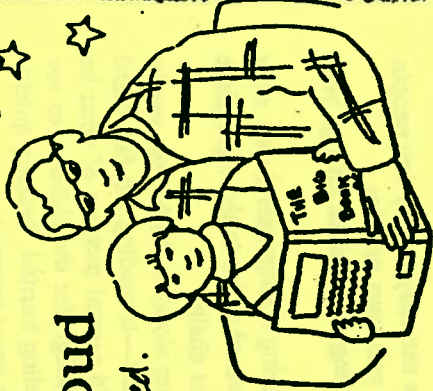


The Dos and Don'ts of Read-Aloud

Read-Aloud Handbook, fourth ed.

in Books

1995



Writing begins long before the marriage of pencil and paper. It begins with sounds, that is to say with words and simple clusters of words that are taken in by small children until they find themselves living in a world of vocabularies. If that world is rich and exciting, the transition to handling it in a new medium—writing—is made smoother. The first and conceivably the most important instructor in composition is the teacher, parent, or older sibling who reads aloud to the small child.

Empty Pages: A Search for Writing Competence in School and Society
—Clifton Fadiman

- Begin reading to children as soon as possible. The younger you start them, the easier and better it is.
- Use Mother Goose rhymes and songs to stimulate an infant's language and listening. Simple black-and-white illustrations at first, and then boldly colored picture books, arouse children's curiosity and visual sense.
- With infants through toddlers and preschoolers it is critically important to read and reread books that are predictable and contain repetitions.
- During repeat readings of a predictable book, occasionally stop at one of the key words or phrases and allow the listener to provide the word.

- Read as often as you and the child or students have time for.
- Set aside at least one traditional time each day for a story.
- Remember: The art of listening is an acquired one. It must be taught and cultivated gradually—it doesn't appear overnight.
- Start with picture books, and build to storybooks and novels.
- Vary the length and subject matter of your readings.
- To encourage involvement, invite the child to turn pages for you when it is time.
- If a child is too active to pay attention to a book, try telling some stories about a little boy or girl with the same name as your child: After a week, introduce a character to your stories who is also found in a children's book like Eric Hill's *Where's Spot?* Gradually wean the child from your invented stories to those in books.
- Before you begin to read, always announce the name of the book and the author and illustrator—no matter how many times you have read the book.
- The first time you read a book, discuss the illustration on the cover. "What do you think this is going to be about?"
- As you read, keep listeners involved by occasionally asking, "What do you think is going to happen next?"
- Follow through with your reading. If you start a book, it is your responsibility to continue it—unless it turns out to be a bad book. Don't leave the child or student hanging for three or four days between chapters and expect interest to be sustained.
- Occasionally read above children's intellectual level and challenge their minds.
- Picture books can be read easily to a family of children widely separated in age. Novels, however, pose a challenge. If there are more than three years (and thus social and emotional differences) between the children, each child would benefit greatly if you read to him or her individually. This requires more effort on the part of the parents, but it will reap rewards in direct proportion to the effort expended. You will reinforce the specialness of each child.
- Avoid long descriptive passages until the child's imagination and attention span are capable of handling them. There is nothing wrong with shortening or eliminating them. Prereading helps to locate such passages, and they can then be marked with pencil in the margin.
- If the chapters are long or if you don't have enough time each day to finish an entire chapter, find a suspenseful spot, at which to

stop. Leave the audience hanging: they'll be counting the minutes until the next reading.

- Allow your listeners a few minutes to settle down and adjust their feet and minds to the story. If it's a novel, begin by asking what happened when you left off yesterday. Mood is an important factor in listening! An authoritarian "Now stop that and settle down! Sit up straight. Pay attention!" is not conducive to a receptive audience.
- If you are reading a picture book, make sure the children can see the pictures easily. In school, with the children in a semicircle around you, seat yourself just slightly above them so that the children in the back row can see the pictures above the heads of the others.
- In reading a novel, position yourself where both you and the children are comfortable. In the classroom, whether you are sitting on the edge of your desk or standing, your head should be above the heads of your listeners for your voice to carry to the far side of the room. Do not read or stand in front of brightly lit windows. Backlighting strains the eyes of your audience.
- Remember that even sixth-grade students love a good picture book.
- Allow time for class and home discussion after reading a story. Thoughts, hopes, fears, and discoveries are aroused by a book. Allow them to surface and help the child to deal with them through verbal, written, or artistic expression if the child is so inclined. Do not turn discussions into quizzes or insist upon prying story interpretations from the child.
- Remember that reading aloud comes naturally to very few people. To do it successfully and with ease you must practice.
- Use plenty of expression when reading. If possible, change your tone of voice to fit the dialogue.
- Adjust your pace to fit the story. During a suspenseful part, slow down, and lower your voice. A lowered voice in the right place moves an audience to the edge of its chairs.
- The most common mistake in reading aloud—whether the reader is a seven-year-old or a forty-year-old—is reading too fast. Read slowly enough for the child to build mental pictures of what he just heard you read. Slow down enough for the children to see the pictures in the book without feeling hurried. Reading quickly allows no time for the reader to use vocal expression.

- Preview the book by reading it to yourself ahead of time. Such advance reading allows you to spot material you may wish to shorten, eliminate, or elaborate on.
- Bring the author, as well as his book, to life. Consult *Something About the Author* at the library, and read the information on your book's dust jacket. Either before or during the reading, tell your audience something about the author. Let them know that books are written by people, not by machines. You also can accomplish this by encouraging individual children (not the class collectively)—authors hate assembly correspondence) to write and share feelings about the book with the author. *Something About the Author* will provide an address, or you can write care of the publisher. It is important to enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope just in case the author has time to respond. The child should understand from the start that the letter's purpose is not to receive a response.
- Add a third dimension to the book whenever possible. For example: Have a bowl of blueberries ready to be eaten during or after the reading of Robert McCloskey's *Blueberries for Sal*; bring a harmonica and a lemon to class before reading McCloskey's *Lentils*; buy a plastic cowboy and Indian for when you read *The Indian in the Cupboard*, by Lynn Reid Banks.
- Every once in a while, when a child asks a question involving the text, make a point of looking up the answer in a reference book with the child. This greatly expands a child's knowledge base and nurtures library skills.
- Create a wall chart or back-of-the-bedroom-door book chart so the child or class can see how much has been read; images of caterpillars, snakes, worms, and trains work well for this purpose, with each link representing a book. Similarly, post a world or U.S. wall map on which small stickers can be attached to locations where your books have been set.
- When children are old enough to distinguish between library books and their own, start reading with a pencil in hand. When you and the child encounter a passage worth remembering, put a small mark—maybe a star—in the margin. Readers should interact with books, and one way is to acknowledge beautiful writing.
- Encourage relatives living far away to record stories on audiocassettes that can be mailed to the child.
- Reluctant readers or unusually active children frequently find it difficult to just sit and listen. Paper, crayons, and pencils allow

them to keep their hands busy while listening. (You doodle while talking on the telephone, don't you?)

- Follow the suggestion of Dr. Caroline Bauer and post a reminder sign by your door: "Don't Forget Your Flood Book." Analogous to emergency rations in case of natural disasters, these books should be taken along in the car, or even stored like spares in the trunk. A few chapters from "flood" books can be squeezed in during traffic jams on the way to the beach or long waits at the dentist's office.
- Always have a supply of books for the babysitter to share with the child and make it understood that "reading aloud" comes with the job.
- Fathers should make an extra effort to read to their children. Because 88 percent of primary-school teachers are women, young boys often associate reading with women and schoolwork. And, just as unfortunately, too many fathers would rather be seen playing catch in the driveway with their sons than taking them to the library. It is not by chance that most of the students in U.S. remedial-reading classes are boys. A father's early involvement with books and reading can do much to elevate books to at least the same status as sports in a boy's estimation.
- Arrange for time each day—in the classroom or in the home—for the child to read by himself (even if "read" only means turning pages and looking at the pictures). All your read-aloud motivation goes for naught if the time is not available to put it into practice.
- Lead by example. Make sure your children see you reading for pleasure other than at read-aloud time. Share with them your enthusiasm for whatever you are reading.
- When children wish to read to you, it is better for the book to be too easy than too hard, just as it is better that a beginner's bicycle be too small than too big.
- Encourage older children to read to younger ones, but make this a *part-time*, not a full-time, substitution for you. Remember: The adult should be the ultimate role model.
- Regulate the amount of time children spend in front of the television. Research shows that after about eleven TV hours a week, a child's school scores begin to drop. Excessive television viewing is habit-forming and damaging to a child's development.
- When children are watching television, closed-captioning should be activated along with sound. But for older children who know

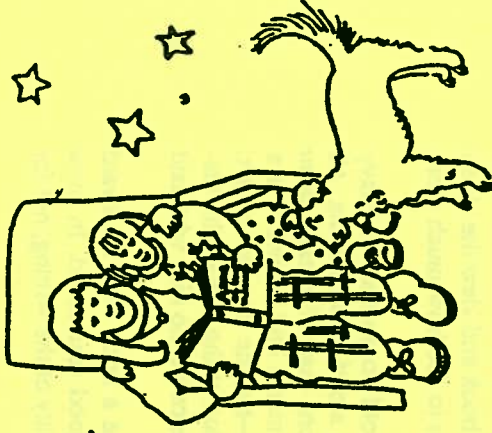
how to read but are lazy about it, turn the volume off and captioning on.

Don'ts

- Don't read stories that you don't enjoy yourself. Your dislike will show in the reading, and that defeats your purpose.
- Don't continue reading a book once it is obvious that it was a poor choice. Admit the mistake and choose another. Make sure, however, that you've given the book a fair chance to get rolling; some, like *Tuck Everlasting*, start slower than others. (You can avoid the problem by prereading at least part of the book yourself.)
- If you are a teacher, don't feel you have to tie every book to class work. Don't confine the broad spectrum of literature to the narrow limits of the curriculum.
- Don't overwhelm your listener. Consider the intellectual, social, and emotional level of your audience in making a read-aloud selection. Never read above a child's emotional level.
- Don't select a book that many of the children already have heard or seen on television. Once a novel's plot is known, much of their interest is lost. You can, however, read a book and view the video afterward. That's a good way for children to see how much more can be portrayed in print than on film.
- In choosing novels for reading aloud, avoid books that are heavy with dialogue; they are difficult reading aloud *and* listening. All those indented paragraphs and quotations make for *easy silent* reading. The reader sees the quotation marks and knows it is a new voice, a different person speaking—but the listener doesn't. And if the writer fails to include a notation at the end of the dialogue, like "said Mrs. Murphy," the audience has no idea who said what.
- Don't be fooled by awards. Just because a book won an award doesn't guarantee that it will make a good read-aloud. In most cases, a book award is given for the quality of the writing, not for its read-aloud qualities.
- Don't start reading if you are not going to have enough time to do it justice. Having to stop after one or two pages only serves to frustrate, rather than stimulate, the child's interest in reading.

- Don't get too comfortable while reading. A reclining or slouching position is most apt to bring on drowsiness.
- Don't be unnerved by questions during the reading, particularly from very young children. Answer their questions patiently. Don't put them off. Don't rush your answers. There is no time limit for reading a book, but there is a time limit on a child's inquisitiveness. Foster that curiosity with patient answers—then resume your reading.
- Don't impose interpretations of a story upon your audience. A story can be just plain enjoyable, no reason necessary. But encourage conversation about the reading. Only 7 minutes out of 150 instructional minutes in the school day are spent on discussions between teacher and student.
- Don't confuse quantity with quality. Reading to your child for ten minutes, given your full attention and enthusiasm, may very well last longer in the child's mind than two hours of solitary television viewing.
- Don't use the book as a threat—"If you don't pick up your room, no story tonight!" As soon as your child or class sees that you've turned the book into a weapon, they'll change their attitude about books from positive to negative.
- Don't try to compete with television. If you say, "Which do you want, a story or TV?" they will usually choose the latter. That is like saying to a nine-year-old, "Which do you want, vegetables or a doughnut?" Since you are the adult, you choose. "The television goes off at eight-thirty in this house. If you want a story before bed, that's fine. If not, that's fine, too. But no television after eight-thirty." But don't let books appear to be responsible for depriving the children of viewing time.

5 Read-Aloud Success Stories



You see things and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?"

—George Bernard Shaw

In 1989, Arthur Tannenbaum was just a few years away from retirement when he brought new meaning to the term "power lunch." Working in New York City as an executive with CHIP Industries, a leading home textiles supplier, and married to an employee of the New York City Board of Education, Tannenbaum was surrounded by extremes. On his walk to work he passed adults who came from the finest colleges in the nation, and children who came from the homes most at risk. "What can I do about it?" he wondered.

And then one day he picked up the 1989 edition of the book you are holding in your hand, and within a few chapters an idea began to form. "I could do this!" he said to his wife, Phyllis. "If I had someone to read to—I could do this." And then he thought of Public School 116 down