



The Magic of the Read Aloud

Children who realize in their first few weeks and months of life that listening to stories is the purest heaven; who understand that books are filled with delights, facts, fun and food for thought; who fall in love with their parents and their parents with them, while stories are being shared; and who are read to for ten minutes a day in their first five years, usually learn to read quickly, happily and easily. And a whole lot of goodness follows for the entire community. No wonder I can't contain myself.

– Mem Fox, from *Reading Magic*

It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imaginations—something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own.

– Katherine Patterson

News of a literacy crisis is widespread, and evidenced by many students struggling to achieve proficiency in reading by third grade. It is an even more challenging situation for marginalized students, including those from minority backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners, who often face additional barriers to reaching reading proficiency.

Research repeatedly shows that reading aloud together is the single most important thing a caregiver can do for a child to boost their literacy skills. There is a clear connection between reading engagement and reading achievement: Children who read more are better readers and more likely to have academic success. Reading aloud to children early and often will result in the most gains—we began reading regularly to our own children before they were even born—but it is never too late to start a read-aloud routine.

Unfortunately, not all kids are read to in this way before they start Pre-K or kindergarten. School communities and classroom teachers are left to fill in the gaps. Making sure that read-alouds are a planned part of instructional time allows all students to take part in shared literacy experience and gain the benefits to language and background knowledge. This approach is even more effective than sustained silent reading because the burden is removed from the child, and the joy of reading is shared with the entire school or classroom community.

Our mission at Novel Effect may sound ambitious: to have every child reading *above* their grade level. We believe this starts by creating experiences that make reading fun for children, so they develop a desire for reading at an early age. Fostering a love for literature at a young age can open up new worlds for children, nurture their imaginations, strengthen their connections to familiar experiences, and build empathy and understanding for the lived experiences of others. Research shows that reading aloud is a cherished and beloved tradition by parents and children. Both express enjoyment in this special time together. This doesn't happen by simply making reading a chore, or only a task to complete; when you read aloud you model the fun and adventure that is possible in a story and unleash the magic of the books.

We believe in making reading aloud fun and magical, captivating children early and helping cultivate a love for books and reading that lasts a lifetime. At the heart of our mission is a desire to build relationships, to connect every child with a community of readers—including parents, teachers, public librarians, and other children—and to empower this community with best in class tools, curriculum, and instruction to develop early literacy skills.

We've seen firsthand how our soundscapes can be game-changers in classrooms. Teachers tell us frequently that their effect is like magic—it grabs student's attention and helps them connect with the story on a deeper level. We love hearing stories about how using soundscapes (the subject of Chapter 3) to enhance a story doesn't just keep children engaged; it helps them understand and feel the emotions behind the words, and it makes stories accessible to every child.

We want every teacher to experience a read-aloud where both you and your students are completely lost in the fun, silliness, and emotion of a story together—to discover and share the pure joy of the read-aloud. It doesn't matter how many times you've read the story; the magic is always there because of the connections to your emotions, your experiences, and the adventures that await. In this chapter, we describe the benefits of reading aloud to children—not just to better their chances for academic success but to enrich their experience with literature and with their reading community.

Reading as a Social Act

Early education prioritizes literacy skills to establish the foundation for a lifetime of learning. Children who cannot read well will fail to grasp important concepts and miss educational milestones, with compounding consequences. The way we approach achieving literacy goals can be complex and different for every student. Learning to read can often be thought of as a primarily—and often frustrating to learn—cognitive skill (more on this in Chapter 4), that requires explicit systemic instruction. But developing a love for reading in a child requires emotional skills to help children comprehend what they are reading, or hearing read to them.

Reading aloud is more than just a pedagogical tool; it is a social act that fosters connections, nurtures emotional bonds, and entertains us. When we read together we create a shared pool of knowledge and ideas that bind us with each other as well as larger communities. And it is also social in the sense of thinking and learning about “big ideas”—anything from emotional

understanding, values and ethical behavior, or diversity and cultural awareness—that form your perceptions about these big ideas, locally and globally.

Our philosophy is that a lifetime of literacy doesn't grow by treating reading as a solitary activity. Reading alone and even listening to an audiobook or recording of a book being read can support literacy skills, yes. But reading aloud together is where the real connection, thinking, and learning takes place. It provides a chance to build bonds, share stories, spark conversations, develop reading comprehension skills, and most importantly, have fun together. And it's definitely not just about the child's enjoyment; it's also about creating a fulfilling experience for the adult reader.

As author and literary editor Emilie Buchwald widely is credited with saying, "Children are made readers on the laps of their parents." And as children grow, the impact of being read to continues to grow as well: Even when a child may not yet be able to read the words themselves or even understand them all, having a book read with them helps them grasp what reading is actually about. They begin to connect with the meaning behind the words on the page. This, we believe, will not only help a child ultimately develop skills to read on their own, but provide an additional impetus that they will be more likely to want to read, and to read often.

The following sections explore some of the many benefits of reading together with a child—before *and* after they can read on their own.

Bonding Through Books in the Classroom

Regularly reading aloud to your students can significantly strengthen your relationship with them—and theirs to you. Forging this connection is one of the most important things you can do to positively influence their literacy development, and reading aloud at a predictable, scheduled time that fits into your daily routines in the classroom provides something consistent that they can look forward to.

Having a shared activity like reading also gives you and your students something to talk about, which supports the development

of reading and writing skills. Through picture books, students learn about themselves and their classmates as they discuss individual and shared experiences, emotional connections, and perspectives. And children's books often serve as springboards for meaningful conversations about a variety of topics, helping to develop their critical thinking skills (more on that in Chapter 2).

For example, when reading together a book like *After the Fall*, students learn about risk-taking and perseverance. Texts like this invite conversations and enable children to learn about each other's fears, struggles, hopes, and goals. Read-alouds like these tap into empathy and create an environment where they not only better understand each other, but can support each other.

Connecting and Creating Experiences

At their core, books enable children to understand concepts without necessarily experiencing them firsthand, and without feeling the burden of "learning" so much as the pleasure of discovering. Reading to children exposes them to a wide range of subjects and ideas, building their understanding of humanity and the world around them. Over time, reading together can lead to discussions about real-life experiences and issues that might not otherwise arise.

Through picture books, they not only expand their world, but develop understanding and empathy. For example, when reading books like *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures* or *Emanuel's Dream*, children learn about the experiences of people who live with a disability. Learning about others through picture books enables children to apply that information when meeting new people or solving real-world problems.

Benefits to You, the Teacher

When it comes to reading aloud with children, we often focus on them and the benefits they reap. But let's not overlook the adults in the room—the ones holding the book, infusing the words with life, and sharing in the magic of storytelling. You need to be having fun, too.

Think back to those moments when you and your students were engrossed in a tale, swept away by the laughter, the silliness, and the heartfelt moments. That's what we aim for in every read-aloud—inspiring the children to experience the pure joy of the story. And the best part? It never gets old, no matter how many times you've read the same story.

We frequently hear from educators how much fun it is to read aloud books like *Dragons Love Tacos*, *The Book with No Pictures*, or *The Big Cheese*. The books themselves are delightful, and with the additional layer of music and sound effects, it elevates the fun. Teachers giggle at fun puns, bop to catchy background music, and even are surprised by silly sound effects. They get to focus on the pure enjoyment of reading because Novel Effect is doing the performance work.

Building a Foundation for Future Reading Development

Being read to helps children develop essential reading skills, such as print concepts, even before they can decode words themselves, or fully understand their meaning. As children are hearing new words, and especially if they are having conversations about it, before, during, and after the read-aloud is finished, they are building the vocabulary around the book's ideas, expanding their capacity for language and their use of language.

Many literacy coaches and educators encourage you to re-read your students' favorite book as many times as they want, to reinforce vocabulary and aid in language development. This can often encourage children to want to read the book themselves, whether they are truly reading the words or are enjoying the pictures and familiarity of the book. This promotes positive associations with books and reading.

Books like *Last Stop on Market Street*, *Owl Moon*, and *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* are rich with figurative language. Inferring is a crucial skill in helping children understanding its meaning. With Novel Effect's perfectly timed music, sound effects, and character lines, they make these abstract ideas concrete for them. The same

is true when reading stories like *Trombone Shorty*, where the sound-scape music helps students understand what jazz sounds like and the energy felt when he's playing. Reading aloud with stories like these builds background knowledge and develops vocabulary in a supportive way, equipping children with the information needed the next time they come across a similar phrase, event, or time period.

This foundational understanding is crucial for their future reading development, as it introduces them to vocabulary, expands their language skills, and helps them grasp the concept that printed words carry meaning.

Moving Beyond Decoding

Many teachers will be familiar with the concept that by fourth grade, literacy development moves beyond “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Making that transition requires a foundation in comprehension, which we believe only develops in young readers who have discovered an enjoyment rather than a rudimentary skill in reading.

While decoding is undoubtedly essential in developing reading skills, reading itself is about more than that; it involves comprehension, interpretation, and the ability to engage with texts on a deeper level, transforming reading from a mechanical process into a rich and meaningful experience. This is how we develop not only better readers but better thinkers, dreamers, and citizens of the world.

And that's because reading is so much more than just sounding out words on a page; it's about understanding and connecting with the text, developing critical thinking skills, and fostering a genuine love of learning. In the words of Frederick Douglass: “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

A member of our team—a former film music composer and software developer who now leads our soundscapes development department—compares learning to read to learning to play music: If you focus on the rudimentary skills—like how to put your hand in the right position on the piano and do whatever is necessary

to make a note come out—there’s a certain satisfaction in being able to do that. It’s kind of fun to take notes on sheet music and make a sound in the real world via this mechanical mechanism of the piano.

But that initial satisfaction wears off quickly. Ultimately, it is about *making music*. Just like when reading, you’re making meaning from text on the page. The act of sounding out and decoding the text might be interesting while you’re learning, but once you’ve mastered that, or if you find it hard and don’t enjoy it, you need a motivation to continue. If you want to understand the meaning of a book, that’s where you’ll find the desire to work a little harder, sound it out, and decode it.

When you read aloud to a child, you have the opportunity to introduce new world knowledge, such as vocabulary they would not encounter in their daily lives or the ability to empathize with a character or situation by making a connection to a time they had a similar experience or feeling. As described in Chapter 6, you can incorporate voice inflection, placing emphasis on key words; pacing strategies that help build excitement, hint toward danger, or give weight to sadder moments. You can create silences. You bring the story to life; you make it memorable and meaningful—for you and for the child.

Getting Inside a Book

In her TED Talk, “Why We Should All Be Reading Aloud to Children,” teacher, literacy consultant, and performer Rebecca Bellingham relays her experience adapting and directing a production of *Charlotte’s Web* with a group of third graders at PS 220, the Mott Haven Village School in the South Bronx.

To engage the children and introduce the story, she began by reading aloud the first chapter from EB White’s classic book, in which—as you may recall—young Fern saves a runt pig, whom she names Wilbur, from being slaughtered by her farmer father.

Fern begs her father not to kill the pig:

“Please don’t kill it,” she sobbed, “It’s unfair.”

Mr. Arable stopped walking. “Fern,” he said gently, “you will have to learn to control yourself.”

“Control myself?” yelled Fern, “This is a matter of life and death, and you talk about controlling myself?”

Fern’s pleading works, and the pig is saved. At breakfast, Fern sees a carton on her chair:

As she approached her chair, the carton wobbled, and there was a scratching noise. Fern looked at her father, then she lifted the lid of the carton. There, inside, looking up at her was the newborn pig. It was a white one. The morning light shone through its ears, turning them pink.

“He is yours,” said Mr. Arable, “Saved from an untimely death. And may the good Lord forgive me for this foolishness.”

Fern couldn’t take her eyes off the tiny pig “Oh!” she whispered, “Oh! Look at him! He is absolutely perfect.”

She closed the carton carefully, first she kissed her father, then she kissed her mother, then she opened the lid again, lifted the pig out and held it against her cheek.

When the chapter was finished, Belligham recalls, her reading had been so engaging, so effectively dramatic, that at least one child was hooked: “Well, when I finished reading the chapter,” she says, “the kids lined up for lunch, and a little boy named Joey tugged at my sleeve, and he said, ‘Miss B, I felt like I was right there. Like, I could really see that little pig. I never got inside a book before like that.’”

What a wonderful way to express the joy of reading: getting *inside* a book!

That’s the power of a read-aloud done well: You grab a child’s attention, hook them into the story, and you’ve opened up a whole new world for them.

Keeping Children Engaged During a Read-Aloud

Keeping students in a classroom engaged during a read-aloud takes a conscious effort. Although stories have an amazing power to grab the emotions and imagination of children and adults like, it can sometimes be hard to compete with all the distractions that surround us. And, naturally, the adult should be engaged and having a good time, too. How do we make sure every child stays hooked and tuned in?

Our approach is all about making reading fun and interactive (much more on this in Chapters 3 and 6). We believe if children enjoy what they're hearing, they'll not only pay attention but also dive deep into the story.

When kids are excited about what they're reading or the stories they are hearing, learning naturally follows. That's why we're so dedicated to equipping teachers with practical ways to make reading sessions full of wonder and excitement. Part II offers many lessons that correspond to nearly 1,000 (and growing) soundscapes on the Novel Effect app.

Read-alouds are filled with wonder and excitement when done well. Soundscapes add an additional layer that helps young readers tune into the ways words leap off the page, notice details they may otherwise miss, and even surprise them. Teachers tell us how well this is achieved when reading aloud with Novel Effect. Students will hear a cat meow and that helps them notice the creature on the page. They'll hear Squirrel say something silly in *The Leaf Thief* and they'll better understand how he's not understanding seasons. They'll hear a fun doorbell in a story like *Pete the Cat: Trick or Pete* and sit up just a bit straighter, lean in just a bit closer so they can pay better attention to what will come next in the story.

Novel Effect soundscapes are interactive by nature, they break down vocabulary, uncover tone, and support character development. Going beyond the story and incorporating interactive

strategies during a read-aloud strengthens student understanding and peer relationships.

It's also important to keep things interactive. All kids need to get up and move, all kids need to talk to each other, and all that's part of building understanding and comprehension. Getting kids up and moving, letting them talk about what they're hearing—these are all ways to keep the energy up and make sure every child feels involved. When children can discuss the story and interact with it, they're not just passive listeners; they're active participants in their own learning.

Talking to others helps them clarify their own ideas, challenge their own assumptions, and broadens their perspective. Facilitating conversations amongst students benefits their development of social skills, but also helps them to intuitively strengthen, revise, expand upon, and reconstruct their own ideas. It supports their ability to access and understand the text.

Incorporating movement during a read-aloud not only supports comprehension (depending on how its used), but also activates the brain, awakens it, and makes it alert to attend to others' ideas. For example, when reading aloud *Happy Dreamer*, students can stand up every time they hear a dream that resonates with them. Making read-aloud a multisensory experience with soundscapes, movement, and conversation enriches it, deepens understanding of both simple and complex themes, and just makes it more enjoyable.

Maintaining the attention of young readers' is about creating a safe learning environment that honors their current skill levels while gently pushing them beyond their comfort zone so they are comfortable grappling with big ideas.

Holding an audience of young readers' attention is about creating an environment where stories come alive, and where children feel the adult is equally enthusiastic about the experience. In doing so, we not only keep children engaged while hearing a story, but we help make read-alouds a part of the day children look forward to and truly enjoy.

Teaching Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students with Novel Effect: An Interview with Gina Gardella Ditrio

Gina Gardella Ditrio works in the Norwalk Public School District in Connecticut, where she uses Novel Effect to support deaf and hard of hearing children. Here, she shares with us how Novel Effect has shown results in her teaching, including increasing the enjoyment for children during read-alouds and improving focus. As one second grader told her, “It made me pay attention better.”

Note this interview has been edited for length, but you can find the complete version on our blog at noveleffect.com.

Novel Effect: Can you tell us about your work with Novel Effect?

I teach deaf and hard of hearing children, from birth to 14, in the public school system. I travel from school to school, using lots of environmental sounds with my students. I used to carry a big bag of instruments—shakers, clappers, drums. Then Audra Good purchased Novel Effect for Brookside Elementary, and I was like, “Oh my God, this is a game changer.” Now I just carry my speakers.

For example, at St. Vincent’s Special Needs School, I do group lessons with severely disabled students. I have a disco ball with a speaker so the visually impaired children can zoom in on the light and sound.

That’s amazing! What are some of the biggest challenges you face, and how has Novel Effect helped?

With Novel Effect, attention spans have greatly improved, and students are more engaged in read-alouds. YouTube and videos have made it hard for them to enjoy traditional reading. But with Novel Effect, students from age three and up have really improved. Even in my birth to three program, toddlers are more attentive. They sit and listen, even if only for a minute, which is better than without it.

Have there been times where Novel Effect has had a major impact on your teaching style?

Definitely. I have a preschooler I work with in a very distracting environment. With Novel Effect, I can pause the story, ask him questions, and keep him engaged. The sound effects help maintain his focus.

That's so cool! We've heard you had a great experience with a second-grade class as well.

Yes, I read *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* to a second-grade class. One boy told his classmates to be quiet so they could hear the sound effects. Afterward, they said it was the best story ever because they could hear and think about it better. A second grader even said, "It made me pay attention better."

That's wonderful. How do teachers react when you bring Novel Effect into their classrooms?

They love it! One teacher even said her students are fascinated when she reads with it. Audra Good wants me to talk to all the teachers at a staff meeting because of how excited I am about it.

Have you seen a major impact on a particular student with Novel Effect?

Yes, I work with a student with bilateral hearing loss who struggled to follow directions. When I introduced Novel Effect, he stopped, listened, and followed along with the book. It was a game changer for him.

How does Novel Effect work for students with unilateral hearing loss?

It's challenging because they can't locate the sound. I hide the speaker and play Hide 'n' Seek listening games. For kids with bone-anchored hearing aids (BAHA), Novel Effect encourages them to bring their aids to hear better on both sides.

To close, do you have any favorite stories from Novel Effect?

I love the holiday stories, the *There Was an Old Lady* series, and *Big Red Barn*. *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* is a favorite among all my students, from age three to fourteen. I love every single one I read!

Up Next . . .

This chapter began with a wonderful quote by the extraordinary children’s author and literacy expert Mem Fox, so it’s perhaps fitting that we close with the same. In her seminal work, *Reading Magic*, she describes a read-aloud experience with a child she had just met, as part of a segment on an Australian television program—it summarizes perfectly how magical a read-aloud can be, for children and adults alike:

But the most important truth, I believe, is what happened between me and the child. There was a frenzy of silliness and excited game playing, with me shouting and laughing and saying, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” in higher and higher tones, and hugging Ben, who was laughing and grinning as if this “reading” thing were just about the best fun he’d ever had. We were literally rolling around on the floor and banging the book with our hands at each new revelation of its “It’s time for bed,” shrieking in triumph as the words were revealed on each page.

We were never tense. We were never quiet. Even when we were looking for and finding the same farm animals in each book, we were noisy and wild in our discoveries—and in our togetherness.¹

Learning to turn your read-alouds into meaningful fun that excites a young reader is something we believe everyone can do. And it starts with something the Novel Effect team has a deep appreciation for: the rich, thought-inspiring medium of children’s books, the subject of the next chapter.

¹Mem Fox, *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), chap. 3, 3, e-book.