

Why Guided Practice in the ELA Block

I've just completed five guided practice shared reading lessons with my group of sixth graders who are developing readers. I use the term *developing readers* instead of struggling or striving because I believe that all children, even those who are a grade level (or two, three, or more) below their peers, can develop into competent readers who enjoy reading at school and home! The hesitancy in students about participating I had noticed during the first two lessons recently transformed into full participation. I observed progress in using context to determine the meanings of tough words and students' ability to infer and visualize. It was time to hear their thoughts, so I grabbed a pencil and notebook and asked, "How have these lessons supported your reading?" I scribbled their answers, which surprisingly, rolled out like water cascading down a mountain:

- I felt good because if I got stuck, you'd ask a question to help me.
- Today, I was able to figure out "mercenary."
- It helped that we talked [to a partner] and then gave answers.
- I'm getting better at making inferences. I was scared the first time.
- I like that we [students] help each other.

Students' responses revealed how much they felt supported by peers and me. Knowing I wouldn't give an answer but would ask questions to stir their thinking, students told me that they had begun to have confidence in themselves as reading problem solvers. In addition, working together had firmed up their sense of community.

Guided practice lessons, an interim learning step sandwiched between a mini-lesson and instructional

reading, is one way for students to engage in guided practice. Using a short text, students practice what their teacher modeled during the interactive read-aloud. Guided practice spotlights those students who can successfully apply a specific skill and those who require extra practice and support. The beauty and benefit of guided practice is that teachers can provide interventions before students dive into long texts. It's an opportunity to repair small confusions before they grow into large obstacles that can diminish students' progress and reading comprehension. The selections in this book are age-appropriate and on topics that motivate and build the background knowledge developing middle school readers need. When students learn with these texts, they not only improve their reading skill, but they also develop the social-emotional well-being that develops when they learn from the poems and short texts appropriate for their grades instead of having to read books written for students in K–2. Though you might feel that finding the time for guided practice is a challenge, know that these lessons can greatly improve the progress of developing to proficient readers in Grades 4–8 by improving their reading skill and developing the self-confidence they need to press forward and work hard.

So how do you find time for guided practice? Most Grade 4–8 teachers have a block of time from 45 to 60 minutes a day to teach reading and an extra 30 to 45 minutes for writing. I favor ELA classes that open with independent reading, followed by an interactive read-aloud or mini-lesson. Guided practice lessons using short texts are part of instructional reading. Most guided practice lessons last fifteen to thirty minutes over two to three days. The graphic in Figure 1.1 shows how guided practice fits into a 50-minute ELA class. If you have a 42- to 45-minute block, you'll only be able to complete guided practice and perhaps one conference.

FIGURE 1.1: GUIDED PRACTICE CAN BE ON ANY THREE CONSECUTIVE DAYS YOU CHOOSE.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Independent reading: 15 minutes	Independent reading: 15 minutes	Independent reading: 15 minutes	Independent reading: 15 minutes	Independent reading: 15 minutes
Teacher reads aloud: 12 minutes	Teacher reads aloud: 12 minutes	Guided practice: 20 minutes	Guided practice: 30 minutes	Guided practice: 20 minutes
Instructional reading: 20 minutes	Instructional reading: 20 minutes	Teacher confers; students complete notebook writing or read		Teacher confers; students complete notebook writing or read
Wrap up	Wrap up	Wrap up	Wrap up	Wrap up

Appendixes A and B show ELA schedules for 45- and 60-minute class periods. Adapt the schedules to your specific needs and keep the guidelines fluid, as some days you'll spend more time on a task because that's what students need. Be flexible, for it's students who inform your instruction. Keep in mind that guided practice builds students' reading capacity and skill as long as the students do the reading, thinking, discussing, and writing.

There are no recipes or premade scripts when you teach this way. Readers' notebooks replace worksheets. Beautifully written and illustrated books relevant to students' lives and interests replace the class novel, a basal, or computer

program. Reading volume matters, and students can boost their reading mileage and skill when they do the reading and problem solving on their own (Allington, 2002, 2012, 2014; Burkins & Yaris, 2018; Krashen, 2004). Your students are the script; their interests, abilities, and needs are the recipe. And the professional reading and conversations you have with colleagues about teaching and learning enable you to support the diverse learners in your classes. It's impossible for a pre-made program or one-size fits all scripted reading curriculum to know your students' unique needs. *Only you do!* And the guided practice reading lessons in this book can help you capitalize on your knowledge and relationships with the students you teach.

Readers' Notebooks Improve Comprehension

The research by Graham, Harris, and Santangelo (2015) makes a strong case for students writing about reading. The authors show that when students write about texts they can read, "their comprehension of that text jumps 24 percentile points." That's why having students write about reading should be an integral part of instructional reading lessons. Further, research shows that adults and students can only write what they understand (Murray, 1984; Self, 1987). So students' notebook writing is your window into their thinking processes, their comprehension, and their ability to use language to express ideas. Reading students' entries has a huge benefit; their writing informs your instructional decisions: to move on because students *get it*, to rewind and review, or re-teach.

Model how to respond in your notebook using your interactive read-aloud or another common text. Providing this mental model for students enables them to complete a task with understanding. See pages 26–27 for more on readers' notebooks.