

Teaching a Reading and Writing Workshop

by Laura Robb

“I like all the different things we do in workshop—read, discuss, write, work with a partner or our teacher. And most of the time I’m liking what we do.” These words, spoken by a sixth-grade boy, say a great deal about the varied learning experiences in a reading workshop. Within a block of time, a workshop approach to reading enables you to model reading strategies, then support individuals and small groups, while the rest of the class completes independent reading, discusses a text, or writes about their reading.

The Benefits of a Reading/Writing Workshop

- **Independence** Middle school students can develop the independence they crave during choice time when students work alone, in pairs, or in small groups.
- **Guided Practice** The blocks of time available during a workshop allow students to practice and apply strategies and skills to new materials under the expert guidance of you, the teacher.
- **Social Aspects of Learning** Talking to and hanging out with friends is what middle schoolers enjoy. Workshops build on students’ social natures by fostering focused talk about reading.
- **Flexible Grouping** Because students learn to work independently, teachers can meet with individuals or small groups to support strategic reading and the interpretation of various literary genres.

Establish Workshop Routines

Reflect on the kinds of independent work you want students to complete during the workshop. Here’s the list a seventh-grade teacher compiled: independent reading; reviewing specific genres in the *Reader’s Handbook*; applying reading methods such as marking the text, finding the main idea, using a graphic organizer to figure out theme in their independent reading books; or completing a lesson in the *Daybook* or *Sourcebook* that relates to what’s being studied in the *Reader’s Handbook*.

Allow five to six weeks to teach routines and have students practice them, as well as understand what the behavior expectations are. The time you invest in helping students understand the different levels of workshop learning is directly related to the level of organization and productivity in your class.

Four Workshop Elements

The graphic organizer on page 34 will help you visualize these workshop elements.

1. Teach It By planning a mini-lesson, you can demonstrate how a reading or writing strategy works for you by modeling your process and thinking aloud to share your anxieties, frustrations, and ideas. The *Reader’s Handbook* offers a wealth of mini-lesson ideas. Start the year by presenting these mini-lessons from the *Reader’s Handbook*: “The Reading Process” and “Reading Know-how.” You’ll also want to design and present these mini-lessons: “Reading Nonfiction,” “Reading Fiction,” “Reading Poetry,” “Reading Drama,” “Reading for Tests,” and “Improving Vocabulary.” One possible curriculum to follow is laid out in the *Lesson Plan Book*. Use it as a model to construct your own, or follow it as a plan for your school.

2. Practice It During this block of time, you can work with groups who need support with applying strategies to different materials. While you work with a small group, student-led groups or partners can discuss literature, write about their reading, read independently, or study and review specific pages in the *Reader's Handbook*. For example, if you've had two to three mini-lessons on the short story, you might want students to check the Reader's Almanac in their handbook for a refresher on Character Maps or Plot Diagrams.

3. Apply It Here students have multiple opportunities to work independently, with a partner or in a small group, to apply what they have learned and practiced to new material. You'll also be able to carve out some time during this block to support struggling readers or students who missed a lesson.

Once students have worked through the lesson on the novel in the *Reader's Handbook*, they can apply some of the strategies to a free-choice book at their independent reading level. Ask students to keep written work in their journals so that they have a record of their thinking and learning.

4. Evaluate It Student journals, independent work done in the *Student Applications Books*, and student's writing about literature are all potential assessments. Independently completed work in the *Daybooks* and *Sourcebooks* are also good assessments that you can use to evaluate students' progress.

While students complete work, you can block out some time to hold brief meetings with those who still need more guidance to improve their reading and writing skills.

Basic Workshop Experiences

The experiences that follow offer choices that enable you to interact with students and monitor their progress.

Teacher Read-Aloud Teachers read aloud from genres that relate to those the class is studying.

Paired Questioning Partners read passages and question one another.

Complete a Journal Entry See suggestions in the *Reader's Handbook* and *Student Applications Book*.

Practice a Strategy Students, solo or in small groups, use books at their independent reading level to cement their understanding of a strategy.

Peer Conferences Pairs or small groups discuss how they apply a reading strategy and/or share journal entries that explain a strategy. The *Teacher's Guide* offers a wealth of independent reading suggestions as well.

Student-led Book Discussions Organize heterogeneous groupings, mixing ability levels and gender. The *Reader's Handbook* offers many possible discussion topics: the structure of a genre and supporting examples from a text, finding themes, character analysis, cause and effect, close readings, inferences, and so on.

Teacher-led Strategic Reading Groups These are homogeneous pairs or small groups that require additional instruction on how to apply a reading strategy, complete a graphic organizer, or transfer their knowledge of a specific genre to students' independent reading.

Integrating the *Reader's Handbook* into Your Reading Workshop

Here are some suggestions for constructing strategy lessons and reading and writing experiences using the *Reader's Handbook*, the *Teacher's Guide*, and the *Student Applications Book*. As you integrate the *Reader's Handbook* into your workshop, you will discover dozens of additional learning experiences and strategy lessons to bring to your students.

Possible Mini-lessons

- Setting a purpose
- Reading autobiographies, biographies, essays, geography textbooks, history textbooks, magazine articles, math textbooks, newspaper articles, novels, science textbooks, short stories
- Previewing a text
- Making a reading plan
- Using graphic organizers
- Making connections
- Inferring ideas
- Understanding the structure of short stories, novels, poems
- Understanding the structure of nonfiction books, essays, newspapers

Guided Practice

- Use the *Student Applications Book* and offer opportunities to apply your mini-lessons during workshop time called “Practice It.”
- Create reading and writing experiences from the *Reader’s Handbook* and your *Lesson Plan Book*, such as taking notes, building vocabulary, and making personal connections.

Gathering Written Work for Evaluation

- Evaluate students’ progress based on their journal writing.
- Collect work students complete in the *Student Applications Book*, and evaluate whether they understand a skill, tool, or strategy.

Independent Reading

- Reserve time for students to read books at their independent level.
- Invite students to choose books that relate to the genres you’re teaching.

Sourcebooks and Daybooks

- Use *Sourcebooks* and *Daybooks* to engage students in practice and reinforcement at students’ instructional levels. This means that in an eighth-grade class you might have students in a sixth-grade *Sourcebook* because they are reading at that level, students reading on grade level in an eighth-grade *Daybook*, and several in ninth- or tenth-grade *Daybooks* because they are proficient readers.
- If your class has many struggling readers, consider using the *Sourcebooks* to meet their needs. In such a sixth-grade class, most students will be in a fourth- or fifth-grade *Sourcebook*. Those reading on grade level will use a sixth-grade *Daybook*.

Closing Thoughts

As an indispensable resource for you and your students, the *Reader’s Handbook* and support materials will quickly become the foundation for your workshop. By using these materials, you can organize a workshop that meets the needs of each child and reaches all reading levels.

REFERENCE

Robb, L. (2000). *Teaching reading in middle school*. New York: Scholastic.

Workshop Approach

1

Teach It

Model a strategy.
(10–20 minutes)

- Mini-lesson with *Reader's Handbook*
- At start, in middle
- Reading and/or writing strategy

2

Practice It

Students use; teacher supports.
(20–40 minutes)

- Discussion groups
- Strategic reading
- Groups—student and teacher led
- Writing
- Independent work

Reading/Writing Workshop

3

Apply It

Students refine reading and writing.
(15–30 minutes)

- Whole group, small group, independent
- Work with students who need extra help.
- Work with *Daybooks*, or *Sourcebooks*.

4

Evaluate It

Students show what they can do.
(15–30 minutes)

- Complete work independently.
- Write about reading and writing strategies.
- Teacher support for those who need help