

Reading Aloud to Older Students: Benefits and Tips

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Abstract: The research is clear that reading aloud to students is sound educational practice for many reasons including building vocabulary and increasing fluency. At the middle and high school levels the literacy demands on students increase exponentially, yet teachers are less likely to take the time to read aloud. This article shares some of the research supporting reading aloud to secondary students as well as benefits, tips, and links to book lists for your classroom.

“Reading aloud is the best advertisement because it works. It allows a child to sample the delights of reading and conditions him to believe that reading is a pleasurable experience, not a painful or boring one” (Trelease, 2013). I have been reading aloud to my secondary students every day my entire career. Allow me to share three of my favorite “conditioning stories” with you.

I have read Rawls’ *Where the Red Fern Grows* out loud many, many times. In case you didn’t know, there are some very sad parts. It’s such a great read-aloud though, so I have figured out a way to read through the sad parts without crying or getting choked up. While reading the words, with all the emotion and expression called for, I think of something else. Once, while I was reading one of the sad parts, I distracted myself by thinking about my plans for after school. I won’t give away anything in the plot in case you haven’t read it, but that day I looked up and I saw two eighth-grade boys crying in the front row. Two! One was trying to tip his head back ever so slightly so nobody behind him noticed while he blinked the tears away, but the tears came out anyway. The other one already had his head cradled in the crook of his elbow on the table, and he’d wipe his tears on his sleeve with the thumb of his other hand. Both boys were barely moving and listening intently. Well, I completely lost it. I got choked up and the tears

came out of my eyes. *They* made me cry! I was saying the words I'd said many times while thinking, "I'll stop for gas and then go to the store to pick up something for supper." I saw these two eighth grade boys cry in school and it hit me. Wiping my tears I said, "Wow! I've read this book a million times! I knew this was coming! I don't know why I'm crying this time!" While the class was focused on me, the boys gathered themselves and then *joined in* on the good-natured teasing from the class. Each boy knows I saw him--I'm not sure if they know about each other, and they know I didn't say anything. Taking the time to read aloud is worth it.

One year when I read Hinton's *The Outsiders* and then showed the movie, a girl suddenly sat straight up, pointed at the screen and burst out loudly, "*That's* not what he looks like!" when C. Thomas Howell, who played Ponyboy, came on at the beginning. (She was very embarrassed.)

Reading aloud Palacio's novel *Wonder* provides an occasion to "get to know" a kid with a rare medical facial deformity who is forced to deal with bullies in middle school. Your students will not only get to know Auggie, but they will love him and want to be his best friend. The life lessons and discussions about the power of bullying *and* the power of being brave and kind are incredible. One of my favorite memories of reading this book aloud is, after a particularly kind gesture in the story, one of my students simultaneously pushed his chair back, threw his arms in the air, and yelled "This is now officially my favorite book!" Then he looked around at everyone and pushed his chair in, saying, "Sorry, sorry, sorry." The whole class was smiling and saying things like "me too" and "no, I get it," and "it's my favorite book, too."

I started my career teaching middle school English and literature and transitioned into a K-12 district reading specialist, which evolved into teaching 6-12 literacy intervention in West De Pere, Wisconsin, a rapidly growing district in suburban Green Bay. We have approximately 3400 students, are bursting at the seams, and are currently working toward going to a referendum to build. We know this is a good problem to have. Our administration is extremely supportive of literacy and we are constantly striving to do what is best for our students. We know we are lucky.

I have been reading aloud to these students my entire career. To be honest, my reasons for starting were not research based. My reasons were worry based. I was an intern and teaching six sections of 7th- and 8th-grade English and literature. New to lesson planning, it took me awhile to know how much to expect to be able to do in each hour. (I know you know what I'm talking about.) I tried to OVER plan (like you did) so there would never be any, "What should we do until the end of class?" moments. It didn't always work. I went to my mentor, Irene Hucek, and asked her if she thought it would be a good idea, and if I would be allowed, to start reading a novel aloud if there was extra time at the end of class. She thought it was a great idea. What started as a time filler has become one of the most effective tools to demonstrate to students that reading is good and enjoyable. According to Oczkus (2012), "Reading aloud every day to your students is a research-based, proven way to motivate your students to read on their own, model good reading, promote critical thinking, and create a sense of community in your classroom" (p. 21). I have found all of these to be true.

In their book *Learning under the Influence of Language and Literature*, Laminack and Wadsworth (2006) describe six types of read-alouds: books that ... address standards, build community, demonstrate the craft of writing, enrich vocabulary, entice children to read independently and model fluent reading. Addressing standards might be a stretch for me, but otherwise I have read all of these types of read-alouds.

Benefits of Reading Aloud to Older Students

1. *Gives them a positive experience with a book.* Many of our adolescent students have never read an entire book. They might lack the skill, time, interest, availability, whatever--they've never read a book cover to cover and some are pretty open and proud about their "reading is stupid" opinion. In my experience, there has never been a student I have not won over because they've enjoyed at least one book that I read aloud. It doesn't matter what the obstacle is, reading aloud provides positive experiences. Sharing a compelling, enjoyable, important, or funny book with their classmates can be powerful. They start to trust that reading can be a good thing and that maybe this teacher knows what she's doing. One year, the teacher across the hall witnessed in-

between classes when a student of mine, fresh off of in school suspension, hurried to the podium to quick read what he missed from the read aloud. That teacher was convinced that taking to time to read aloud was worth it and she's been reading aloud to her classes ever since.

2. *Exposes them to books, genres, authors and topics.* According to Hinds (2015), "Reading aloud can advance teens' listening and literacy skills by piquing their interest in new and/or rigorous material" (p. 1). Typically listening comprehension is higher than reading comprehension; therefore, reading aloud is an effective way to encourage students to take on a challenging book. Secondary teachers can read poetry aloud in their classes. Science teachers can read poems from Scieszka and Smith's *Science Verse* (2004) to introduce or spark interest in topics such as states of matter or metamorphosis. There are many sophisticated children's books that could be used to introduce or enhance a topic. Polacco's *Pink and Say* (1994) could be read during a civil war unit. Try reading it aloud without getting a little choked up at the end--it's not easy. Bunting's picture book *The Wall* (1992) illustrates the profound loss a family can feel as a boy and his father visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Secondary teachers can also read newspaper, magazine, or online articles aloud to start real-world conversations about their content. If we model reading because we're interested, we are doing a service to our students

3. *Encourages students to read the remaining books of a series on their own.* When *Hunger Games* by Collins came out in 2010, I read it out loud to my freshmen and sophomores. They loved it. One of my students happy-shocked her parents by asking for a copy of *Catching Fire* (second in the trilogy) as a gift so she could read along.



High school students attend *Hunger Games* together

These students were so wild for the dystopian genre that when we were done with the *Hunger Games* series, I read the first book in Westerfeld's *Uglies* series. I got smart, though, and read only the first one and then made the second one available for them to read on their own. They did. The magic doesn't just happen with dystopian series. I have had success with the Patterson's *Maximum Ride* series, Horowitz's *Alex Rider* series, Nielsen's *Ascendance* trilogy, and Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series.

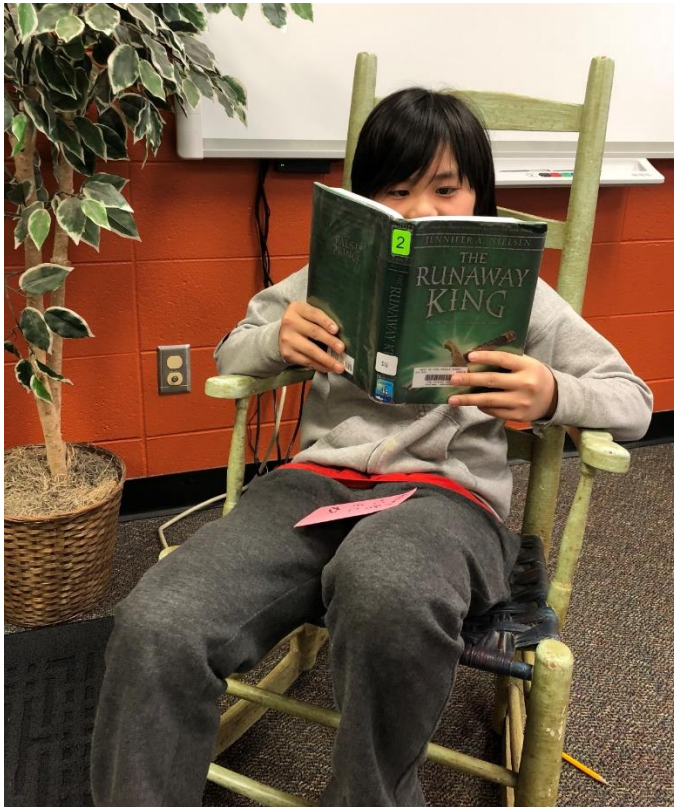


After listening to *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment* by James Patterson, students read other novels in the series including graphic novels

4. *Provides the opportunity to discuss life concerns and builds a sense of community.* Our older students face many confusing issues and messages about life and the world around them. Discussing it around a character or a situation based on a book can be a safe, comfortable place to talk about dangerous, uncomfortable topics. The pain of eating disorders can be lived through Anderson's *Wintergirls*. After reading Bauer's *On My Honor*, you can have amazing discussions about personal responsibility, blame and peer pressure. Palacio's novel *Wonder* introduces students to a character with a rare medical facial deformity opening the class up for compelling discussions about bullying and the power of kindness.

5. *Builds vocabulary.* Secondary reading requirements are vocabulary rich. This is good, but it can also be a challenge: "Secondary students encounter 10,000 or more new words per year in their content area texts" (Hougen, 2014). Reading aloud to students can expand their vocabulary and improve their comprehension. When we're taking the time to read aloud, we are another source of exposure to learning new words.

6. *Increases fluency.* When I was first transitioning from an English teacher to a reading specialist to an intervention teacher, I didn't understand the power of fluency for improving comprehension (or even exactly what fluency was). Reading fluently means reading accurately, effortlessly, at the proper rate, and with expression. Along with decoding, fluency affects comprehension and is often thought of as the bridge from decoding to comprehension (Pikulski and Chard, 2005). When we read aloud to our students, we provide a model for fluent reading that our students can emulate when they're reading on their own.

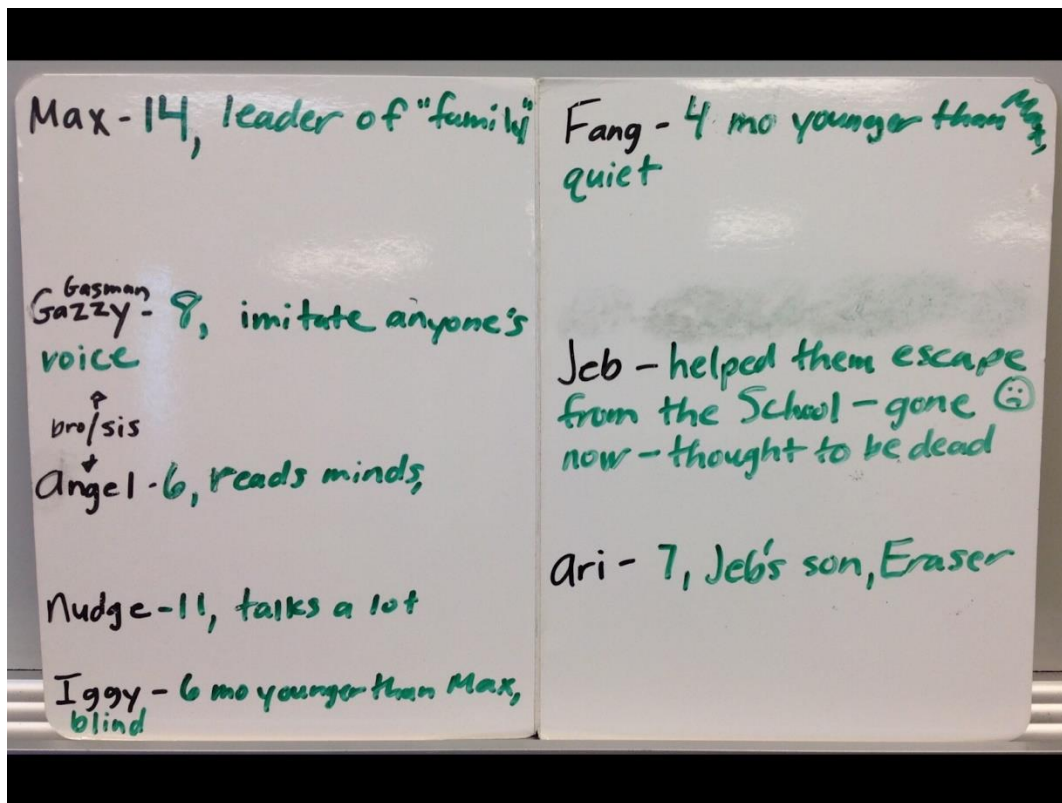


After listening to *The False Prince* by Jennifer Nielsen, a student reads *The Runaway King*, the second book in the *Ascendance* trilogy.

Tips for Reading Aloud

1. Preview the book. It will be easier for you to read fluently, you can choose “think aloud” sections, and you can prevent any accidental R-rated moments.

2. Introduce the book. Read the back and the inside flap and activate any needed background knowledge.
3. Ask what happened in the book yesterday before you start each read aloud session. It helps bring their heads back to the story and prepares them for active listening.
4. Decide how long and when you plan to read. I read the first ten minutes of class, but it works better for some teachers to read the last ten minutes.
5. Use your voice. Read enthusiastically--if you can pull off the character's Irish brogue--do it! Read at the appropriate rate--quickly when it's suspenseful and slowly when it's sad.
6. Occasionally model intellectual curiosity and research skills by looking topics up during the middle of the book.
7. Occasionally stop and have a nonacademic conversation about the book in the middle of reading.
8. Keep a chart of the characters and their traits for the students who need it.
9. Watch their body language. Fidgeting or watching the clock might mean you need to stop for the day or even pick a new book.
10. Have a brief discussion after reading. What happened today? Any predictions?



Character chart for Patterson's *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment*

Conclusion

There are academic benefits to reading aloud to older students, and they are important. What will keep you taking the time to read aloud is the look on your students' faces as they get angry for a character, feel a character's pain, or experience righteous indignation. Their faces will keep you reading aloud when you see them celebrating or laughing with a character, or feel a character's love, happiness, sense of achievement, or vindication. You'll keep taking the time to read aloud when you overhear students having rich discussions--without you! It'll feel totally worth it when you see students who normally don't read on their own time--either because they don't believe they're readers or just don't want to be a reader--carry around a book. I've seen all these things happen and I believe it can be attributed to reading aloud. Time well spent.

Book Lists and Ideas to Get You Started

- International Literacy Association book lists:
<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists>
- Pernille Ripp's Global Read Aloud: <https://theglobalreadaloud.com/>
- Jim Trelease's Home Page: www.trelease-on-reading.com

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