

## Think Alouds

### ***What is it?***

As the title implies, a think aloud is a great strategy to use to slow down the reading process and let students get a good look at how skilled readers construct meaning from a text. Many of us developed our skills as readers implicitly, by simply doing a lot of reading of all sorts of texts; after all, reading is a passion for us. Therefore, when we teach reading at the secondary level, we need to keep in mind that we must take what we know and do *implicitly* and make it *explicit* for our students, especially for our struggling readers. Below is a beginning list of what skilled readers do implicitly; we need to help our students learn and apply these skills/strategies on a regular basis to improve their interactions with text.

### **What Skilled Readers Do While They Read:**

**Activate prior knowledge:** Whenever skilled readers approach a text for the first time, they consciously (or unconsciously) summon any information or background that they have in relation to the topic, idea, people/characters, setting, historical context, author, similar events, etc. This process provides a footing or foundation for the reading; it helps us to make sense of the new text. This is an important step that inexperienced readers often skip over.

**Set a purpose/reason/goal for reading:** Another step that becomes automatic for skilled readers is establishing what they expect to get out of the reading. Depending on the purpose, we adjust our reading in order to meet the chosen goal. Helping our students to define the reason, purpose or goal for the reading is a crucial initial step in helping them to successfully interact with the text. Are they reading for pleasure/entertainment? To gather information? To support a thesis? To answer an essential question? etc.

**Decode text into words and meanings:** These are the basic reading skills that our children *begin* to learn at the elementary level; but as secondary teachers, we must continue to work on them as the texts become more varied and sophisticated. Decoding text into words and meaning can also involve using strategies to define unfamiliar words using context clues or word parts (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, roots).

**Make personal connections:** As skilled readers move through a text, they constantly compare and contrast their knowledge and experience with what is presented and revealed in the text. This process of “personal engagement” in the text improves the reader’s comprehension and understanding. Skillful readers often ask themselves (consciously or unconsciously) the following questions as they read: How is this like or unlike something I know or have experienced? How can I connect the ideas here to other texts I have read? How is this text (and the ideas presented in it) useful or relevant to me?

**Make predictions:** From the moment a skilled reader picks up a text, they start making predictions about it. They look at such things as the title, table of contents, dedication, number of pages, font size, photographs, commentary on the back or book jacket, etc.; and they begin to make predictions about the contents, quality and their initial reactions to the text. As their reading progresses, they continue to check and revise their initial reactions and predictions.

**Visualize:** One of the most powerful tools that skilled readers develop is their ability to visualize what they are reading. While reading a fictional text they may create a mental picture of the setting, imagine what the characters look like, in short, immerse themselves in the visual world of the story. In a nonfiction text that is abstract in nature, the reader may create visual symbols, concept webs, or mind maps that help him/her to keep track of the information and organize it.

**Ask questions:** Good readers make a habit of asking questions while they read. They ask questions about the text, the writer, their own responses, opinions, and reactions to the reading. They may be questions that probe deeper for understanding, but they may simply be questions that voice their internal confusion and need for clarity. When explicitly taught, this is a skill that often will shock some of your less skilled readers; they often think that it is time to stop reading when they become confused, assuming that good readers never get confused. It is powerful for them to see/hear someone work through their confusion.

**Monitor understanding and summarize:** Skillful readers carry an “invisible suitcase” of information with them as they read a text. Along the way, they drop important items into the case that help them to make sense of the text; if something doesn’t make sense they unpack it and take a closer look. They review those collected items at various points in the reading in order to move toward understanding, synthesis and evaluation of the text.

**Apply what has been learned:** Both during and after the reading, skillful readers are constantly asking themselves, “How can I use this information?” “What does this story mean to me?” “How can I apply this in my own life?” “Is this relevant to other situations or circumstances?” When students are reading a text to fulfill the demands of a task or prompt, they may keep the demands of the prompt in mind, consider how they will apply information from the text to complete an assigned task. More generally, discovering how a reading applies to our lives and the world around us is essential for engaging a reader in a text. We need to help our students discover the ways to reflect on how the reading “applies.”

### ***What does it look like***

Using the list of *What Skilled Readers Do While They Read*, use the basic process below to model think-aloud reading with your students. There are many variations on this process, some of which will be listed in the next section, *How can I use, adapt or differentiate it?*

**Note:** You can either introduce the list of *What Skilled Readers Do* to your students, or use an inductive process whereby they annotate what you are doing during the think-aloud and then the group or class can create the list together.

**Step 1:** Begin with a short section of a text (1-2 pages); the text should be challenging for most of your students and give you several opportunities to illustrate the various strategies.

**Step 2:** Depending on your students' skills and grade level, choose 3-5 strategies on which you want to focus from the list. (Activate Prior Knowledge, Make Predictions, Ask Questions, etc.) Tell your students the *what*, *why* and *when* of these strategies: *what* the strategies are that you will be using, *why* each of these strategies help on this particular text, and have them keep track of *when* you use them as you read the text.

**Step 3:** Make sure you give your students the purpose or goal for this reading or have them come up with it if that's appropriate for the particular reading.

**Step 4:** Read the text to your students and model the chosen strategies as you read by stopping (sometimes even in the middle of sentences!) to articulate aloud what is going on inside your head as you read.

**Step 5:** Have your students annotate the text by underlining/ circling the cues that triggered the use of a particular strategy and discuss them after the read-aloud is complete.

**Step 6:** Have students brainstorm a list of other texts and circumstances where they might be able to use each of the strategies. Have the students connect these strategies to real life applications. (e.g. How do we judge the tone of a school when we walk into it, and what clues might a writer use to create a chosen tone in his/her description of that school?)

**Step 7:** Consistently reinforce the use of these strategies as you continue reading this text and as you introduce new texts to your students.

### ***How could I use, adapt or differentiate it?***

In his book, *Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies*, Jeffrey Wilhelm provides a list of "basic ways to conduct think alouds;" the book is an excellent reference tool that gives specific details on each of the following:

- Teacher does think-aloud; students listen.
- Teacher does think-aloud; students help out.
- Students do think-alouds as large group; teacher and other students monitor and help.
- Students do think-alouds in small group; teacher and other students monitor and help.

- Individual student does think-aloud in forum; other students help.
- Students do think-alouds individually; compare with others. (they write their commentary)
- Teacher or students do think-alouds orally, in writing, on an overhead, with Post-it notes, or in a journal.

Willhelm notes that “written think-alouds have the advantage of providing a record of reading activity that can be shared, manipulated, saved, assessed, compared to earlier and later efforts to gauge and demonstrate improvement, etc.” (Willhelm, 2001)

**Reference:**

Greece Central School District, <http://web001.greece.k12.ny.us/>