To
Lucy Calkins,
whose teaching changed my life forever
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Late January cold blew in the windows as a group of students huddled in my seventh-grade classroom. Earlier they had found a box in the closet with back copies of *Horn Book* magazine and *Riverbank Review*, and they gathered in my room at lunch to pore over the magazines. As I puttered around and changed a bulletin board, I overheard their conversation.

“Look at this! A review of *Walk Two Moons!* We just read that!”

“What’d they say? Did they like it?”

“Oh, my gosh! An interview with Gary Paulsen! I love this guy’s books!”

It was an all too rare sight: five adolescent boys and girls all choosing to spend lunch reading reviews of their favorite books, making comments about whether or not they agreed with the reviewers, and marking longer essays they wanted to read at home. Finally, at the end of lunch period, one student, Liz, said to me, “Hey, Mrs. A., why were you keeping this stuff secret?”

Secret? Yes, indeed, why had I kept them “secret”? Why hadn’t I made all my resources for reading about books available to my students? Why hadn’t it occurred to me that, as literate students, they would want to read authentic writing about books? I read book reviews, commentaries, literary essays, and author interviews all the time—why shouldn’t they?

It occurred to me that day that there was more to my students’ engagement with the *Horn Book* and *Riverbank Review* than the legitimacy of reading published texts. What they read in the magazines was written with authority, as if experts on each book were advising others about it. Yet my students rarely if ever read each other’s writing about books, and they rarely wrote with a sense of authority or had something original to say about a text. In fact, I am ashamed to admit, their writing was intended for me, their teacher, and after they noted their grades, all of it went forgotten into writing folders. All those papers just filed away in darkness. All that thinking left unshared and unread by eyes other than my own.
I met with those students the next day. What could we do to get some of that excitement from reading reviews into our own writing about books? They were filled with ideas: we could have a magazine of book reviews or put them into a database for the school; we could start a book club or online chat room for talking about books; we could write blurbs for books to advertise them; we could write to newspapers about issues and refer to books we’d read. The energy about this was so different from their usual middle-school malaise. It was as if they understood instinctively that this type of writing really mattered because it would go out into the real world of the class, the school, and the community to be read by others and to affect their reading lives. So the idea was born: they would write in real-world genres of writing about reading, and their writing would be read by many people, not just their English teacher. And, as Lucy Calkins says, since the best way to teach children to write about literature is to teach them to write literature, we would teach them to write well, so that they’d be proud to send their writing into the world.

Writing About Reading All Year

One of the first things I did after this was look at my curriculum plan for the year. I noticed immediately that there was no space in my writing instruction for teaching children how to write about reading. I had fallen into the trap of asking them to write about their reading without teaching them how to do it. I knew that I had to spend some time studying the genres I decided to teach and that I had a lot to learn about how reviewers and essayists write these genres. In fact, I realized that there was so much embedded in each of these genres that I could teach writing about reading all year.

This is not to suggest that all a teacher would do all year long in writing instruction is writing about reading. Nor would we only teach writing about reading at reading time. On the contrary, there is much other work to be done during both instructional periods. There is writing work to teach, including studying other genres, teaching qualities of good writing, mastering written conventions, and so on. And there is reading work, the many strategies children must learn to be efficient readers, including decoding and other basic interactions with print. But there is a symbiotic relationship between reading and writing instruction (Harwayne, 1992) that teachers can emphasize at some times during the year and that fit quite well when teaching writing about reading.
How the Year Might Go

A year of teaching writing about reading needs to be carefully planned. Because so much of what students will be writing comes from the conversations they have, you’ll want to spend time early in the year getting children to talk about books (Britton, 1993; Berthoff, 1981). One way to do this is to read aloud to them every day, using that read-aloud time to model the ways to think and talk about books (see Chapter Two). Much of their early conversation will be based on the read-aloud book. By October, they should be in partnerships (Calkins, 2001) where they are regularly meeting to talk with another student about texts they are reading, and by November, you should be pushing them to take notes of various kinds from their reading and conversations. At the same time, you should introduce the concept of a readers notebook (see Chapter Four) as a way to record thinking and conversation and to plan for longer pieces of writing. Much of this work is done during reading instruction, because it is part of reading, thinking, and talking about books. When children have their readers notebooks established, you’ll want to teach some of the possible genres of writing about reading. This will be part of writing instruction, even though they will be writing about information from their reading. Your teaching will focus on how to write this genre, using the notes they took while reading and talking about their books. In this way, instruction in both reading and writing complement each other.

The units of study in actual genres of writing about reading will usually come after the holiday break or the fourth month of school, as it will take a few months to teach them to think while reading, take notes to prepare for conversations, talk with others, take more notes based on conversations, and then reflect on these notes. You will not be able to teach all these genres, but whatever you do teach should become part of the expected writing in the room from that point on. Some schools might decide to plan vertically, with students learning different genres in different grades. But whatever you decide, it is vital that students understand they are being taught how to write these genres so they can then go out and do it again and again, each time they have something to say about a book. Working to teach students that readers write about the texts that affect them will not happen until there is a paradigm shift. The focus of writing about reading must shift away from students writing to prove something to us. If we release students from the tyranny of book reports or the triviality of mobiles as responses to books, we must replace those “activities” with work that is meaningful. We want them to know that writing
about reading is serious business. When we ask them to respond in cute, mundane, or repetitive ways, we communicate something to them: we communicate that responding to books is cute, silly, or boring.

Learning to respond powerfully to books is one of the great truths they will learn in school. It reflects their thinking and their learning lives. It takes many forms because it is so complex, as their learning lives should be. And it cannot be taught in one unit of three or four weeks, because it is too vital to their learning.

**What You Need to Get Started**

One thing we’ll examine is the role of conversation in getting students to think clearly and thoroughly about texts, but for this to occur, you’ll need to establish a certain atmosphere in the room, a safe environment where students know they will be encouraged and respected (Peterson, 1992). Children learn best in an atmosphere where they feel they can speak and question freely and exchange ideas without being in “social danger.” Teachers can encourage this by modeling and establishing routines for conversation and by creating an atmosphere of calm acceptance and unbiased confidence in students’ abilities. In whole-class and small-group conversations, students need their thoughts to be valued and supported, while at the same time the teacher scaffolds their thinking for clarity and text evidence.

You will need some clear structures in the room before beginning to teach writing about reading. One is the basic structure of organizing your teaching into whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction (Calkins, 2001). You’ll also want to set up a system for assessing your students to ascertain their needs, both as readers and as writers. This needs assessment will help drive some of your instruction as you tailor your units of study to the needs of your students.

Students will also need materials if they are to read and write. I prefer well-stocked classroom libraries filled with outstanding books that are matched to students’ levels, but I realize this is merely a dream for some schools. Some schools use a combination of trade books and a fine anthology. Even if students are working from an anthology, it would be wise to have as many books as possible available to them for independent reading. Children will also need a notebook in which to record their responses (see Chapter Four) and adhesive notes or index cards. Other materials, such as colored pens and highlighters, are useful but hardly necessary for students to do good work. Teachers may find chart paper or an overhead projector and blank transparencies helpful for demonstration. Beyond this, tools for
assessment, systems for note-taking about individual students (Anderson, 2000), and an ever-expanding knowledge of children’s literature are essential, as well.

So this is how the work to prepare for writing about reading might look in September:

- assess students and fit them with books they can read
- begin reading aloud regularly
- use the read-aloud books to spark discussions
- carefully scaffold students toward accountable talk, that is, including everyone in the conversation, staying on topic, keeping with the text, and so on
- give students chances to talk in small groups about the read-aloud text
- occasionally model jotting down on chart paper some of the points made in the conversations
- ask students what they would write down from the class conversations if they were keeping notes; write these on a chart for later reference and to show how notes look

From the very first day of school, teachers can be laying the groundwork for students' thinking and talking about books that will set the stage for later writing about reading.

*Schedules and Timetables*

A year of writing about reading has to start with reading. Whether students are reading books on their levels (Calkins, 2001; Fountas and Pinnell, 1996) or in a student anthology, they must know that reading is one of the most important things they will do in school. They must spend a significant amount of time reading every day in class, in addition to whatever reading they might do at home. Frankly, reading is just too important to be solely an “at home” activity. And teachers will want to be learning about their students as readers and writers during the first few weeks of school, as well as establishing a safe learning community. This is a good time to get children reading, sit with them to assess their reading, and begin to read aloud to them every day. It is unlikely that children will be ready to produce long writing about reading yet. (Any review of summer reading should be kept to conversations in small groups, rather than
writing reports or taking tests.) Figure 1–1 shows one teacher’s plan for reading and for writing about reading across the whole year.

The most important message we can give to students is that reading and writing matter so much that we will find time for them every day. And every day there will be some kind of instruction about and practice of reading and writing skills, not just assigning pages to read or papers to write.

Schools where the schedule allows at least forty-five minutes for each are giving a solid literacy foundation to children. A forty-five-minute period for reading or writing might consist of ten minutes of direct instruction, followed by independent work while the teacher works with small groups or individuals, followed by some wrap-up or sharing of their work. In schools where these blocks are not scheduled, teachers must do whatever they can to provide reading and writing time for children or to lobby for changes in future schedules.

In the remainder of this chapter, we’ll look at some ways to get started and how to use reading aloud to teach thinking skills early in the year.

**Showing Students the Pleasures of Reading a Good Book**

One of the first things teachers must do, before we can ever ask children to write meaningfully about their reading, is to reveal to them the pleasures of reading a good book and the fun of recognizing a “bad” one. It is powerful for children to realize that they don’t have to accept everything that is written on the page, that they have a responsibility as thinkers to question and make meaning from their reading. Louise M. Rosenblatt (1995) tells us that all reading is a transaction between the reader and the text, that the reader’s job is to make meaning of the words on the page and to take an active stance while reading. It seems logical to think that if the reader is interacting with text and using his or her intellect to make the text come alive, the experience of reading will be more meaningful and enjoyable.

Once we can get children to comprehend and respond thoughtfully to texts in conversation and in short jottings to record their thinking, we can then work on the muscles of writing well in authentic genres of writing about reading. But we should not expect that children will be able to do the writing work until we have heavily scaffolded their thinking and note-taking, as well as their organizing and planning of their writing. Using reading aloud, partnership reading, and supported independent reading, we can teach children to think about books in meaningful ways and to write about them from the thoughts they produce in conversation.
### What the Students Should Be Able to Do by January and June in the Fourth Grade

#### SEPTEMBER
**Unit of Study** Building stamina and meaning  
**Big Idea(s)** Accumulate the text  
**Strategies** Ask questions; gather information about the setting, characters, and plot as the story unfolds; retell  
**Writing About Reading** Jot on Post-its

#### OCTOBER
**Unit of Study** How stories go: folktales, fairy tales, and myths  
**Big Idea(s)** Anticipating  
**Strategies** Talk longer off the text; create mental images; look out for problems/obstacles and anticipate resolutions; reread  
**Writing About Reading** Writing off Post-its

#### NOVEMBER
**Unit of Study** Talking, thinking, and writing about reading 1+2 (whole-class study on friendship and independent work)  
**Big Idea(s)** Having ideas about the text  
**Strategies** Look out for cause and effect connections; reread; find evidence to support ideas/theories  
**Writing About Reading** Chart with argument from their point of view, write longer responses; pick three best Post-its and then write a reflection/response

#### DECEMBER
**Unit of Study** Nonfiction reading  
**Big Idea(s)** Developing theories  
**Strategies** Think about character motivation; create webs; infer what is not directly said  
**Writing About Reading** Write a summary of a book(s)—three sentences? or write a book report

#### JANUARY
**Unit of Study** Close reading of short texts  
**Big Idea(s)** Writing for the ELA  
**Strategies** Make comparisons; infer; question what an author is saying or has left out; integrate ideas across parts of a text  
**Writing About Reading** Write a persuasive commentary with an angle and evidence or write about literary text they’ve read (either would have a thesis or a point of view/angle and information to support thesis)

#### FEBRUARY
**Unit of Study** Thinking and talking across texts—book clubs (whole-class genre)  
**Big Idea(s)** Revising thinking  
**Strategies** Listen to peers and reread texts; find evidence to support new ideas; integrate ideas across texts or parts of a text; have new ideas and develop new theories  
**Writing About Reading** Write three related paragraphs—a comparison based upon an issue

#### MARCH
**Unit of Study** Social action book clubs  
**Big Idea(s)** Locating ideas into the world  
**Strategies** Research; infer what is not directly being said; have ideas and develop theories; integrate ideas across texts  
**Writing About Reading** Write a persuasive essay to educate or create change

#### APRIL
**Unit of Study** Reading within a thematic study  
**Big Idea(s)** Thinking about an author’s message, big idea, or lesson  
**Strategies** Develop theories; find evidence to support ideas; infer what is not directly said; differentiate sources; integrate ideas across parts of a text(s), research  
**Writing About Reading** Write a letter to the author or an author profile

#### MAY
**Unit of Study** Reading—writing connections  
**Big Idea(s)** Thinking about and studying a variety of genres (including literary essays)  
**Strategies** Study different genres of writing; review books read; name issues that came up in books read and in reading log; research  
**Writing About Reading** Create a list of what a literary essay is comprised of and write in different genres

#### JUNE
**Unit of Study** Reading projects  
**Big Idea(s)** Bringing it all together—writing a literary essay  
**Strategies** Use reading logs to find books on subject, etc.; skim reading notebooks, looking back at notes taken; use evidence from each book to support theory  
**Writing About Reading** Write a literary essay on three to four books

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**FIG. 1–1** Teacher’s year-long plan for reading and writing about reading
In this chapter, we will look at some ways teachers can open up reading enjoyment for children, while showing them ways to think about and interact with books. I first encountered the idea of “thinking aloud” when I read Katie Ray’s book *Wondrous Words* (1999). Teachers can model their thinking for children while stopping and musing aloud during the read-aloud time. As teachers will be reading aloud to children every day, perhaps several times a day, they can use the read-aloud to teach many things, not the least of which is how readers think and talk about books.

One of the first places we can begin to shape students’ ways of thinking about texts is by using the read-aloud time to model ways to think. What we carefully and explicitly teach them to do through the read-aloud will become the things they do in their independent and partnership reading. Therefore, we’ll look first at ways to use the read-aloud to our best teaching advantage, as we give children containers for the ways they can consider and talk about the books they read.

- reading aloud to create shared conversations
- reading aloud to model types of thinking
- reading aloud as a springboard for new thoughts

**Reading Aloud to Create Shared Conversations**

It was a warm September day, and Rob Ross sat on a chair in the rugged meeting area of his fifth-grade classroom. His students sat around him, some of them sprawled on their backs, others cross-legged, and some on small benches. Rob was reading aloud from *Holes* by Louis Sachar, a book he had read to his previous class and had become a cornerstone of their classroom conversation. *Holes* is the story of a boy who is falsely accused and convicted of a crime and sent to a juvenile prison where the warden requires inmates to dig holes every day in the blistering sun. Rob finished reading Chapter One and looked up.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked, looking around expectantly.

There was no response. Nothing. Just a sea of empty faces. Finally Hatesh raised his hand and said, “It was nice.”

Rob’s mouth fell open. “Nice? Hatesh, tell us what you mean by nice.”


Rob shook his head. “Okay, we need to talk about this. I can’t imagine that all of you would just sit there and hear this chapter and have nothing to say about it.”
Diana raised her hand. “It’s just good to hear you read to us.”

“Yes, I know that. It is good to be read to. Thanks for being brave enough to say that, Diana. But I need you all to think while I’m reading. I need you to have a thought about the book, to be ready to say something about it to a neighbor, to a friend, or to me. That’s what good readers and good listeners do. They are always using their minds to take what they are hearing and to make some meaning from it. It’s more like playing video games than watching TV. With TV you can just zone out, but with video games, you’ve got to be involved. And you’ve got to be involved with books.”

Then Rob read the chapter again and modeled his thinking by stopping and saying it aloud as he read. He told the class that of the many things he was thinking, some of them were things he would want to talk about with other people. Some of his thoughts were just questions about the text, for example, how could there be no lake at a place named Camp Green Lake? But other thoughts were deeper and fuller, and he jotted them down on a chart for the class to see.

“These fuller thoughts are ideas I think I could talk about with other people for a long time,” Rob explained. “But I could also use my questions about the text as ways to get some talking going. So my question about there being no lake at Camp Green Lake could get some conversation going about how clues like that build expectations for us as readers. We already know from the first sentence that there is something very wrong with this place.”

Rob’s class helped him make a chart of what he was thinking. Later, they went back and named what they were thinking so they could try to reproduce it in their own thinking about text. The chart looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of the Book</th>
<th>What I’m Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No lake at Camp Green Lake.</td>
<td>The author wants me to see that things are not as they appear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No town left here; weather is too hot.</td>
<td>This is a forbidden place. Why is there a camp here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Warden “owns” the shade.</td>
<td>How can someone own shade?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rattlesnakes and scorpions don’t bite. Usually.</td>
<td>What happens to you if they do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are campers digging holes by the no-lake?</td>
<td>Are they looking for water? Why would they make you dig holes in the heat? Isn’t that child abuse?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a yellow-spotted lizard?</td>
<td>I may have to look this up in a reptile book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who would want to go to a camp like this?</td>
<td>I wouldn’t send my daughter there. What kind of parents would send their child there?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rob's students were fascinated. “You did all that thinking in two pages?” Matthew asked.

“Yes,” Rob said. “And I know you can do it, too.”

The next day Rob went on to read Chapter Two. First he told the class that he was expecting them to think as he read to them and that he would give them time to think and time to talk. Rob was using Judith Langer’s framework of stop and think, stop and talk, stop and sketch. He knew he would eventually ask the children to stop and talk, but for now he was content to get them thinking. Rob knew that the only way to get children to write meaningfully about what they read was to have them think meaningfully first. So as he reread the last few lines from Chapter One to remind them of the plot, he asked them to stop and think for a minute. At first, the class seemed uncomfortable—the teacher was not asking them questions about the book, nor was he “testing” them on comprehension—but they quickly realized that Rob just wanted them to think about what he had read to them. The children all appeared to be ready to hear more of the story. Rob later told me he was willing to accept almost anything reasonable the students said that day, just to get them to respond to the book. He knew that once he assessed what his students already knew about responding to books, he could scaffold their thinking to be deeper and more insightful.

Chapter Two of Holes is very short. But it clears up some of the questions in the reader’s mind about Camp Green Lake, and it poses some interesting ideas. One idea is that some people thought that digging a hole every day in the hot sun would turn a bad boy into a good boy (page 5). When Rob paused in his reading aloud and asked the class to say something about that, most of the students erupted into indignant responses.

“That’s not fair,” Jameel said. “They could die in the sun. Who were the people that thought that was the right thing to do to them?”

“Having to dig holes in the sun would only make you angry, not good,” Melissa said.

“I’d be meaner and badder than ever after that,” Joey said.

Rob smiled. It was clear they were responding to the book and that some interesting conversation was beginning. Rob continued to read the page and then asked students to stop and think about the end of the chapter. Then he asked them to go off with their partners and talk about what they were thinking. He went around the room eavesdropping on some conversations and taking notes on his notepad. Then he called the class back together.
“Okay, I heard people say some very smart things. Let me tell you some of them. Then we’ll give what you do a name, so you can do it again.”

Diana stood by the chart paper to take Rob’s notes down.

“I heard one partnership talking about the idea that some people have certain ideas about what is good for others and that often those ideas can be really mean or wrong. Let’s think of a way to name that.”

The class thought for a minute. “Let’s call it ‘thinking about the opinions people have’,” suggested Nyal.

“Good,” Rob said. “Here’s another one: The choice the judge gave Stanley wasn’t a choice at all. Let’s name that.”

“‘Things are not always what they seem?’” Molly said. Diana wrote that on the chart.

“Okay. The last group I listened to said that Stanley was tricked into going there because he was poor and he didn’t know what real camp should be like. What do you think?”

Desmond raised his hand. “I think that proves he’s stupid. I’ve never been to camp, but I know it’s not a place where you dig holes, and I know that if they sent you there instead of jail, it’s got to be bad.”

Diana added Desmond’s thinking to the list.

Rob smiled. “This proves to me that all of you can think. All of you can have thoughts as we are reading a book together or as you are reading a book alone. All of you can push yourselves to figure out a story or any text. Today I want you to try to push yourselves to have at least one thought about your independent reading book and to be ready to share that thought with your partner. Some of the ideas in the second column of our chart might give you an idea of what you can think about as you read your book.”

### Chart of Partnership Thinking About Holes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event from the Book</th>
<th>What We Think About It—Book Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some people think they know what is good for others—the judge thought it would be good for Stanley to go to Camp Green Lake, and warden thought it was good to dig holes.</td>
<td>People’s opinions can affect others, especially if they are powerful people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to camp or jail wasn’t a choice at all.</td>
<td>Sometimes things don’t go the way you would like them to and things aren’t as they appear to be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley was poor, so they took advantage of him.</td>
<td>The world can be an unfair place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The chart gave students some specific events to think about, as well as ideas about how to grow those events into bigger conversations. Again, Rob was not concerned in this first read-aloud with the quality of their ideas, although he would not have allowed them to consider any ideas that were totally unfounded in the text. He knew there was much more he could and would teach them in the weeks ahead about thinking and talking about books. What’s important here is that Rob used his own thinking about a text to model for students what he wanted them to do. Then he showed them how to go from an observation about an event to a more global statement. These global statements would provide ways that children could begin to think about their own books.

**Reading Aloud to Model Types of Thinking**

Within a week, most of Rob’s students had the concept that you had to have an idea as you read. They were regularly talking about the read-aloud book, *Holes*, and they were trying out the same strategies (stop and think, stop and jot, stop and talk) in their independent reading books. They also had the idea that you could look for certain bigger ideas, such as “things are not always what they appear to be” in many books. But Rob noticed that students seemed to get on one type of thinking, such as asking questions, so he decided to use the read-aloud again to model types of thinking.

After reading aloud from Chapter Ten of the book, Rob removed the adhesive notes he had written from the book. He read them to the class and asked the students to classify them.

“Here I wrote that I feel how much pain Stanley is in and I know how he must ache because after I play softball I sometimes feel like that. What can we call that?”

Diana raised her hand. “Feeling like the character?”

“Good. Let’s get that down.” He wrote that on the chart next to his adhesive note.

“This one says that Stanley thinks he found a way out because he found the fossilized fish. I think he’s getting greedy.”

Hatesh raised his hand. “That’s ‘character motivation.’ It’s about why Stanley did what he did.”

Rob continued. “And this one says that *Armpit* is a bizarre name.”

Ibrahim answered. “That’s ‘looking for clues or noticing details.’ ”

Eventually the class made a chart with different types of thinking that they could do in the books they were reading, as well as in the read-aloud
book. The items on the chart could provide them with things to think about as they read and ways to prepare for conversations with each other, just as the previous chart helped make their literal observations more global.

**Some Early Types of Thinking About a Book**

- empathy for a character
- trying to understand a character’s motivations
- noticing details and wondering what they might mean
- thinking about the significance of unusual names
- thinking about how the world in the book affects the character or the story
- questioning what’s happening in the story and what doesn’t fit
- wondering where the story will go next
- information I must get to understand this story
- thinking about fairness in the story

Armed with the above list, the students went off to read their books and prepare for conversations about them. Some of the partnerships were reading the same book, in which case the conversations could go very deep into the book. Others were reading different books, and their conversations needed to focus on more abstract ideas and on pointing out places in the text where each partner could show examples of what he or she was thinking. In any case, it was now clear to the students that they were reading for more than getting the literal meaning of the words on the page and that they were capable of thinking about stories in deeper ways. Rob’s modeling also gave students specific things to look for as they read, such as needing more information to understand or noticing a detail that doesn’t fit with the story and wondering why it’s there.

**Reading Aloud as a Springboard for New Thoughts**

Marilyn Lopez was a fourth-grade teacher in Rob Ross’ school. She heard what Rob was doing with his class and decided to visit during her prep period to watch and learn. She was so excited by what she saw and heard that she went back to her room to try it with her own class. After doing...
the same things with the read-aloud in her room, Crash by Jerry Spinelli, Marilyn decided to see if she could teach her students to go beyond the text and to grow new ideas. She also wanted to push them to write important things on their adhesive notes, because she felt many of the adhesive notes were wasted with written remarks such as “wow” and “yes.” Although Marilyn didn’t want her students to write long paragraphs on their adhesive notes, she felt that the tools should be used to their best advantage. She wanted to teach students that although notes are short, they must mark some insight or thinking rather than a passing thought. She also noted to herself that later in the year she would work more on the difference between interesting and important information.

After Marilyn read Crash to them, she constructed with the class a chart of types of thinking that was similar to Rob’s chart. But she wanted them to go even further. Marilyn had read Randy and Katherine Bomer’s book For a Better World (2001), and she hoped that much of the reading could be put into a framework for social action or, at least, for social awareness. So where children had listed empathy as one way to consider a text, Marilyn extended it to consider the action one could take based on one’s “empathy” for a character.

In Crash, the main character, Crash Coogan, is an antihero, a young man who is a star athlete but whose cruelty toward others earns him a reputation and eventually some retribution. Spinelli wrote the book as a window into the heart of an athlete, but there are other layers to this book. Marilyn’s class took on the cause of the underdog, that is, the character of Penn Webb, who is tormented by Crash because he is a naïve, gentle soul and a Quaker. He also seems to have everything Crash really wants, such as a family and love. Following are the issues the class brought up as they read through this book, although their chart looked different from Rob’s because they focused on the issues first and then the events in the text.

**What We’re Thinking About in Crash**

- Why are some people singled out because of their religion? Why did Spinelli make Penn a Quaker, not a Catholic or a Jew? Did he think he would offend the fewest numbers of people by making him a Quaker or did he really need Penn to be a Quaker in the book? Do we need to know more about what Quakers believe to figure this out? Should we think about Penn as Every-Religion, so we don’t make fun of anyone because of their beliefs? How should we treat anyone who is different in any way? Do we see any injustice around us in the ways kids are treated in this school, and what can we do about it?
Why do some people act mean toward others for no apparent reason? Why do people hate each other? Should we accept that some people are like this, or can we hope that people can change? If we think people can change, what can we do to help them? What can we do when we see kids being mean in the schoolyard or cafeteria?

What does it mean to be unselfish? Is anyone really capable of being totally unselfish? Do you ever see anyone around you acting like this, or have you noticed times when people could have been unselfish or kinder, but weren’t?

Marilyn’s students were developing more abstract ideas because of her willingness to model her thinking and to discuss larger issues, or themes, in books. Her assumption was that the students would understand the book on a literal level, because she was reading aloud. To be sure, she put a system in place for those who were having difficulty, but otherwise assumed all children were capable of talking about the book.

The students broke into small groups based on the large question from the chart that they wanted to discuss. They took notes on their conversation so they would be able to report back to the large group. Then they took their notes and spread them out to look for categories or threads of thinking. Finally, Marilyn asked them to summarize their talk about at

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**Helping Children with Literal Comprehension**

Realistically, some children struggle with literal comprehension. There can be many reasons for this, including struggling to understand a complicated plot or missing a cue to a change in time or setting. Some structures you can set in place to help these children are:

Ask partners to retell stories to one another. Teach them to listen for places where the story doesn’t make sense or there are holes that affect their understanding, and stop their partners. Teach them to say things like: “Can you tell me that again?” “I’m not sure what happened there.” “Tell me that part over.”

Show them how rereading the first chapter of a book can help them get the “setup” of a book and put them on their way to understanding the rest of the book.

Have them stop at the end of each page for a comprehension check, always asking themselves if it makes sense.

Show them how it looks when you understand a book (you’ll have to be an actor here!), using facial expressions to show confusion and understanding. Then teach them to monitor themselves for the first signs of breakdown in understanding, so they go back and reread before reading without comprehension for too many pages.
least one of the questions in a paragraph to hand in to her. Although she felt the students had had a good introduction to finding a social awareness idea, thinking and talking about it and finally using notes to summarize, she knew she would come back to this work again later and build on it to support longer and deeper writing.

Teaching children to see literature this way, in a larger context, shows them that books are more than stories; they are doors into knowing ways to live and be in the world.

Summary

Before we can ask children to write about reading in meaningful ways, we must teach them to think about reading in meaningful ways. By modeling your own thinking during your read-aloud, charting, and naming the kinds of thinking, you can give children frameworks for thinking about books, which will lead to deeper, more interesting writing. If their thoughts are dull, their writing will be, too. If they are excited about the ideas they can extract from books, they will be more likely to produce interesting, well-thought-out writing. Most importantly, we must remember to carefully scaffold conversations so that children will gradually come to know that deep talk about a book is something they can all do.

Producing Thinking About Books in Preparation for Writing

- Model aloud the thinking that you are doing about your read-aloud book. You can begin with a shorter text, such as a picture book or an editorial, and then move to a longer text, such as a chapter book.

- Ask students to be ready to say, sketch, think, or write something during your read-aloud times. Stop at regular intervals to allow them to do this. Listen to what they are saying and scaffold their learning by highlighting insights for others.

- Let them practice doing this regularly. Ask them to go off with a partner and talk for a long time about their thinking. One way to do this is to refer back to the text for evidence, so they can talk together with the text close at hand, pointing to examples from the book to support their thinking.

- Ask children to choose one thing to talk about and stay with it for a long time. Often in a group, children will each say their ideas in turn.
and then think they are done. Choosing and staying with one idea for fifteen minutes will force them to grow new thinking about it, rather than flitting from the surface of one idea to another, without deepening any thinking.

- Teach children to capture some of the smartest things they said on an adhesive note. Have them put the adhesive notes in their independent reading books or tape them in their readers notebooks for later reference.

- Name the kinds of thinking (questioning the text, wondering why something happened) that are going on in the room and chart them. (See Chapter Two.)

- Chart the ideas that groups of children are studying. Add the names of children, as well as specific examples from the read-aloud books. Regularly ask each group how their thinking is going.

- Assess how students are doing (from literal comprehension to coordinating talk) and plan for small-group or individual work accordingly.
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