

What is Guided Reading?

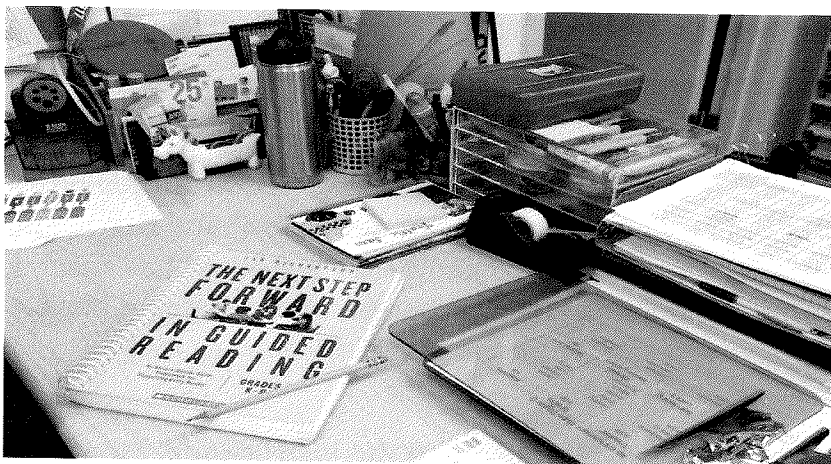
James Cannon // Nov 15, 2017

It's not unusual to hear the term *guided reading* used to describe small-group instruction. But does that term mean the same thing to everyone? Some teachers, any time they meet and read with small groups, call it guided reading regardless of the text they use, or the instructional focus of the lesson.

At Scholastic, we believe that teaching reading in small groups is just one part of the instructional practice known as guided reading.

In guided reading, the goal is to build independent readers who can read fluently with comprehension. A guided reading teacher plays the role of an expert reader who scaffolds—and, yes, *guides*—the lesson for less-experienced readers.

Therefore, a guided reading teacher plans lessons and focuses instruction on the areas where students need support. By focusing instruction on these areas, a guided reading lesson prepares students to be able to read the next level of text complexity.



Of course, the devil is in the details. Just what should we expect to see in a guided reading lesson? Experts agree that small groups and leveled texts are necessary, and there is

also consensus that teaching must be targeted and include progress monitoring.

Jan Richardson, in *The Next Step Forward in Guided Reading: An Assess-Decide-Guide Framework for Supporting Every Reader* (2016), offers three essentials of guided reading:

- Small groups
- Instructional-leveled texts
- Targeted teaching

Let's dig in to these important components of guided reading.

Flexible, Small-Group Instruction

How do we know that small-group instruction is not always guided reading?

Think about it this way: Back when I was in elementary school, I was in the "blue" reading group. I was with the same students in second grade, in third grade, and... well, you get the picture. Usually, there was a low group, a high group, and a few middle groups. Unfortunately, students often stayed in the groups to which they were assigned, year after year. Small-group instruction on its own is not enough.

Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey and John Hattie have explained in *Visible Learning for Literacy, Grades K-12: Implementing the Practices That Work Best to Accelerate Student Learning*(2016) that small-group learning has been shown to accelerate student learning, if two conditions are met:

- Guided reading must occur in *flexible groups*. A teacher moves a student out of a group as soon as there is sufficient evidence that a student's reading behaviors are appropriate, her word accuracy shows mastery and her comprehension is sufficient. And in order to know that a student has reached that level, the teacher must monitor student progress on an ongoing basis.
- Guided reading instruction must *match the needs of the learner*.

So guided reading must be in small, flexible groups and the instructional focus must be based on student needs.

Teaching with Instructional-Leveled Text

Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell created an A-through-Z leveling system by examining and identifying the (many) characteristics of text that impact its difficulty. Since guided reading helps students read increasingly challenging texts, guided reading instruction provides students the reading behaviors they need as they encounter the various characteristics of each level.

Instructional-leveled text is a bit challenging, and requires students to use strategies as they read. So, it is important to determine at which level students are able to read with just the right amount of challenge. To do so, a teacher identifies the level at which a student can read with 90–97% word accuracy, and 70–89% comprehension.

Then the teacher, acting as the expert reader, scaffolds instruction by selecting appropriately challenging texts, preparing students before they read, then coaching them when they face challenges (Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, 2001). This is one reason why the text has to be at a student's instructional level, and why the small groups must be flexible and based on students' current reading levels.

Targeted Teaching

Guided reading teachers use a *before*, *during* and *after* model of reading instruction.

- **Before** students begin to read, the teacher prepares them by explaining the purpose, frontloading challenging terms or concepts, and activating students' background knowledge.
- **During** reading, teachers support students by offering feedback such as questions, prompts, and cues around the lessons' instructional focus, comprehension, and the reader's point of need.
- **After** students finish reading, the teacher helps students synthesize what they have learned from the text, which helps students extend their thinking.

Guided reading is focused on reading. It is not a phonics lesson. The act of reading the text independently, with the support of the teacher, should be the centerpiece of a guided reading lesson. Fifty to sixty percent of reading instruction time should

be spent on students reading. So, for example, in a 20-minute guided reading lesson, students should read for 10 to 12 minutes.

Here is what doesn't happen: round-robin or popcorn reading, or taking turns, whether in or out of order. As we all know, when students take turns reading, those waiting for their turn are practicing what they will read, and those who have finished reading just check out (Allington, 2013). So in guided reading, *all* students are reading, even if they're whisper-reading or reading silently.

This Is Guided Reading

Successful guided reading classrooms are homes to small, flexible groups of students who are reading instructional-leveled text and employing strategies that allow them to read and comprehend. The teacher uses a *before, during* and *after* reading model as students independently read silently or whisper-read, and the groups change as students are able to read varying levels of text.

As Fountas and Pinnell have written, "Guided reading is a small group instructional context in which a teacher supports each reader's development of a systems of strategic actions for processing new texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty." (Fountas and Pinnell, 2017)

Bringing It All Together in Literacy Instruction

Guided reading is a critical component of high-quality literacy instruction that supports students as they progress toward independence and mastery of reading, writing and critical thinking.

Using a gradual release model and authentic literacy rotations, expert literacy instructors use research-based practices—such as interactive read-alouds, shared

reading, guided reading, integrated writing, and independent reading—to create purposeful, meaning-driven instruction every day. Each of these practices relies on the other to support students’ needs, learning styles and achievement.

Comprehensive literacy highlights teaching and learning and high-quality instruction. When instruction is focused on the whole child and is truly comprehensive, all core literacy instruction is aligned. This is a powerful illustration of evidence-based instructional promising practices working together to meet the needs of every child in a holistic way.

RESOURCES

- Allington, R. L. "What Really Matters When Working with Struggling Readers." *The Reading Teacher* 66 (2013) (520-530).
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., and Hattie, J. *Visible Learning for Literacy: Implementing Practices That Work Best to Accelerate Student Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin , 2016.
- Fountas, I. C. and Pinnell, G. S. *Guiding Readers and Writers Grades 3-6: Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
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