

The Reading Workshop

BY JUDY WALLIS, Ed.D.

BACKGROUND

How to organize the literacy classroom creates a challenge teachers face. While the term “reading workshop” has become a common way of describing that organization, designing the flow of what happens within the workshop can be daunting. Even though the term is widely used, there is less clarity around the specifics, leaving teachers with questions about what the workshop looks like, how to schedule the various components, and what teachers and readers actually do.

PLANNING A WORKSHOP CLASSROOM

Workshop, quite simply, is a container of time into which we put the instructional practices we believe are essential and matter for successful literacy teaching and learning. Planning around a predictable structure is important for students. We know that when learners are prepared for learning—when they know what to expect from teachers and what teachers expect from them—they are more confident and engaged. There is a predictable rhythm in the workshop structure. While some explanations of workshop may seem overly complicated, that doesn’t have to be the case.

We can think about workshop in three chunks: a time for explicit modeling and demonstrating; a time for small-group opportunities, responses, and supported independent reading; and a time for sharing and debriefing. Even though these chunks of time offer different opportunities for students, there is a sense of coherence and connectedness across the three parts.

Learning in the reading workshop is organized around the gradual-release-of-responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Duke & Pearson, 2002) in both the support teachers offer students and the texts students read. For example, the texts used in explicit modeling and demonstrating can be more complex since the teacher is providing a high level of support in both comprehension and decoding. However, the texts and support used in small-group reading closely match the needs of learners. Much research has continued to mount since 1985 and the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson) to support the importance of independent reading (Gambrell, 2011). Students need opportunities to apply their learning and build stamina as readers within their own reading.



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Judy Wallis has spent the past four decades as a teacher, literacy coach, university instructor, and staff developer. She served two large, diverse, Houston, Texas school districts as language arts director and provided leadership support to literacy coaches for 21 years. Her professional interests and work focus on reading comprehension, writing, and whole-school/district change through robust literacy instruction. She currently works with schools and districts across the country as a staff developer and educational consultant. Her work has focused on linking research and practice and bringing out the strengths in others.

EXPLICIT MODELING AND DEMONSTRATING

Launching the workshop with either an anchor lesson or a minilesson provides the kind of support and background readers need to grow into proficient readers (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011). Too often, reading instruction is “telling” rather than “showing” and at times even occurs with no text! Imagine if one tried to learn tennis without a racket and a ball. Thus the workshop typically begins with an anchor lesson in which a teacher models and demonstrates thinking within a short text. Students’ comprehension grows when we provide explicit reading strategy instruction that includes describing the strategy, modeling it in action, and inviting students to engage in collaborative and guided practice, and finally independent use (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Students participate by turning and talking about their own thinking as the teacher thinks aloud to show what is too often invisible to learners.

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Frequently, an anchor chart (Harvey & Goodvis, 2017) is constructed to capture the key ideas and the thinking that occurs during the lesson. Because the teacher is careful to engage in and model a close, careful reading of a text, a short minilesson can follow the next day using part of the same text to highlight and model a particular strategy or craft element an author uses.

While the anchor lesson may take longer, the minilessons are short and more narrowly focused. Beginning with a whole text allows students to see how the parts contribute to understanding the whole.

WORKTIME: SMALL-GROUP OPPORTUNITIES, RESPONDING TO READING, AND SUPPORTED INDEPENDENT READING

The largest chunk of time in reading workshop is dedicated to worktime and opportunities for differentiation. Small-group instruction is carefully designed around the needs of readers—organized in flexible groups according to needs. Because students are similar within a group, teachers are able to plan the right level of support and select appropriate texts for those within a group. This small-group experience offers readers a time to apply new learning and teachers a time to coach and support. In addition, this time is rich with opportunities for formative assessment that is used to plan the next instructional steps.

During this part of the workshop, readers often respond to reading in various ways through drawing, writing, and engaging in research. All responses are authentic ways that have first been modeled by the teacher in whole-group instruction. These responses are another way in which teachers gain insights into student learning and are able to adequately plan future instruction.

Supported independent reading is an essential part of the workshop. While there is much research to support independent reading (Reutzel, Fawson, & Smith, 2008), we also know that there are conditions that make it productive. The amount of independent reading time depends on readers’ varying levels of proficiency. However, the amount of time must be sufficient for readers to engage meaningfully in reading. Many teachers find that about twenty minutes a day is optimal. In addition to students’ having ample time to read, their having a good choice of texts and access to texts also play key roles. Because students are applying newly acquired learning from explicit instruction, support is critical. Teachers monitor readers through conferring. Short, side-by-side conferences ensure each student’s independent reading is productive and meaningful as well as promoting positive attitudes toward reading.

SHARING AND DEBRIEFING

The third chunk of reading workshop takes a variety of forms. There is no single way to bring the workshop to a close. The teacher may reinforce something from the explicit modeling and demonstrating, asking students to turn and talk about what they found when applying their learning in small groups or their independent reading. Another way teachers close workshop is by asking students to consider questions such as *What did you learn about yourself as a reader today? What was challenging for you . . . easy for you as a reader?* Readers may do a quick share in triads or small groups about what they read during independent reading. While the sharing and debriefing may take different forms, the teacher is intentional in selecting the way to close each day's reading workshop.

Theoretically, the books themselves create the groups. Children select books that they really want to read and sign up to discuss that book. Teachers should provide numerous titles, genres, and formats for students to select from in order to ensure readers can find something to read that truly interests them. Being able to choose what one reads helps sustain the types of discussions we are working toward. The more choices readers have, the better the chance they will find something that is engaging and something that is worth discussing more deeply.

Quality literature discussions are filled with a variety of readers' perspectives and opinions about the books being read, and readers in the discussions are interested in the meanings they construct and those meanings offered by other readers. It is the diversity of ideas present in literature discussions, rather than the group's ability to reach consensus and agreement, that is essential for quality literature discussions. The subjugation of group members' interpretations to a single main idea should not be part of these proceedings. Book clubs should support conversations where engaged readers passionately share and negotiate their understandings and interpretations concerning a piece of literature (Serafini, 2001).

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

Teachers find reading workshop is a structure that creates a predictable routine for learners. It also provides a way to plan reading instruction that creates varying levels of support for readers and ensures that time is allocated for what is most important. The three-part structure makes planning not only easier but also more productive. It allows us as teachers to focus our efforts on meeting the diverse needs of readers rather than on the challenge of how to organize.

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