

Recommendation 5 *continued*

Among 14 studies that tested the effectiveness of engaging practices, 10 found that the practices improved reading comprehension. The reading programs tested in these 10 studies had varying degrees of alignment to the practices described in this recommendation; indeed, only six tested programs that closely resembled the recommended practices (including three or more such practices).¹⁰⁸ Two other studies focused on programs that were somewhat related to the practices described in

this recommendation (i.e., relevant to two or fewer of the recommended practices),¹⁰⁹ and the remaining two studies tested programs that, although effective in increasing reading comprehension, were minimally related to the recommendation.¹¹⁰ Finally, four of the 14 studies showed negative or no detectable effects of the engaging practices they examined.¹¹¹ Appendix D provides more detail on these studies and explains how the panel interpreted the findings.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Help students discover the purpose and benefits of reading.

Teachers should model how the ability to read affects our daily life, provides enjoyment, and helps students learn about the world.¹¹² When walking students to the cafeteria, a teacher might stop to read the students a memo posted on a bulletin board that notifies teachers of a meeting. The teacher would then say: “Oh! There is a meeting for teachers after school today. It’s a good thing I stopped to read this note so that I can be sure to attend.” Teachers could use this scenario to later encourage students to brainstorm about similar situations in which people read about something and how this helps them.

Teachers should give reading a prominent role in the classroom.¹¹³ They can begin by displaying their students’ work, posting classroom rules, and reading safety signs and directions together when moving around the school or engaging in classroom routines. Teachers can also fill their classrooms with books that are appealing to students. For instance, the panel recommends creating attractive and prominently located “literacy centers,” or classroom libraries, which can be decorated to convey the themes of the books in the center and of interest to the students. The center can have comfortable seating (e.g., beach chairs help create a beach theme), small reading rugs, or pillows to make the reading experience especially enjoyable.¹¹⁴

Adapting for younger students

- If students cannot yet read what is posted around the classroom, pair the text with pictures.
- Although some students may not yet be able to read an entire book on their own, literacy centers can get students excited about reading by providing a special place in which they can read at their own level and pace.

Teachers can also cultivate student interest in reading through hands-on activities that exemplify a theme. For instance, acting out a scene in a book, drawing, or other crafts can engage students’ interest in a subject by making it real to them.¹¹⁵ To promote students’ interest in an informational text about plants, for example, the class might plant seeds in small pots in the classroom so they can watch the plants grow. Then, when reading, the teacher can help the students make meaningful connections between the text and their experience growing plants.

Choose texts in which the themes are relevant to students. “Survival of life on land and in the oceans” would appeal to older students, while books on weather or friendship would resonate with younger students.¹¹⁶ These themes can be linked to both content standards (e.g., in social studies or science) and student interests.

Key reminders

Promote literacy by encouraging students to see value in each reading activity.¹¹⁷

- Relate a new text to others that students have already read and enjoyed.
- Point out other books written by the same author.
- Identify texts on topics in which students have expressed interest.

2. Create opportunities for students to see themselves as successful readers.

Reading comprehension activities should be challenging but attainable with effort, so that students learn to appreciate rather than fear challenge.¹¹⁸ Teachers should set the bar high but clearly express their expectations that students meet the comprehension challenges in front of them.¹¹⁹ Instead of punishing students for mistakes or failures, it is better to help them to recognize and learn from such errors; remember, the point is learning. Let students know that mistakes or difficult tasks are opportunities to learn, and encourage them to try despite the challenges.¹²⁰

The panel urges teachers to pay careful attention to the difficulty of reading assignments and to support students as they are learning to read.¹²¹ When students struggle to comprehend a text, teachers can steer them in the

right direction by asking questions such as “why” and “how.” The idea is to get them to focus on what they are reading or to use their strategies and skills to understand the text.¹²² Another way to support students, especially those that can read independently, is to break the text into sections and have the students check in with the teacher or with a peer to go over any points of confusion in the section before moving on.

When students do complete challenging tasks or acquire new skills, provide frequent and specific praise.¹²³ Working with them to set goals, monitoring their progress toward those goals, and providing frequent positive feedback on their performance can boost students’ confidence,¹²⁴ which the panel believes increases students’ intrinsic motivation to read.

3. Give students reading choices.

Reading choices should be in line with the teacher’s instructional purpose.¹²⁵ The panel encourages teachers to think creatively about how to give their students a choice in what they read. For example, teachers can

- **Allow students to choose from a variety of reading activities or centers.**¹²⁶ Students could go to their classroom literacy center and choose to read to themselves, to a friend or stuffed animal, or to a tape recorder that would later be reviewed by the teacher.¹²⁷
- **Permit students to choose the order in which they complete their work.** When flexibility is possible, teachers can allow students to decide which center to

Adapting for younger students

Provide limited and specific choices. This can help them learn how to make choices and stay on task.

visit or which text to read first within a set time frame.

- **Encourage students to think of questions that lead them to texts that will hold their interest.**¹²⁸ Teachers can support students in finding topics that interest them during reading activities. For example, one student might be interested in the weather, and the teacher may guide him or her toward asking, “Where does

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thunder come from?” and then direct the student to a text that could answer his or her question.

- **Allow students to choose how to respond to a text.** Students might present what they learned from their book to the class, work in a group to dramatize a story, keep a journal about the text, or compose an alternative ending to a story for others to read.
- **Give students a choice in where they can read.** Some students might be more comfortable reading at their desks or in a secluded corner of the classroom where

they are better able to concentrate. For others, a comfortable chair or carpeted area with pillows might be more inviting.

- **Allow students to choose from a selection of texts that serve an instructional purpose.**¹²⁹ For example, to teach about the similarities and differences between animals, teachers might allow students to choose from various texts about animals and ask them to report on what they learned to the group.¹³⁰ Students can also take turns selecting a text for the teacher to read aloud to the class from a limited range of options appropriate to the lesson.

4. Give students the opportunity to learn by collaborating with their peers.

Collaborative learning opportunities, whether simple or elaborate, should allow all the students in the group to work together to complete the task.¹³¹ The panel believes that collaborative learning activities are most productive under two conditions: (1) when the students perceive their roles as valuable¹³² and (2) when teachers motivate students to help their peers learn rather than simply giving their peers the answer. Examples of collaborative learning opportunities include the following:

- Ask students to read the same text and then talk to a partner about what they read, what they predicted, and any connections they made while reading.
- Pair a student who wants to read a book that is too difficult with a higher-performing reader. Both students can read aloud, alternating paragraphs or pages. As the higher-performing student practices reading fluently, he or she is also modeling fluent reading to the other student.¹³³ Teachers should guide students in providing constructive support to their peers.¹³⁴
- Pair students to retell a story, identify the main characters or story setting, or make predictions about how the story will end.¹³⁵

Adapting for younger students

Teachers can provide props such as cutouts or puppets and model how the students will use the puppets to retell the story.

- Pair or group students to learn interesting facts from informational texts. Students can take turns sharing their favorite fact from the same text. Teachers can provide guidance about where students can look for interesting facts.
- Group students to use how-to texts to perform a simple task. Students can take turns following the instructions step-by-step to complete the task as a group. Model strategies for the students to use when reading how-to texts.
- Group students to perform a scripted version of a story they have read, create their own dramatization of a story, or write a new story.¹³⁶

Key reminder

Encourage students to support and motivate one another as they do challenging reading comprehension activities.