

# Learning to Read



## and Loving to Read

### Early-in-the-Year Possibilities for Both

By Debbie Miller

**I**t's the end of the third week of school in this K-1 classroom, and it's independent reading time! Children are seated at tables—four or so children at each—and already most eyes and hands are on books for twenty delicious minutes.

In the middle of each table sits a bright red plastic tub, filled with books—mouthwatering books—that seem to say, “Choose me!” And children do.

Jaime's choices include *How to Heal a Broken Wing*, *Extremely Weird Spiders*, *The Lady with the Alligator Purse*, *The Little Yellow Leaf*, and *Actual Size*. But it's *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* he's holding now, singing the ABC song and pointing to the bright and curly letters on the inside cover.

Next to Jaime, Molly and Naomi giggle as they read what they remember from multiple read-alouds by their teacher of *The Recess Queen* . . . “Mean Jean was Recess Queen, and nobody said any different. Nobody swung until Mean Jean swung. Nobody kicked until Mean Jean kicked. Nobody bounced until Mean Jean bounced.” Next up for Molly and Naomi might be *Hush Little Baby*; *Puffins Climb*, *Penguins Rhyme*; *Dr. Seuss's ABC*; *Pete the Cat*; or an array of others—the choice is theirs.

Jaime, Molly, and Naomi haven't cracked the code—not yet. But they're participating in what David Perkins would call a “junior version” of reading, where they “get to see the whole game and participate around the edges, developing a sense of its shape and rhythm however much of it they are playing.”<sup>1</sup>

And yes, a few children are a bit outside the edges, like Max and Harper, who appear to be building a series of houses out of their books. . . .

In *Making Learning Whole*, David Perkins quotes a statement from the eminent cognitive and developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner, who wrote in 1973, “We begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Perkins and Bruner, I believe in intellectually honest teaching. For me, that means striving to create learning environments where children do intellectually honest kinds of things—things that are authentic, worthy of their time and effort, and mirror, in some form, what we do in the world.

How might teachers create authentic learning environments that lay the groundwork for learning to read, and learning to love it, too? Even when children still have much to learn about letters, sounds, and words? How can we keep in mind the whole of reading and not focus our attention on these surface structure systems alone?

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Analog Clock



1:50  
Digital Clock

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Good Morning Readers and Writers,  
Happy Monday! Did you know  
the way to read and spell  
is to read and spell

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# How Do Active Readers Read a Book?

Before reading, active readers  
**read** (or find out) the title and author

**think** "What am I noticing about  
what's on the cover and the back?"

**ask** "What do I already know about  
this kind of book?  
this story?  
its topic?  
author?"

**and predict** "What might this story  
be about?"  
"What might I learn?"

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We immerse children in amazing books. Picture books, alphabet books, song books, predictable books, early readers, nonfiction, poetry, and rhyme.

Remember the books from those bright red tubs at children's tables? Books like *Pete the Cat*, *Extremely Weird Spiders*, and *Hush Little Baby*? Most of them have been read aloud. I've read aloud ten to fifteen books a day since the first day of school, and now, near the end of the third week, children have heard over 125 titles, many of them more than once. (How many times can you sing *The Lady with the Alligator Purse* in one day?)

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**At the same time I'm reading aloud, I'm modeling and thinking aloud about what I do and think about before I read, while I'm reading, and when I finish a book.**

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Hear me out. I'm not saying I read all ten in one sitting! Depending on their length, I might read one, two, three, or even four books during reading time, and also any time I can fit one or two in throughout the day—before and after lunch and recess; during writing workshop, social studies, and science; and ten minutes or so before the final bell. Selecting a stack of books before the school day begins ensures I'll be ready with a variety of thoughtful choices.

Why so many read-alouds?

In addition to making the book itself accessible to children, reading aloud also builds background knowledge for:

- how stories go
- what fluent reading sounds like
- different types of text
- content
- vocabulary
- reading behaviors
- comprehension strategies/listening comprehension
- conversation and collaboration about books and big ideas
- joyful reading!

At the same time I'm reading aloud, I'm modeling and thinking aloud about what I do and think about before I read, while I'm reading, and when I finish a book. (See anchor chart on next page.)

For example, before reading aloud *The Recess Queen*, I say to children, “Readers everywhere, whether they’re just learning to read or they’ve been reading for a long time, do some important thinking before they read, and I want you to learn how to do this, too. Let me show you what readers do and think about before they read.”

I locate and read the title and author’s name, take a close look at the cover and the back of the book, mention the type of text, and say:

I’m thinking this girl has got to be the recess queen—see the look on her face, and, oh! See how all the other kids are running away? I’m thinking they look like they’re scared of her. Do you see?

And look at the back—look at this little girl! She reminds me of Odd Velvet. Remember that book we read last week, this one on the shelf here? Hmm, she doesn’t look scared of the Recess Queen, does she? I wonder if she’s going to be an important character in the story. What do you think?

Let’s peek inside and make some more predictions. . . .

These before-, during-, and after-reading strategies give young readers tools for accessing a variety of books early in the reading process, providing focus during independent reading time, increasing children’s stamina, practicing reading behaviors, and highlighting meaning making. The before-and-after strategies apply to all readers, but the during-reading strategies listed on the anchor chart are designed specifically for children who haven’t yet cracked the code.

In addition to these kinds of lessons, emerging readers are engaged in focused, fun, and fast-paced skill lessons and activities, where the

emphasis is on letters, sounds, and words. I keep these lessons to around fifteen minutes a day, and although they occur outside the workshop, children practice *applying* their learning from these lessons during the independent practice time described here.

Putting great books front and center early in the reading process engages and motivates kids to want to learn to read. Do you remember Max and Harper, the two children who built houses from their books? They’ve teamed up again, only this time, *Tough Boris* is much more than just a roof. And *Noisy Nora* is so much more than a door. They’ve discovered there are stories inside!

**Debbie Miller** is the author of a number of books and coauthor of Heinemann’s *Comprehension Going Forward*. She taught and learned from children in the Denver Public Schools for thirty years and has also been an adjunct professor at The University of Denver and Regis University. Debbie now works extensively with schools and districts on long-range planning and development of literacy programs. Debbie’s next Heinemann book on guided practice is in development now and informs this article.



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How Do Active Readers Read a Book?

Before reading, active readers

- read (or find out) the title and author
- think "What am I noticing about what's on the cover and the back?"
- ask "What do I already know about this kind of book? this story? this topic? this author?"
- peek and predict "What might this story be about?" "What might I learn?"

During reading, active readers read by

- reading the pictures
- reading the pictures and the words they know
- using their own words to read a book they've heard before

After reading, active readers

- ask "What was this book about?" "What did I learn about myself as a reader?" "Who might like this book?" "What will I read next?"

Notes:

- Perkins, David N. 2009. *Making Learning Whole*, 41. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bruner, J. S. 1973. "Readiness for Learning." In *Beyond the Information Given*, edited by J. Anglin, 413–25. New York: Norton.