The Guided Reading Lesson Sequence: Tips, Tools, and Techniques

There used to be times when I felt like one of those circus clowns who balance several spinning plates on sticks while riding a unicycle. Some things don't change. Keeping all those curricular plates up in the air will always be a challenge.

As I visit classrooms across North America, I sometimes think that elementary teachers have an organization gene not present in most of the general population. But perhaps I'm not the only one who has had to interrupt a guided reading lesson to grab a dry-erase marker or to search for a missing book or to reprimand a student who is off-task. Managing time, managing materials, and managing assessment and record-keeping are all challenges that can become unwieldy without consistent systems in place.

Here, we'll look at a few simple practices that help me keep on track and make the most of not only those precious 18 minutes with a guided-reading group, but my precious preparation time as well.

1. Establish Routines

It all boils down to routines and procedures: routines for independent learning, routines for handling materials, routines for seeking help for problems.

Almost 30 years ago, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) identified an instructional model they called the *gradual release of responsibility*, which suggested that new learning is most effectively mastered when it shifts incrementally from the teacher as model, to student practice with teacher support, to independent application by the student. This principle applies as much to behaviors as it does to cognition. Start by showing and explaining to students what is expected of them. Give them plenty of opportunity to practice with support before expecting them to engage in the routine independently.

Gail Bouchey and Joan Moser (2005) describe a system for "building muscle memory" that includes a stage they call *stamina-building*, in which children are expected to participate in each routine for longer and longer time periods until they achieve mastery for an extended period of time. Some teachers display charts on which they graph the number of minutes all students can work independently without interruption, waiting until the entire class can reach the magic 18-minute mark before small-group instruction even begins.

Even the most independent learners will need time to master the classroom routines necessary for a guided-reading program to run smoothly. We need to give our students—and ourselves—time to establish those independent learning routines. It usually takes six to eight weeks, during which time we can be conducting assessments and teaching through read-alouds, shared reading, independent reading, and writing workshop. You will find it is well worth the time to establish that student self-regulation, with or without guided reading.

2. Minimize Transition Times

Transitions can be a major time-waster, one that is easily eliminated by establishing routines for moving from one activity to another. That's where the 18-minute timer comes in. One of the earliest routines I establish is for all of us to listen for the "two-minute warning" to signal the end of a 20-minute guided reading session. For me, it's a signal to wrap up the lesson, explain the must-do, and get ready for the next group. For the students, it's a signal to put away their materials and move on to the next activity.

The key, of course, is to make sure that students know what to do with their materials and where to go next. Those are the routines that we model, demon-

strate, and practice, practice, practice. I'm noticing that an increasing number of teachers, especially those with younger students, like to bring the whole class together at the end of each guided reading lesson. They might do a shared reading of a poem, read a story, or simply "shake the sillies out" before moving to the next guided reading lesson. These students know to gather at the class meeting spot and wait for the teacher's direction.

I teach students to bring their individual book boxes to the guided-reading table and read independently until I am ready to start the guided reading lesson. Individual book boxes generally contain the current guided-reading text; copies of three or four previous texts; some independent-reading materials, such as library books; perhaps a folder of weekly poems; and sometimes a reading journal or other collection of personal writing. When I introduce a new guided-reading text, I ask students to return one of old texts from their book boxes. This simple routine engages students in connected reading and frees me up for a few minutes to deal with issues in the class or to conduct an oral reading record with one of the students in the group.

Plastic magazine holders make durable (but costly) individual book boxes, while cardboard magazine holders and even empty laundry detergent boxes are much more economical alternatives.

3. Eliminate Interruptions

I know, I know, it seems pretty obvious! But I've had teachers ask me well into the school year how to eliminate interruptions during guided reading. Unfortunately, by that time, students have had months to train their teacher to be interrupted! It should be the other way around. You need to train students to seek assistance from other students or to move on to other work if they encounter a problem they can't fix. One of the many advantages of simple independent learning routines, such as "read or write," is that every task should be within the students' capabilities. And having students practice and rehearse routines until they're mastered before we expect independence assures that there will be less need to seek help from the teacher.

I've seen teachers use many creative techniques for reminding students not to interrupt the guided reading lesson, from wearing a firefighter's hat labeled SOS (for emergencies), to wearing a tiara ("When the queen is busy, she's not to be bothered"), to holding up a large plastic Stop sign.

One of my preferred routines is to provide a collection of bright yellow sticky notes labeled "*HELP!*" If a student needs teacher assistance, he/she places the sticky note on his/her desk or table and moves on to something else: this is another routine that involves plenty of modeling and practice. When I'm free, I scan the room for the yellow stickies and can take a few moments to address the issues. (Amazingly, the majority of these crises are solved or long-forgotten by that point.)

4. Build In Assessment

Basically, there are two main types of assessment data for guided reading: anecdotal notes and oral reading records (running records with comprehension checks). It's also possible to evaluate some of the must-do tasks. You can use the first few minutes of each lesson to take a quick oral reading record with one student while others read from their book boxes. Usually this oral reading record is conducted with the current guided-reading text, but there's no reason you can't use an unfamiliar leveled text, such as a benchmark book, for a more formal assessment.

It's hard to find time during the guided reading lesson for making anecdotal records. While it can be handy to jot notes right on the lesson plan, teachers have a range of other tools for anecdotal records, from notebooks with a tab for each student to sticky notes that are later transferred to file folders. I have a file folder containing a library pocket for each student, so the whole class is right there in one folder. The library pockets are just the right size for holding 3" x 5" index cards, which I can pull out to jot dated observations about students, to record running record data, etc. When one card is full, I just add another card to the

pocket.

I like to change my groups once a month. As I approach the end of the month, I might even cancel guided reading for a day or two and allow students to work independently so that I can catch up on individual reading records. We need to remind ourselves that assessment is legitimate use of instructional time! As I approach the end of the month, I'll also take a quick look at my anecdotal notes; if there are students whose cards contain a dearth of information, I make a point of observing those students more closely for a few days.

At the end of the month, I analyze all the student information cards and physically reshuffle them to form new guided-reading groups for the next month.

5. Manage Materials

I don't think I could live without my timer and my four-drawer plastic storage cart! I confess that I'm married to my timer (a spouse that never argues with me) and couldn't do without it. Keeping my guided reading lessons at 18 minutes helps balance my whole day.

Because I prefer to work with four guided-reading groups, I use one drawer in my cart for each group. In the drawer is everything I need for the entire guided reading sequence over two to three lessons: my lesson plan; a copy of the text for each student; reading manipulatives we will use, such as plastic letters, dice, whiteboards and markers. I want to have all the materials at my fingertips to keep the lesson flowing smoothly and the time flowing efficiently.

Sticky-Note Reading and the Reading Toolkit

Among the materials we need are different sizes and shapes of sticky notes. As students read, they can track their thinking with sticky notes, tabbing specific points of interest or strategy spots in a text during reading. Sticky-note reading helps readers engage with text and think about what they are doing as they read. It requires them to consciously apply strategies to solve reading mix-ups, to be metacognitive; in other words, to think about their thinking. And most importantly, it builds readers who are active participants, not passive recipients, in reading.

Sticky-note reading can be used to support whatever comprehension strategy you are working on in the guided reading lesson: questioning, connecting, inferring, predicting, visualizing, etc. Highlighting tape can also be used to draw attention to specific words or letter features in the text.

One of the challenges of sticky-note reading is managing all those little scraps of paper. In an 18-minute guided reading lesson, we simply don't have time to waste searching for or distributing sticky notes. If we are going to make the most of our time, we need to have all our supplies at our fingertips.

My easy and inexpensive solution is the Reading Toolkit (see pictures in margin), stocked with sticky notes, that enables me to access these tools quickly and efficiently. Sometimes I will provide a variety of stickies from which students may choose, and other times I will have the toolkits prestocked with the specific size or type of sticky notes that will be needed for that day's reading.

Reading Toolkits are simple to create from a colored file folder. With the file folder shut, cut it in 10 cm (3") strips. This gives you four Toolkits from one file folder. Add a clipart label, if you choose, and laminate the Toolkit for durability. Add a plastic coil for a pencil at the top (small golf pencils are just the right size) and you're set to stock the Toolkit with sticky notes for active reading.

Prestocking the Reading Toolkit with sticky notes eliminates time wasted in handing out materials. I store the Toolkits in my four-drawer organizer and distribute them along with the books at the beginning of the guided reading lesson. Additional Reading Toolkits can be available to students for independent reading as well.

Sometimes, if I need to have five groups, I'll place an extra basket on the top of my storage cart. But I won't have more than five groups. Having too many groups makes meeting times too infrequent and too widely spaced for continuity.

Tools for sticky-note reading
• various sizes, colors, and shapes of sticky notes
• sticky-note Stop sign
• strips of highlighting tape
• colored flags
• pencil or pen