

# *Reading aloud to students*

## *Five reasons why this classroom practice works*

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It is harder now for high school students to focus on and make sense of long, complex texts, particularly the underserved students who were already struggling with reading.

The 24-hour news and entertainment cycle, cellphones, work schedules and family problems are just a few of the pressures competing for teens' attention. That means when teachers assign the reading of literature for homework and use class time for lectures and quizzes, they may not be providing the engagement necessary to compete with such distractions.

One strong solution is to have teachers read aloud to their classes, then move into leading inquiry-based discussions about texts.

In this shared-experience vision of reading aloud, students are following along, taking notes with old-school technology: a pencil.

The benefits of reading aloud to students have been known for decades. A landmark report called "Becoming a Nation of Readers" identified listening as "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading." This report by the National Academy of Education, the National Institute of Education, and the Center for the Study of Reading may have been published more than 30 years ago, but that truth is timeless.

More recent research indicates that for students — even those in high school — hearing literature aloud helps model fluency in diction and tone, build background knowledge, and develop language acquisition skills. So, for better literature comprehension and appreciation from their high school students, teachers should continue to read aloud to their classes.

Here are five reasons why:

**(1) Even if a text is above a student's reading level, that doesn't mean it's above their comprehension level.** Some students are able to listen to high-level texts that they could not read on their own. In turn, the students push their own complex ideas further when they're read to aloud. Listening to a piece read at someone else's pace allows high school students the freedom to follow their own curiosity as they absorb a text. Their attention is no longer split between decoding and critical thinking. To further support

their lines of thought, teachers can encourage students to mark their texts as they listen, which can help teachers know what questions students have and maximize their engagement with a text.

**(2) Teachers can access a wide range of reading levels within one classroom.** The opportunity to listen to a text — instead of reading it independently — makes literature accessible to students who struggle to read on their own. If learners follow along with a text as they listen, it will allow them to gain a better understanding of unfamiliar words and the language as a whole. Reading aloud is also a tool to support, rather than call out or section off, those who read independently at a slower pace or are still emerging fluent readers.

**(3) Reading aloud is an effective replacement for both “popcorn” and “round-robin” reading.** Though the merits of these approaches have been argued for many years, both approaches require focus on decoding a text rather than thinking about the narrative itself. Therefore, a reader’s ability to discuss thoroughly is diminished. Further, if students are anticipating, or even dreading, their turns to read, they’re not truly comprehending the words on the page. And constantly changing voices, speeds and tones is not a natural way to hear a story.

**(4) Hearing a text read aloud also supports students’ ability to remember key information.** This enables them to think critically about the text, and formulate and express their own reflections, which allows the students the ability to share their thoughts in writing or discussion.

**(5) Listening to a story can be more relaxing for busy high school students, and can lead to a lifelong appreciation for storytelling and literature.** As everyone listens silently to the same story at once, it’s a fun, communal experience. For many high school students, reading a book they’re not interested in for class becomes an aversive experience reinforced by similar ways of approaching a text. All too often, this can lead to a disdain for reading later in life.

A talented, expressive teacher can bring a poem, story or other written work to life and allow listeners to experience things they may not have noticed had they simply read the piece to themselves.

That makes it easier to understand a story and empathize with characters, thus boosting appreciation for the story as well as comprehension of it.

A teacher can also model multiple interpretations of a text by reading aloud. For example, consider these lines from *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 7:

*Macbeth: But what if we fail —  
Lady Macbeth: We, fail?*

Lady Macbeth's interruption can be understood in many ways. One interpretation could be "There is no we — only you," to Macbeth. In other words, she is telling Macbeth before the journey begins that if the overthrow is a failure, he will die alone. Another way to read the line could be a foolhardy and resounding, "We won't fail, you dolt. I, unlike you, have thought this out. We're going to end up ruling." Finally, a potentially less confident Lady Macbeth could respond with a cracked, high alto of "Why would you say that to me when I'm already nervous enough?"

By reading these lines aloud to a classroom, teachers can illustrate the possibilities of this response so students can choose the lens through which they'll interpret a text, putting students back in charge of their own minds and building upon the engaging experience of hearing a story aloud.

However, simply listening to an audiobook isn't enough. It's also crucial for students to interact and follow along with the words on the page as they listen.

Students should participate in critical, inquiry-based classroom discussions led by their teacher to further comprehend and appreciate works of fiction and non-fiction.

The discussions encourage students to slow down, pick up a book and relax with a great story, regardless of what else might be going on in their lives. This fosters an interest and engagement in literature that is exciting for all students.

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