

# **Differentiation Through Flexible Grouping: Successfully Reaching All Readers**

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## Definition and Rationale for Flexible Grouping

*Anyone who thinks there is one right way to teach reading  
has never worked with two children.*

There always has been a problem with grouping practices in reading programs. The complexity of the interaction between readers, texts, and the contexts in which reading takes place often is ignored by educational decisions that suggest that one program, set of materials, instructional technique, or grouping arrangement can address the needs of all students in a classroom. Common sense and personal experiences suggests that one size rarely fits all. A single instructional response to a group of diverse learners often means that the teaching technique will help some while it ignores others. Furthermore, the exclusive use of the single instructional technique over time will magnify that flaw.

No one grouping pattern inherently is bad, but the exclusive use of one grouping pattern often leads to problems in the classroom. In the past, the overuse of homogenous small groups often meant that many readers never had access to the same quality of instruction as others did. The grouping tactics themselves contributed to the establishment of a public stigma attached to reading instruction. These negative feelings about reading and school actually ran interference with even the highest quality small-group instruction. In contrast, the overuse of whole group instruction often meant that many students were not reading text appropriate for their levels. On one end, students were reading without adequate challenges. On the other end, students were not reading at all due their level of frustration with the material in front of them. The difficulty of teaching a diverse group of students the same material often meant that some students—many times those who needed help the most—were not engaged.

Flexible grouping emerged as a practice to address these concerns. It acknowledges that all grouping patterns—large groups, small groups, teams, partners, and individuals—have value because they all offer the reader slightly different experiences with different outcomes. Flexible grouping was defined by Radencich and McKay (1995) as “grouping that is not static, where members of the reading group change frequently” (p. 11). For example students may work with a partner, in a small cooperative or teacher-led group, or with the whole class. The basis for the grouping may be students’ interests or needs. Typically, flexible grouping may revolve around a core grade-level selection read by an entire class or around an individual trade-book program. Teachers attempting flexible grouping recognize that reading achievement is a function not only of the text but also of the conditions that surround the learning situation. (Radencich & McKay, 1995).

Radencich and McKay (1995) remind us that when teachers plan for flexible grouping, they consider the strengths and weaknesses of each grouping approach and then put them together to allow the teacher to best meet the needs of the classroom. The groups are formed and dissolved as needs change to allow for maximum flexibility, avoiding the static nature of the grouping patterns of the past.

While it often is possible to form and reform groups during a single lesson on any one day of instruction, it is more important for teachers to look at their classroom program over time. When

a program is evaluated over time, teachers likely will see that students were involved in a variety of grouping arrangements, leading to a wide variety of reading experiences and accomplishing many reading outcomes. Flexible grouping can occur during any one lesson, but it is probably more important that flexible grouping is seen over the course of many lessons. Table 1 shows the contrast between common grouping arrangements.

**Table 1. Common Grouping Arrangements**

<b>Dimension of Grouping</b>	<b>Homogenous Small Groups</b>	<b>Whole-Group Instruction</b>	<b>Flexible Grouping</b>
<b>Group size</b>	Typically three small groups	All students in one large group	Variable use of large group, small group, partner, and individual work
<b>Membership</b>	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous	Variable use of homogenous and heterogeneous groups
<b>Purpose</b>	Differentiate instruction along the lines of three ability groups	Build community and contribute to an effective use of resources and time by providing same instruction to all	Differentiate instruction while building a classroom community in an effective use of time and materials
<b>Texts</b>	Different texts for different groups	Same text for all students	Variable use of same texts or multiple connected texts
<b>Disadvantages</b>	Inequity of access to meaning-based instruction	Inequity of access to instructional level texts	Need for students and teachers to be able to flow in and out of a variety of grouping patterns within and across lessons
<b>Affective concerns</b>	Social stigma of being in groups with lower levels of achievement or stuck in mid-level groups	Disengagement of students for perceived lack of challenge or lack of success	While visual structural changes should minimize affective concerns, invisible structures still may contribute to affective concerns

## **Model One: Grouping Without Tracking (Differentiating by Levels of Support)**

### **Explanation**

Imagine that you have a group of fairly diverse learners at many different reading levels, and you have a selection from your basal anthology, common trade book, or science textbook that you want all of those students to read. You know that the selection will be manageable for many students but probably too hard for others. How can all of your students effectively learn this selection? The grouping without tracking model was designed by Jean Paratore to assist teachers to more effectively address the diverse needs of learners in a classroom when using the same text with all students.

This whole-group model proposes that all students stay together in an intensive prereading phase that frontloads the lesson and begins to level the playing field, insuring that more students will have success with the text. As the students move closer to reading and responding to the text, the teacher asks one critical question: Which of my students can read and respond to the text on their own? The teacher then sets up an infrastructure that engages as many students as possible to operate as independent strategic readers, allowing them to read and respond to the text on their own. For those students in need of more help, the teacher forms a homogeneous small group and provides the needed support to help those students read and respond to the text. The use of the small-group instruction will help these students access and respond to the same text as the students engaged in independent work. The teacher then is able to bring all students back together to extend what has been read and responded to as a classroom community.

In essence, grouping without tracking is different from traditional, homogenous grouping in two ways. First, it holds the same expectations for all students. In the past, expectations for students varied across groups. While that seems to make sense—different groups of students need different instruction—its unintended outcome is that students with lower levels of achievement often had the least access to quality instruction. Grouping without tracking avoids that outcome by keeping students together on the front end, differentiating support during the middle of the lesson, and coming back together as a whole group in the end. Secondly, all students have access to the same quality instruction. Since the answer to the question, “Which of my students can read and respond to the text on their own?” should vary across time, texts, and contexts; the members of the teacher’s support group also should vary. This should help teachers address another unintended consequence of previous grouping practices in which students remained in the same group throughout the lesson or, worse, throughout the school year. Table 2 shows the various elements of grouping without tracking.

**Table 2. Grouping Without Tracking**

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Grouping Without Tracking</b>
<b>Text</b>	Same text for all students (e.g., same selection from a basal anthology, textbook, or trade book)
<b>Grouping</b>	Primarily whole class and small groups; also may include the uses of partner and independent work
<b>Differentiation</b>	Support given by the teacher to students as they read and respond to text; some students will get the direct support of the teacher, others will be guided indirectly by engagement structures the teacher sets up for independent work
<b>Best Uses</b>	When the same text in common trade books, basal anthology selections, or textbook selections need to be experienced by all learners in the classroom community
<b>Advantages</b>	It builds community across the classroom by providing shared experiences It is an efficient use of time and materials It allows the teacher to provide support to those who need it while others are kept engaged with similar tasks
<b>Disadvantages</b>	The teacher still must provide time for some students to read text more appropriate for their levels with less support. The teacher also must provide for other students to have a chance to meet with the teacher to provide a scaffold for learning with texts beyond those used in community activity

## **Preparation**

1. Select a text that most students are able to read and respond to without direct support of the teacher and that the remaining students are able to read and respond to with direct support from the teacher.
2. Plan prereading activities that adequately will frontload the lesson for all readers. Focus on standards-based skills and strategies needed by your students, as revealed in ongoing assessments.
3. Plan response activities that will engage as many students as possible in working independently from the teacher. If possible, let these flow from the instruction done in the prereading phase of the lesson.
4. Be prepared to provide direct support and additional instruction to students who require additional teacher guidance.
5. Plan extension activities that bring the class together as a community of learners and enable all students to make an important contribution. If possible, let these build on the frontloading and engagement activities.

## **Frontloading**

1. Activate schema about the text. Get all students thinking about the topic or theme.
2. Develop background knowledge for the text.
3. Address any skills and strategies, including vocabulary, necessary for students to read the text successfully.
4. Generate interest about the text.
5. Read aloud a short selection from the beginning of the text. After you have read, use think alouds to model the response activity. Have the students replicate your work as you model.
6. To provide guided practice, invite all students to read the next selection of the text with you using choral reading or an informal reader's theater. As the students read with you, prompt them to tell you how to add to the response activity. As appropriate, have students add to their work with you.
7. To provide independent practice, invite all students to read one more selection of the text on their own while in the large group. Focus their reading and follow up to see that the purpose for reading was accomplished. As they are reading on their own, monitor and probe to see that they can add to the response activity without you.
8. Set a clear purpose for reading and responding to the rest of the text.
9. Provide visible written directions for independent work.

### **Key Points to Remember About Frontloading**

- Time invested on the front end of the lesson guarantees that more students will be able to work independently from the teachers, reducing the number of students who will need support.
- Gradually turn over the responsibility for the reading and responding to the text over to the students by moving from modeling to guided practice to independent practice. This also will insure that more students will be able to work successfully away from the teacher.
- Make sure the purpose and directions for independent work are clear before starting any instruction with the small group.

## **Reading and Responding**

1. Turn the completion of the task modeled and practiced during the frontloading over to those students who can read and respond to the text on their own.
  - Review the directions as needed.
  - Review any class rules about working independently as needed.
  - Clearly identify one or two activities that the students can do when they are all done with their work, if you still are working with your small group.
  - Monitor the students as they start on the reading and response activity.

2. Once the students seem engaged in their independent work, call those students in need of additional support together to work with you at the table or in the identified place.
  - Review any of the frontloading activities as needed.
  - Address any other critical skills more appropriate for this group.
  - Assist them in the reading of the text. Depending on the length of the text and the ability of the students, you may choose to read the text aloud to them, read the text together, read with partners, paraphrase certain sections, or any combination of techniques.
  - Identify at least part of the text that students can read aloud or silently on their own.
  - Provide support in completing the response activity, including additional modeling and guided practice as needed.
  - Be intentional about identifying at least part of the response activity that the students would complete on their own.
  - Monitor students to assess understanding and work habits.

### **Key Points to Remember About Reading and Responding**

- Engagement activities should be developed so that they encourage students to read the text, assist them in processing the text, and create a paper trail that can be used in responding to the text. The paper trail also can provide information for quick assessments of reading performance and independent work skills.
- Differentiate the level of support during reading and responding but hold the same expectations for all students.

### **Extending**

1. All students should be able to contribute to the postreading activity. In developing postreading project work, use this as an opportunity to set up heterogeneous groups.
2. Review the work that students completed independently to assess the level of engagement and understanding. Adjust group membership based on information collected by reviewing this work and the work of students during small-group time.
3. Provide additional time for the students in the support group to read texts independently at their instructional level.
4. Provide additional opportunities for students who worked independently to meet with you for interaction around additional texts they are reading.

### **Key Points to Remember About Extending**

- Extension activities should be selected so that they allow all students to contribute to the activity in heterogeneous groups.
- Select an extension activity that allows for students to build on instruction provided during the frontloading and practiced during the reading.



## Illustration of a Lesson Using a Sample Text

**Text.** *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor.

**Focus.** Improving understanding of narrative-story elements (setting, character, conflict) to improve comprehension and composition performances.

**Grouping Rationale.** This trade book is used as a common text for all students in the large group early in the school year so that it can be used as an anchor book for future instruction, provide an opportunity to model and practice classroom routines, and build community across the class by experiencing the same text.

**Frontloading.** Ask all students to create a page in their learning log by drawing three columns. Meanwhile, produce a similar structure on a large poster at the front of the class. Ask students to listen as you read aloud from the first part of *Shiloh* to the whole class. Afterward, ask students to label the three columns: setting, characters, and tensions and label the three columns on the poster. Use a think aloud to reveal the importance in noting details about the setting, characters, and tensions to help with the comprehension of the story. Remind the students also to observe how writers reveal clues about their settings, characters, and tensions and to try to use those models when they are writing their stories. Then, reveal what you learned about the setting, characters, and tensions from the first part of the book. Write clues and details on the large poster paper and invite students to fill in their charts with him. Repeat the process by asking students to listen to the next section of the first chapter and then add more clues to their charts as they learn more about the setting, characters, and tensions. Have students work together in the large group to share and record what they discover. At the end of the chapter, ask all students to open up their texts and quickly divide the class into three groups: one reads Marty's lines, the second reads Ma's lines, and the third reads Pa's lines. The class does an impromptu reader's theater to finish up the first chapter. After the reader's theater, students return to their charts to add any new details they have discovered about the setting, characters, and tensions in the story.

**Reading and Responding.** You have reached the point in the lesson in which you are ready to turn the reading and response of the next chapter in the book over to your students. Define the independent work as reading chapter two and responding to the text by continuing to add to the charts while reading and afterward. Remind the students of the rules for doing independent work and what they can do when they are finished—share what they have read and written with a buddy who also is done and read from additional books by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor and other books about dogs. Monitor the students as they become engaged with their independent reading and then call to the table a small group of students who need more support. With this small group, review the narrative-story elements and what has been discovered so far. Read aloud from the second chapter, model how to spot clues, and add them to the chart. Ask the students to work along with you on their charts. Choose another section of the text they can read chorally and afterward stop and discuss what they have learned. Isolate one small section for the students to read silently, and ask them to add at least two things to their charts. Monitor their ability to complete the task independently. As time is running out, finish by reading the last part of the chapter aloud to the students and have them add a few more details to their charts.

**Extending.** Bring the class back together. Ask the students, whom you have strategically paired, to share with their partners what they have read and what they are learning about the setting, characters, and tensions in this novel. The class then comes back together as a large group to add to the poster chart. Systematically call on students to include as many voices as possible. After the discussion, collect the response journals of the students who worked independently to check for understanding and engagement. Invite those students who had worked at the table directly with the teacher to spend a few minutes reading their extra story books on dogs that are more appropriate reading levels. He then engages the other students in conversations about the other Naylor books and dog stories they are reading.

## **Model Two: Jigsawing (Differentiating Within a Text)**

### **Explanation**

What if you looked at the informational text that you want your students to read for science this week and realized that because of its length and difficulty level, it might be hard for all students to have success with the text? Upon closer inspection, you notice that the text is easily divisible into smaller pieces, some of which might be manageable for those students who struggle the most. Other parts of the text could stretch your students who are always looking for challenges. Jigsawing is a way to organize learning. Jigsawing grew in popularity when it was used to support cooperative-learning activities. Its basic premise is that each team is responsible for one predetermined portion of the text and reports on what they learn to the other groups, who read other portions of text. While it cannot be used with every text, jigsawing lends itself well to any text structured primarily as a main idea with supporting details, which often is true of many informational trade books and content-area textbook selections.

In jigsawing, you still might choose to keep all students together at the front of the lesson. This should help to build the background, vocabulary, and strategies needed to better handle the text as a team. As the students move toward the reading and responding to the text, you can divide the text into meaningful portions. Once the text is divided up, form groups strategically and match each portion of the text with an appropriate group. Portions might vary in length, conceptual load, vocabulary, and potential interest. These factors might make one portion of text easier to read than another. Careful group formation and text matching should help insure that all teams learn the text successfully. After each team has read and responded to their portion of the text, you should reorganize the class so teams or individuals can share what they have learned with each other.

Besides differentiating by using different text for different groups, you also can enhance differentiation by providing more support for any team that may be struggling with their selection. Table 3 outlines the various elements of jigsawing.

**Table 3. Jigsawing**

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Jigsawing</b>
<b>Text</b>	Different parts of the same text for different groups of students
<b>Grouping</b>	Connected small groups that also may include the use of whole-class, partner, and independent work
<b>Differentiation</b>	Predetermined parts of the texts are assigned to better match the performance levels of the members of homogeneous groups of students. Additional differentiation may include varying the level of support from the teacher for each group.
<b>Best Uses</b>	When common text is being used by all learners in the classroom community, from nonfiction and informational trade books, textbook selections, or class magazines and newspapers that are easily divisible into portions; however, it does not work well with texts that follow a narrative timeline.
<b>Advantages</b>	It builds community across the classroom by providing shared experiences. It requires a limited amount of materials. It allows the teacher to provide support to those who need it while others are kept engaged with similar tasks.
<b>Disadvantages</b>	The teacher must have knowledge of how to divide texts into sections with various reading levels to provide appropriate reading opportunities for teams of students. Students must be well prepared to work effectively as teams, requiring an upfront investment of time and energy.

## **Preparation**

1. Select a text that lends itself to easily divisible parts and allows for multiple levels of reading.
2. Plan prereading activities that adequately will frontload the lesson for all readers. Focus on standards-based skills and strategies and/or content needed by your students as revealed in your ongoing assessments.
3. Carefully consider how to match sections to homogenous teams of students.
4. Plan team response activities that will engage students as they work together. Build on instruction during the frontloading of the lesson.
5. Be prepared to provide support to any team that may require additional teacher guidance.
6. Plan extension activities that bring the class together as a community of learners. Continue to build on previous instruction. Consider how extension activities may lead to additional inquiry opportunities.
7. Plan for evaluation of work habits of individuals within teams to strengthen skills for use beyond the lesson.

## **Frontloading**

1. Activate schema about the text. Make sure all students are thinking about the topic.
2. Develop needed background knowledge for the text.
3. Address any skills and strategies including vocabulary needed to read the text successfully.
4. Generate interest about the text.
5. Go through the text with the students, pointing out the various sections. Outline the organization of the text.
6. Select the first part of the section of text to read aloud to the students. As you are reading, model how to do the response activity. As appropriate, have the student replicate your work.
7. For guided practice, invite all students to read the middle part of the section of the text using choral reading or an informal reader's theater. As they are reading the second part with you, invite the students to tell you how to add to the response activity. As appropriate, have students add to their work.
8. For independent practice, invite all students to read the final part of the section of the text on their own but in the large group. Focus their reading and follow up to see that the purpose was accomplished. As they are reading the third part on their own, monitor to see that they can add to the response activity without you.
9. Identify team members for each of the remaining sections of the text.
10. Provide visible written directions for student's work.

## **Key Points to Remember About Frontloading**

- Time invested on the front end of the lesson guarantees that teams will be better able to work independently, allowing the teacher to provide more support to those teams or individuals that need it.
- Gradually turn over the responsibility for reading and responding to the text by moving from modeling to guided practice to independent practice. This also will insure that more teams will be able to work successfully away from the teacher.
- Make sure the purpose and directions for teamwork are clear before starting work with any individual teams.

## **Reading and Responding**

1. Turn the completion of the task modeled and practiced during the frontloading over to the teams:
  - Review the directions as needed.
  - Review any class rules as needed about working together as teams.
  - Clearly identify one or two activities which the students can do when they are all done with their work, if other teams are still working. Students can be encouraged to skim and scan the rest of the text they were not assigned. They also could be encouraged to study additional resources available in the classroom.
  - Monitor to see that the teams get successfully started on the reading and response activity.
2. Once the teams seemed engaged in their independent work, call up the team with those students in need of additional support to work with you at the table or in the identified place.
  - Review any of the frontloading activities as needed.
  - Address any other critical skills more appropriate for this group.
  - Assist them in the reading of the text. Since they should have been assigned a more appropriate part of the text, encourage them to read on their own aloud or silently as much as possible.
  - Provide support in completing the response activity including additional modeling and guided practice as needed.
  - Be intentional about identifying at least part of the response activity that the team would complete on its own.
  - Prepare the students to share what they have learned with the whole class since the other teams have not read their part of the text.

### **Key Points to Remember in Reading and Responding**

- Engagement activities should be selected so that they encourage team members to actually read their part of the text. Assist students in processing that part of the text, and create a paper trail that can be used in reporting to the other teams. The paper trail also can be used to assess performance away from the teacher.
- Differentiate through assignment of different parts of the text to different teams but hold the same expectations for all students. Differentiate support as needed to help teams.

## Extending

1. Each team will need to report to the other teams what they have learned from their assigned section of the text.
2. Spend time asking the groups to complete self-evaluation. Have the members discuss something that went well in their team and something that they could improve on next time. Talk about these in the large group setting.

### Key Points to Remember About Extending

- Extension activities should be selected so that they allow all members of a team to play a role in sharing with others what was learned.
- Select an extension activity that allows for teams, partners, or individuals to use this text as a springboard for additional inquiry.
- Encourage teams to reflect on their work together to improve teamwork skills throughout the year.

## Illustration of a Lesson Using a Sample Text

**Text.** *Whales & Dolphins* (Chapter 2) by Della Rowland

**Focus.** Science content standards related to ecosystems (oceans) and comprehension strategies related to identification of significant details and summarization.

**Grouping Rationale.** The chapter is divisible into six parts at multiple reading levels. This provides an opportunity to use jigsawing. Different parts of the texts can be assigned to homogenous groups. Each group can be responsible for learning about the topic and sharing what is learned with the whole class.

**Frontloading.** Tells the students that they are going to add to what they have already learned about the ocean ecosphere. Draw an information web on the whiteboard and ask the students to replicate your work in their learning logs. In the center circle, write the question, “What is a whale? Ask students to jot down two or three answers to the question on the center circle in their learning logs. After students share their ideas with a partner, ask for ideas and add them to the web on the whiteboard. Read aloud the introduction to chapter two. Using a think aloud, add new information to the central circle, then ask the students to look at chapter two and scan for the next heading in the book. Model how to add a circle to the information web and write the heading, “Is a Whale a Fish?” inside it. Have students continue scanning until they discover the next heading, “Whales on Land” and add it to another circle on the information web. Students continue to scan as they add three more circles and headings to the information webs. Inform the students that they will work in teams to read separate sections of the chapter, adding significant details about whales they have learned from their sections to the information web. Once all teams have finished studying their sections, the class will work together to teach each other critical information about the whales. Identify team members and assign each a section of the text. Provide visible written directions on the board for work to be done by the teams.

**Reading and Responding.** At this point in the lesson, you are ready to turn the reading and response of the rest of the chapter over to the teams of homogenously grouped students. Define the teamwork as reading the text, identifying at least three significant details to add to the information web, and providing a written summary of what has been learned. Remind the students of the rules for teamwork and what they can do when they have completed their work—skim and scan the other parts of the chapter and review and read other resources about oceans available in the room. Monitor the teams as they become engaged with their task and then move your chair next to a team that you knows will need more support. With this team, provide support as needed and help them identify significant details. Provide support to the team as they add to their information webs and make sure that they can summarize what they have learned from their section and feel confident reporting to the large group.

**Extending.** Bring all the teams back together. Randomly assign a reporter from each group. The reporter comes to the front of the room and adds to the information web created by the class on the whiteboard by sharing three critical details learned from their section of the text. The students add details to their individual information webs. They have a chance to ask any member of the group a question from their section of the text. After all reporters have shared their information, ask each individual to complete a think wink. The students create a think wink by dividing a paper in half and writing think on one side (Things I Now Know) and wink on the other (What I Need to Know). After the students share their think winks with a partner, call on students and list winks that could be opportunities for extra team, partner or individual projects. Reform the teams and ask them to evaluate how well they worked together. Finally, ask each team to share what they thought went well and what they could improve on next time.



## **Model Three: Connected Literature Circles (Differentiating With Limited Texts)**

### **Explanation**

What if during a study of the westward expansion during social studies you discovered you had access to multiple copies of four novels about frontier life written at different reading levels? You know that the novels might help students explore the content of social studies at an even deeper level through the stories of these people. Connected literature circles might help you accomplish that goal. Literature circles emerged as a classroom organizational structure as teachers integrated the use of trade books in reading programs. Teachers organized literature circles in a variety of ways. Many assigned text sets containing multiple copies of the same text to more small, homogenous groups of students. Each group would meet with the teacher or on their own to read and respond to the book. An effort was made to make sure that the text selected for the group matched its reading level. In some classrooms, the titles assigned to each group were not related to each other, and each circle often received instruction different from the others. In other classrooms, the text sets were connected in some way, whether it be theme, content, genre, or author. Connected literature circles allow for similar instruction across groups and connected conversations throughout the class. Instead of differentiating within a text as in jigsawing, differentiation in connected literature circles is made possible by selecting different whole texts for different groups of students. Similar to jigsawing, the teacher can enhance differentiation by varying the degree of support provided to each of the literature circles.

In connected literature circles, it is important to keep all students together for the front end of the lesson. This way, all of the circles receive the same instruction to focus and support their work away from the teacher in their groups. Once students are in their groups working, the teacher can decide what role to take with each group. Some groups may just need monitoring, others may need direct intervention. In the end, the teacher should consider how to structure a classroom conversation that connects the texts and students. This also will build and foster a better sense of community in the classroom. Table 4 outlines the elements of connected literature circles.

**Table 4. Connected Literature Circles**

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Connected Literature Circles</b>
<b>Text</b>	Different but related groups of texts for different groups of students
<b>Grouping</b>	Connected small groups that also may include the use of the whole class, partners and independent work.
<b>Differentiation</b>	Predetermined related texts are assigned to better match the performance levels of the members of homogeneously groups of students. Additional differentiation may include varying the level of support from the teacher for each group.
<b>Best Uses</b>	When multiple sets of connected texts of various levels are available for use by all learners in the classroom community to collaboratively explore a common topic, theme, genre, author, element or strategy.
<b>Advantages</b>	<p>It builds community across the classroom by providing shared experiences while matching students with texts more appropriate to their reading levels.</p> <p>It uses real texts in a setting that more closely mirrors what real readers do in the real world.</p> <p>It adds a critical social dimension to the reading instructional program that may have a strong appeal for some students.</p>
<b>Disadvantages</b>	<p>The teacher must have access to and knowledge of multiple sets of texts written at various reading levels that still can provide an opportunity for connected conversations across the classroom community.</p> <p>Students must be well prepared to work effectively in small group. For example, they should make sure they honor all voices, not privilege some while marginalizing others.</p>

## **Preparation**

1. Select text sets with a significant common element that are written at multiple levels to match the readers in the classroom. You also may need to select some additional related titles—picture books and excerpts from book chapters—to use in model lessons.
2. Plan prereading activities that will transcend the titles but connect the conversations across them. Focus on strategies defined by local standards and needed by the students as revealed in ongoing assessments.
3. Carefully consider how to match texts to small, homogenous groups of students.
4. Plan response activities that will engage students as they work together in small groups. Build on the focus lesson taught in the prereading phase.
5. Be prepared to provide support to any small group that may require additional teacher guidance.
6. Set up a structure to meet with each literature circle to assess whether standards are being met.
7. Plan extension activities that bring the class together as a community of learners. Continue to build on previous instruction, but lead students to conversations across and beyond the texts.
8. Plan for evaluation of work habits of individuals within the literature circles to strengthen work skills for use beyond the lesson.

## **Frontloading**

1. Set a clear purpose for reading and responding to the texts.
2. Use the first part of a related text to model how you want the literature circles to read and respond to their texts for that day.
3. Continue to read the selected text, but invite students to work with you and practice the assigned activity for the day.
4. Once the students seem confident with the activity, remind them of the literature circles organization.
5. Review rules for how to work together during the literature circles.
6. Provide visible written directions for work to be done by the small groups.

## **Key Points to Remember About Frontloading**

- Time invested on the front end of the lesson guarantees that the literature circles will be better able to work independently, allowing you as the teacher to provide support where it is really needed.
- Gradually turn over the responsibility for the reading and responding to the text by including modeling and guided practice in the large group focus lesson for the day. This also will insure that most literature circles will be able to work independently.
- Make sure the organization and directions for literature circles are clear before turning the activity over to the small groups.

## **Reading and Responding**

1. Turn the assignment of the activity modeled and practiced during the frontloading over to the small groups to complete within their separate texts.
2. Set up the parameters for reading further in the assigned texts. Decide whether all literature circles will read for a set amount of time, pages, or chapters or whether the separate literature circles will decide their own parameters for reading. Also decide the manner in which the reading will take place—silently or aloud, separately or collectively, etc. Will all groups read in the same manner, or will each separate group be able to make that decision?
3. Set up the parameters for the response format assigned. Decide whether response and reading will be integrated (stop and process as the group reads) or whether the groups should read first and then respond. Also decide whether the response is done collectively or separately.
4. Clearly identify one or two activities that the students can do when they have completed their work if other groups are still working. Students can be encouraged to read extra copies of texts they were not assigned or additional related texts that are available in the classroom.
5. Get the literature circles started on the reading and response activity. Monitor the groups as they get engaged.

6. Once the groups seem engaged in their independent work, work with the literature circle in which students may need additional support with the following strategies:
  - Review any of the frontloading activities as needed.
  - Address any other critical skills more appropriate for this group.
  - Assist them in the reading of the text. Since they should have been assigned a more appropriate text encourage them to read on their own—aloud or silently—as much as possible.
  - Provide support in completing the response activity including additional modeling and guided practice as needed.
  - Be intentional about identifying at least part of the response activity that the students would complete on their own.
  - Prepare the students to share what they have learned with the whole class, as the other groups have not read their text.

### **Key Points to Remember About Reading and Responding**

- Engagement activities should be selected so that they encourage each member of the literature circle to read part of the text, assist them in understanding that part of the text, and create a paper trail that can be used in sharing responses within and across groups.
- Discourage the use of activities that promote disengagement, such as round-robin reading. Make sure that students have observed and practiced many alternatives to this.
- Differentiate by assigning different titles, but hold the same expectations for all students.
- Differentiate support as needed to help individual literature circles with students in need of greater intervention.

### **Extending**

1. If the members of the literature circles have been reading and responding separately, invite them to share within their groups what they have read and how they responded.
2. Once members have shared within their groups, bring all the literature circles back together in the large group. Invite a reporter from each group to share the response to their specific text. Encourage students to make connections across texts.
3. Reform the literature circles and ask them to complete an informal group evaluation. Have the members discuss something that went well in their group and something that they could improve on next time. Talk about these in the large group setting.

### **Key Points to Remember About Extending**

- Select an extension activity that allows for members of literature circles to respond within and across groups.
- Encourage literature circles to reflect on their work together to improve group work skills throughout the year.

## Illustration of a Lesson Using Sample Texts

**Texts.** *Sarah Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan, *Caddie Woodlawn* by Carol Ryrie Brink, *The Wanigan: A Life on the River* by Gloria Welan, and *The Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Pioneer Girl* by Megan Stine.

**Focus.** The social studies content should focus on westward expansion, comprehension strategies, making connections (text-to-self connections, text-to-text connections, text-to-world connections), and compare/contrast thinking patterns.

**Grouping Rationale.** The availability of four sets of texts related to pioneer life, written at different reading levels, provides an opportunity to set up four literature circles that enable homogenous, small groups to work together to read and respond to whole texts.

**Frontloading.** Encourage students to make connections and use compare/contrast thinking to reflect on the differences and similarities in pioneer and modern family life. Begin by sharing a personal anecdote about how your own parents used to talk about things they had to do as children that have been made easier by modern conveniences. Then talk about chores you had to do as a child that children today would not have to do because of modern conveniences. Have all the literature circles think about this as they read their books together for this lesson. Make a chart on the board and ask the students to replicate your work in their response journals. Write one open-ended, higher level question at the top of the chart: How are your family's responsibilities similar to or different from the pioneer family's in your book? Then draw two columns: one labeled "my answer;" the other labeled "from the book." Students should use their own words in the first column and select a quote from the book to support their comment in the second column. They also should add the quote's page number so that they can refer others to it.

Using *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, a picture book by Cynthia Rylant, one teacher read aloud from the book, paused when appropriate, and did a think aloud to show compare/contrast thinking in making personal and world connections. He recorded a few examples on the chart to review how to complete the response activity. He read the book further and asked students to listen for additional connections, then paused and prompted them to add to the chart. Once the students seemed to ready to work independently from him, the teacher pointed to the chart, indicating the members of each literature circle and guided them as they moved to begin their work together.

**Reading and Responding.** This is the point in the lesson where you are ready to turn the reading and response activities over to the literature circles. Allow the members of the literature circles to define how they will move forward with the reading and responding of their titles, but set a deadline for the completion of the work. Remind the students of the rules for working in literature circles and that they can continue reading their texts or in any of the related texts about pioneer life available in the room if they are done with their work. Monitor the literature circles as they become engaged with their task and then move your chair next to the circle that you know will need more support. With this literature circle, provide support as needed to help students read the section and complete the response activity. Make sure that they all feel confident sharing their response in the large group.

**Extending.** Bring all the literature circles back together. In the front of the room, create a chart with three columns: title, pioneer family responsibilities, our family responsibilities. Strategically selects a reporter from each literature circle. The reporter from the first title should share the results of his group's response activity, identifying the differences and similarities between pioneer-family responsibilities and modern-family responsibilities. These are added to the chart for that title. Have each reporter share results from each of the other titles. After all are recorded, call on some additional voices to help find some key insights between pioneer families and modern families. These are added as a way of summarizing what has been learned. Invite students to read other related titles and to add to the chart during independent work time. At the end of the lesson, each literature circle should meet briefly and evaluate their group's work for the day.

## **Model Four: Focused Workshops (Differentiating With a Wide Range of Texts)**

### **Explanation**

As your students become increasingly more competent, confident, and comfortable with reading, you may wonder if there is any way to create an instructional reading program that mirrors what accomplished readers do—select their own texts, read at their pace, choose different ways of responding. You may consider expanding the choices students have and providing access to a wide range of texts. As you open up your program, you may wonder how to keep your instruction focused so that you can help your students grow even stronger. The focused workshop helps open up reading programs while providing a common thread that can be used to build an instructional focus throughout the workshop. You can differentiate by helping each student select a different text appropriate for his or her level and then further differentiate with varying levels of support for those students with the greatest needs.

The focused workshop often starts with a focus lesson taught to the whole class to guide students as they work independently. The reading and responding to text is done individually. In the focused workshop, the reading expectations usually are controlled by time. A block of time is set aside and all readers read their individual books silently, making progress at their own pace. After a standard reading period has elapsed, the response activity in the focused workshop is completed by all readers. A standardized response period is held so that all readers can complete the activity for the text they were reading. The focused workshop includes time for you to meet with individual students or small groups to support their efforts as needed and assess their progress. Sometimes this conferencing time happens while others are reading or responding. You can structure time for groups of students to share, which allows you to monitor their progress and advance learning. The focused workshop often ends with a community sharing time in which students are systematically invited to share with others the assigned response activity for the book they have read. When time allows, the sharing time also may provide an opportunity to share beyond the response activity. Table 5 illustrates the elements of a focused workshop.

**Table 5. Focus Workshops**

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Focused Workshops</b>
<b>Text</b>	Different but related texts for every student
<b>Grouping</b>	Connected independent work that also may include the use of the whole class, small groups, and partners
<b>Differentiation</b>	Predetermined related texts are assigned to better match the performance levels of each student. Additional differentiation may include varying levels of support from the teacher.
<b>Best Uses</b>	When connected texts of various levels are available for use by all learners in the classroom community to collaboratively explore a common topic, theme, genre, author, element or strategy
<b>Advantages</b>	It builds community across the classroom by providing shared experiences while matching students with texts more appropriate to their reading levels. It uses real texts in a setting that more closely mirrors what readers do in the real world. It allows for the greatest match of individual texts with individual students
<b>Disadvantages</b>	The teacher must have access to and knowledge of multiple texts written at various reading levels that still can provide an opportunity for connected conversations across the classroom community. Students must be well prepared to work effectively and independently, especially in staying engaged as strategic readers.

## **Preparation**

1. Select texts with a common element, written at multiple reading levels to match the readers in the classroom.
2. Plan prereading activities that will transcend the titles but connect the conversations across them. Focus on strategies defined by local standards and needs revealed in ongoing assessments.
3. Carefully consider how to match texts to individual students.
4. Plan response activities that will engage students as they work independently.
5. Be prepared to provide support to any individual or group that may require additional teacher guidance.
6. Set up a structure to conference with individuals to assess whether standards are being met.
7. Plan extension activities that bring the class together as a community of learners and lead to conversations across and beyond the texts.



## **Frontloading**

1. If appropriate, teach the focus lesson by using a personal example from your life.
2. Invite students to provide examples from their own lives that also illustrate the focus lesson.
3. Read aloud a short text selection that models the focus lesson. As you are reading, model the response activity. Have the students replicate your work as appropriate.
4. Invite all students to turn to their own texts and see if they can find more examples to illustrate the focus lesson. As the students read on their own, monitor whether they can do the response activity without you.
5. Set a clear purpose for continuing the reading and responding to individual texts.
6. State visible written directions for independent work.

## **Key Points to Remember About Frontloading**

- Time invested on the front end of the lesson guarantees that individuals will be better able to work independently, allowing the teacher to provide support to any individual that needs it.
- Gradually turn over the responsibility for the reading and responding to texts by moving from modeling to guided practice to independent practice. This also will insure that more individuals will be able to work successfully away from the teacher.
- Make sure that the purpose and directions for independent work are clear before providing support to any individual or small group that may need more teacher guidance.

## **Reading and Responding**

1. Turn the completion of the task modeled and practiced during the frontloading over to the students with the following steps:
  - Review the directions as needed.
  - Review any class rules about working independently.
  - Clearly identify one or two activities that the students can do when they all are done with their work, if other students are still working. Students can be encouraged to continue reading their own texts or read any additional texts that are available in the classroom.
  - Get them started on the reading and response activity.
2. Once individuals seemed engaged in their independent work, begin conferencing with those in need of additional support. During the conference:
  - Review any of the frontloading activities as needed.
  - Address any other critical skills more appropriate for this individual student.
  - Monitor the student's ability to read the text.

- Monitor the student’s ability to complete the response activity, providing support as needed.
- Prepare the student to be able to contribute to the extension activity with a partner, small group, or the whole class.

### **Key Points to Remember About Reading and Responding**

- Engagement activities should be selected so that they encourage each student to make progress in reading their text, assist them in understanding what they have read, and create a paper trail that can be used in sharing responses with other individuals.
- Differentiate by assigning different titles, but hold the same expectations for all students.
- Differentiate support to individual students in need of greater intervention.

### **Extending**

1. Each student will need to work with other students in partners, small groups, or a large group as they begin to make connections across texts related to the instructional focus.
2. Bring all students together. Set up a community forum that systematically invites students to share how they completed the response activity for the book they read.
3. Provide some time for students to discuss their books with the classroom.
4. Spend time asking individuals to complete self-evaluations. Have the students reflect on something that they did well and something that they could improve on next time. Talk about these in the large-group setting.

### **Key Points to Remember About Extending**

- Extension activities should be selected so that they allow all students to respond to what they are reading and be able to share with others.
- Encourage individuals to self-evaluate their work to improve their independent-work skills throughout the year.

### **Illustration of a Lesson Using a Sample Text**

**Text.** Any narrative story or informational text with a narrative story line.

**Focus.** The story element of setting. Assist the students to use setting clues to better comprehend the texts they are reading and writing. Identify the best examples of setting language.

**Grouping Rationale.** The instructional focus allows students to read any text, as long as it has a narrative story line. Therefore, it is possible to let students choose the book they will use in the focused workshop. While the instruction is connected across the class, the reading and response activities inherently are individualized.

**Frontloading.** The goal is for students to make better use of setting language as a tool to improve comprehension and composition. One teacher, for example, placed an excerpt from Paul Fleischman’s *The Borning Room* (pp. 3–4) on the overhead. It allowed her to show good choices made by the author that describe the sense of place, time, and mood for the story in the opening chapter of the book. Since Fleischman tells the reader, “Look out the window,” the teacher used that as a metaphor for what readers should do when they start a new book or when the scene in the story changes. She also connected that to writing by reminding students that they need to take their readers to “the window” and help them sense the place, time, and mood of the story by using more descriptive language. She highlighted specific phrases, metaphors, and interesting descriptive words that the author used. She asked students to watch for these clues in setting language used by the authors of their books. She invited students to try and find a good example from text they already had read in their books. After students shared these examples with partners, the teacher systematically called on a few students to share their examples in the language group. She told the students that their task for the day was to find at least four more good examples of setting language as they read their books and use their sticky notes to mark the examples or record them in their learning log. When the workshop time for reading and writing was completed, the students shared these four examples with others.

**Reading and Responding.** It is now the point in the lesson where you are ready to turn the reading and response activity over to the students. Set a deadline for the completion of the work and remind students of the rules for doing work in the focused workshop. Also remind students to continue reading their texts or look for good examples of setting language in other texts that are available in the classroom when they have finished their work. Monitor the students as they become engaged with their task and then begin to conference with individual students, starting with those who need more support. Check to see that the students can read their text and find examples of setting language. Make sure that the student feels confident about sharing their setting language with other students.

**Extending.** Bring all the students back together. Reorganize them into heterogeneous teams and provide each team with an overhead transparency. Invite team members to share with each other the examples of setting language that they found in their books. The group should select four of the best examples of setting language from the ones shared by team members and record them on the transparency. Have the group place a star next to the best example on their transparency. Monitor the teams, providing support as needed. Once the teams have completed their work, systematically select a reporter from each group to come to the front of the classroom, share their examples on the overhead, and discuss why they thought these were good examples. Then post a large sheet of paper for students to record their best examples of setting language. Encourage all readers to add to the chart as they continue to find good examples in the books they are reading. Reform the teams and ask them to evaluate their work for the lesson and share their insights in the large group.

## Other Grouping Strategies

### How To Effectively Group Students

Pairing students with buddies or partners effectively is dependent on many different variables. First, there are issues related to the achievement levels of the students placed together. You want enough of a gap in achievement to allow for students to support each other in the learning process, but you also want to avoid creating a gap so wide that neither student derives a benefit from the experience. Dorothy Strickland (1995) suggests the following process to assist you in pairing students:

- Use any type of assessment that will give you a survey of the entire class, such as a developmental spelling test, Illinois Snapshot of Early Literacy, Developmental Reading Assessment, group reading inventory, or standardized test scores.
- Rank your students from highest to lowest in performance.
- Once you have ranked your students, place them in a grid such as the one that follows.

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
10	11	12
13	14	15
16	17	18
19	20	21
22	23	24
25	26	27
28	29	30

- In this grid, students 1, 2, and 3 generally are of equal ability, as are 4, 5, and 6, and so on.
- Horizontally, you have small, homogenous groups that can be used in a variety of configurations.
- This grouping pattern also works well for partnering students. It allows you to partner student 1 with student 7 or 10. In this way, there still is enough of a gap to allow for students to support each other in the learning process but not so wide (such as putting student 1 with student 28) that neither student would derive a benefit from the experience.
- Remember to reorder and regroup students as new assessments are administered to students during the year in order to derive maximum benefit from small-group instruction.

Keep in mind that achievement levels may not be the only factor needed for effectively grouping older students. Nagel (2001) suggested that there are three critical factors in considering the sociopsychological dimensions of an effective group: 1) knowledge; it is important for each group to have a combination of members with the necessary information, resources, and skills for the group task; 2) power, which involves having both a voice and choice in the group work. Power emerges in the ability to influence, control, and exercise autonomy. It means being included in the decision making; 3) affection, which helps create a safe working environment in which members feel a sense of affiliation, acceptance, belonging, and relatedness. This also removes roadblocks to group participation and contributes to positive morale.

Once you have used a technique such as the Strickland model to group students, you also may want to review the teams in light of issues such as knowledge, power, and affection and adjust membership accordingly.

## **Getting Students to Honor All Voices in Small Groups**

As stated before, it is important for all students to have a voice in small-group work. Positive group dynamics are critical if small groups are going work effectively without direct supervision of a teacher. But how do you get students to listen to each other, and how do you encourage all to participate in the small groups? Begin by assuming that these social skills need to be taught. Before you expect students to work effectively on their own, you must demonstrate these social skills in large groups and then have students practice these skills in small groups while being monitored. Following are some suggestions that should help students strengthen their voices so that they are listened to.

### **Concrete Reminders**

Some teachers initially use concrete tools to remind students that everyone should make their voice heard in the group. In one class, students brought task cards to the group. Each member had four index cards. On each card was a way to contribute to the group (e.g., ask a question, share an opinion, make a comment, compliment someone on a contribution.) Once the student had made a specific contribution identified by the card, they would turn the card over and wait for an opportunity to make another one. Another teacher gave each member of the group a different set of colored chips. Every time a person made a contribution to the group they moved one chip to the middle of the table. Over time the group could check their own interaction pattern and encourage one another to talk or listen more. A teacher easily could identify how the interaction was going by dropping in on the group and checking the colored chips in the middle.

### **Random Assignments**

Sometimes giving students random assignments can allow new voices to be heard in new group arrangements. In one classroom, the teacher used colored index cards to set up the groups for the day. Each group had six students, each with a different color. The color of the cards defined the role for the student within the group. Color-coded students randomly were assigned roles as leaders, recorders, and reporters. In another classroom, the teacher gave each student a playing card. The class easily divided into two teams (reds and blacks), teams of fours (based on the

same number across suits), or partners (with the same numbers, suits, etc.). The teacher kept a matched set of cards to use for calling on people in the large group and assigning roles in the small groups.

### **Classroom Chemistry**

Clock buddies is a technique that constantly mixes up the grouping patterns of the class. It works best for assigning partners. Every student in the class has a clock with one signature line at each hour. Students then take turns signing up on each other's clocks. You put your name at 12 on my clock and I put my name at 12 on your clock. By the time the signing is completed each student has twelve buddies, one assigned to each hour on the clock. Whenever you want students to work as partners, you can say, for example, "Today, work with your 3 o'clock partners." Everyone checks out their clocks, finds their 3 o'clock buddy, and begins to work. Some teachers use a theme-based organizer to help partner students. For example, while reading a story of the Iditarod, each student may use a map of Alaska and assign a different partner for the Alaskan towns in which the racers stopped during the race. Some days the students might work with their Nome partners, and other days they might work with their Anchorage partners.

### **Social Processing**

Systematic review of small-group work through self-evaluation can help students strengthen social skills over time. One social process is "we like, we'll try." Students divide a paper in half. On one side, the group writes "we like," and on the other side they write "we'll try." Collectively they list two to four things they liked about how the group worked this time. Then they collectively decide on two to four things they will try to improve on next time. At the end of the lesson, each group can share one or two items from each category. This will reinforce to the students how effective group work looks, sounds, and feels. The fishbowl is another way for students to work through problems in groups. In this technique, the teacher selects one group to model their interaction while the other students watch them as if they were in a fishbowl. Afterward, the teacher can seize the opportunity to discuss what went well (or not so well) in the group with all of the students. Students in the fishbowl can role-play a problem observed in the groups so that others can benefit from it and collectively work on resolving the problem.

### **How to Keep All of the Students Engaged**

Differentiation becomes easier if flexible grouping can be used to tailor instruction to small groups or individuals. It is easier to match instruction to small groups and individuals than the whole class; one concern that always emerges is what to do with the rest of the class. Here are five additional instructional strategies to address concerns about how to keep all learners engaged in meaningful work away from the teacher.

**Allow Meaningful Small-Group and Individual Work to Flow Naturally Out of Whole-Class Instruction.** Models such as grouping without tracking encourage you to keep your class together during the prereading activities and gradually turn the responsibility for reading and responding over to the students. Identify which learners need direct teacher support to continue reading and responding to the text. Provide indirect teacher support to engage other

learners in reading and responding to the text independently, so that you can work more directly with those in need of support. Bring all students back together in the end to collectively respond to the text.

**Set Up Meaningful Small-Group and Individual Work That Allows for Connections Across Learners and Flexibility in How Learners Read and Respond to Texts.** Structures such as jigsawing, connected literature circles, and focused workshops are designed to allow for connections between learners across topics, themes, strategies, concepts, and content, but also to read texts or parts of texts that are most appropriate for their reading levels. In these cases, you can provide structures that allow some learners to operate more independently while you work more directly with learners in need of more support.

**Use Parallel Processes That Allow for Meaningful Small-Group and Individual Work Away From the Teacher.** One school district made a long-term commitment to offer a writers' workshop. The district encouraged teachers to see how they could use the structure of the writers' workshop to help balance the needs of small groups in reading instruction. The writers' workshop provided times for learners to be engaged both in small groups and independently. Teachers were able to model this structure by integrating the demands of small groups in reading with opportunities for meaningful work away from the teacher.

**Provide Ongoing Independent Work That Flows From Classroom Instruction.** In one classroom, well-known poems were used for shared reading experiences. About once a month, a new poem was introduced to the learners. It became a friendly and familiar vehicle for oral language, fluency, and word study in a large-group setting. Poems also became the foundation for a series of activities to work on away from the teacher. Each student had an independent poetry folder, in which there was a hard copy of the poem to use for fluency practice. The student also created flash cards based on the words in the poem. The teacher provided a numbered word list based on the poem. Finally, a reading and writing project was designed for each poem. Therefore, the student had at least four activities they could work on related to the poem away from the teacher. Once students mastered a set of activities for one poem, new activities filled their folder for new poems.

**Allow for Small-Group and Independent-Inquiry Projects As an Ongoing Alternative for Engaging Learners Away From the Teacher.** Taking a cue from the work of gifted and talented educators, one school district saw the need to have broader conversations about how to challenge students when they had met the expectations of the classroom curriculum. They decided to develop a district-wide infrastructure for inquiry projects. This provided a meaningful activity for students to engage in away from the teacher. The district provided materials for teachers to introduce guidelines, planning sheets, contracts, and evaluation forms to use in facilitating inquiry. Since the process and procedures were consistent within grade levels and adjusted appropriately for each grade, students could grow familiar with these and build on them from year to year.

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