Guided Reading, grades 3-6

by Linda Hoyt

Teachers in grades 3-6 are challenged by a wide range of achievement levels, demanding content, and pressure to meet state standards. Guided reading is designed to make teaching easier, to increase student achievement and to empower learners with the tools they need for lifelong success in reading. Because of its emphasis on small groups, guided reading allows teachers in grades 3-6 to see learners as individuals, improves the links between teaching and assessment, and ensures that learning will be deep rather than superficial.

Teach Reading Strategies
In refining guided reading for use in grades 3-6, it is helpful to remember that the purpose of guided reading at this level is to enlarge each student's repertoire of effective reading strategies. With this emphasis, the text serves a vehicle for practicing a strategy and the students are constantly reminded that the goal is to learn the strategy well enough that they can use it independently while reading in the content areas or during self-selected reading. They practice the strategy while you are there to coach and then move into independent reading with the goal of consciously attempting to apply the target strategy. The next meeting of the group would then focus on reflections about the content of the reading as well as a review of the target strategy. A significant difference in guided reading for grades 3-6 is that the teacher does not attempt to hear learners read the entire text. The teacher provides explicit instruction, offers support for independence and then monitors for understanding.

Monitor Time With Text- They need to read during guided reading!
In guided reading, there is a fine balance between teacher input and student reading. It is vital that caution be taken to ensure that guided reading sessions are filled with lots of reading. Time with text must be carefully monitored so that teacher input does not overshadow time spent actually reading and discussing texts. While the teaching of the strategy and building of context for independence are critical, it is also essential that round robin reading be avoided. Round robin reading has been found to actually reduce reading time and detract from comprehension (Opitz, 2002).

How do you manage guided independent reading?
Members of a guided group are asked to read passages to themselves to ensure that all learners take responsibility for reading. Silent processing produces the best comprehension so silent reading is critically important. Since reading rates differ even among groups with similar achievement levels, it is helpful to provide a task for students who finish reading before the group is ready to discuss. You might set the stage with comments such as: "Please read pages 41-44 silently. While you are reading, I will be coming around to listen to individuals. If you finish reading before I give the signal to begin the discussion, please review this section to look for passages which offer the strongest descriptors."

Grouping
Guided reading groups are flexible. Students are gathered together in temporary groups based upon a shared need. Groups might be formed to work on using bold face headings in
informational texts, to practice defining main ideas, to better utilize text structure in fiction, to work on a reading standard such as inferential reasoning, to practice making better book choices for independent reading, or to collaborate during the reading of a novel. It is important not to fall into the trap of assuming that group members must read at the same level to make a good group. When groups are temporary and flexible, there may be times when achievement level is the best criteria for grouping... there may also be times when learners of varying achievement levels make an excellent group because they share a need for instruction in a particular strategy.

**Frequency of Meetings**
Frequency of guided reading group meetings varies with the needs of each group. Vulnerable students who need a great deal of support may need to meet four or five times a week while other students may be best supported by two or three guided reading sessions a week. In the upper grades, it is important to remember that you don't need to guide the students through every page in a text. With the goal of making a teaching point and providing practice and coaching, you might meet about chapter 1 in a novel, have students read chapters 2-3 independently, then meet again for chapter 4. If a group is working on bold face headings, they might meet to make predictions using bold face headings in a newsmagazine, read the text independently and then meet on another day to discuss how closely their predictions matched the actual content of each bolded section. Remember: The purpose is to build strategies which empower readers with tools for independent reading, not to get them through a text.

**How Long Should the Guided Reading Lesson Last with Grades 3-6?**
Timing is personal and dependent upon each of your groups. In general, I try to aim for 10-15 minutes per group. This gives me time to teach a strategy, provide quiet reading while I listen to individuals and assess, and then to conduct a brief discussion of the strategy and how well it worked while they read. Occasionally a group needs more time. If that happens try to be flexible and don't be hard on yourself if you don't get to see all of the groups you had planning to see that day. Take it slow and be prepared for surprises... remember that your job isn't to listen to every word of the text but rather to teach a strategy, assess its use and build the expectation that the students will use the strategy independently across the curriculum.

**Which Texts to Use?**
I like to offer a wide range of texts for guided reading. Novels, newspapers, computer manuals, textbooks, articles from National Geographic for Kids, short stories, poems, selections from basals, resources related to content area studies and comic books can all have a place in guided reading. Guided reading is a great way to use the resources you have readily available as well as expose your students to a wide range of genre.

**Guided Reading to Scaffold Content**
Guided reading can also be a time to scaffold challenging content. If I know that a few students are likely to find our next science unit to be challenging, I might pull them together as a guided reading group to frontload concepts and vocabulary of the unit. I would give them hands on experiences related to the unit, involve them in discussions using the content specific vocabulary, and try to build a knowledge base on the topic. During this time, I might also involve them in reading a text related to our unit of study that is easier than the text we will use for research. Students also benefit from engaging in personal writing about the topic to make meaningful use
of vocabulary which will be addressed in the unit. Guided reading focused on scaffolding content allows the group to explore related information, build prior knowledge and vocabulary, read about the topic in "just right" reading material, and prepare to participate fully in class. When guided reading becomes a preview of content, it enables even the most challenged learners to participate fully.

But What About the Rest of Them?
A common query focuses on ways to keep the classroom running smoothly while the teacher meets with small groups. While there are clearly lots of ways to organize for guided reading, my favorite strategy is simple. Have the class engage in independent reading! While students are reading independently, you can quietly pull groups to the side for guided reading. You don't need time consuming centers or complicated management systems and you know at a glance who is on task while you do your important work with the small group. If your groups are 10-15 minutes in length, you can often see two guided reading groups during a 30 minute independent reading session.