what does it mean?” Readers with excellent comprehension often fill in additional details to supply context.