

Designing Effective Literacy Centers for the First-Grade Classroom



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Designing Effective Literacy Centers Series

This manual is one in the Region 4 Education Service Center's *Designing Effective Literacy Centers* series. It includes suggestions for organizing and managing the materials in the kit, teaching students how to use the centers, and evaluating student work. The Introduction presents background information on literacy centers and a discussion of the centers' contribution to an effective reading and language arts program. The characteristics of effective literacy centers are also described.

Definition of a Literacy Center

A literacy center can be described as a "small area within the classroom where students work alone or together to explore literacy activities independently while the teacher provides small-group guided reading instruction" (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 711).

Importance of Literacy Centers

In *Motivating Primary-Grade Students* (Pressley et al., 2003), the authors discuss the link between motivation and academic engagement. Their findings suggest that the more teachers do to motivate their students, the more academically engaged those students will be. Teachers can directly affect their students' motivation to learn, and also their self-efficacy, "the expectation that (one) can succeed at academic tasks" (p. 24), by providing purposeful and meaningful literacy activities that are both academically engaging and appropriately challenging. The authors state that these activities cause students to "take risks, push themselves to think deeply, and challenge their abilities" (p. 65).

Definition of a Literacy Center

"A small area within the classroom where students work alone or together to explore literacy activities independently while the teacher provides small-group guided reading instruction."

(Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 711)

"A place or activity that invites students to practice and apply strategies that have been taught and modeled in shared and guided reading lessons."

(Nations & Alonso, 2001, p. 4)

"An area of the classroom where children read or write independently during the fifteen or twenty minutes the teacher is working with small groups for guided reading or assisted writing."

(Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998, p. 110)

"An area for the display, storage, and use of literacy materials."

(Morrow, 2002, p. 17)

Introduction

Importance of Literacy Centers



“Children who are motivated to read spend more time reading.”

(Guthrie et al., 1999; Morrow, 1992; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; all as cited in Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006, p. 415)



While some students work in literacy centers, the teacher is free to engage others in small-group instruction, a “critical part of literacy programs” (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 710), without interruptions.

Effective literacy centers can increase students’ motivation to read. As students read, write, speak, listen, and work with letters and words (Diller, 2003), they develop “an intrinsic desire to initiate, sustain, and direct one’s activity. Motivated students feel challenged, competent, and successful” (Morrow, 2002, p. 5).

In a recent article in *The Reading Teacher*, Edmunds and Bauserman note, “research has indicated that children who spend more time reading are better readers and comprehenders than children who spend little time reading” (p. 415). They cite and review the current research on motivation and its importance to reading.

- ✱ Children who are motivated to read spend more time reading (Guthrie et al., 1999; Morrow, 1992; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).
- ✱ There are consistent associations between reading achievement and the availability of books in the child’s environment (Chambliss & McKillop, 2000).
- ✱ Reading motivation has also been linked to the development of lifelong readers (Morrow, 1992; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).
- ✱ Motivation may also influence the success of multiple strategy instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

(All citations from Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006, p. 415)

In addition to their motivational aspects, literacy centers have other advantages as well. While some students work in literacy centers, the teacher is free to engage others in small-group instruction, a “critical part of literacy programs” (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 710), without interruptions.

Characteristics of Effective Literacy Centers

1. *Effective literacy centers are organized and managed so that students can work successfully and independently.*
 - * Management tools, such as work boards, directions, and choice boards, are located within easy view, materials are clearly labeled, and pocket charts are used in several locations.
 - * Furniture and dividers are arranged so that the teacher has a full view of the classroom. Noisy and quiet areas are distinct.
 - * Books are integrated into the literacy centers and are easy to locate and return. Effective literacy centers provide a variety of readily available materials (poems, charts, big books, and other print materials) so that students can work successfully and independently.
 - * There are designated places for students to store their works in progress and their finished products.
2. *Effective literacy centers are both motivating and engaging.*
 - * The center activities are sufficiently open-ended to allow for creativity while structured enough for students to know when they have met expectations.
 - * The center provides an opportunity for students to work independently and successfully without supervision.
 - * The center allows students of varying abilities to work together.

Characteristics of Effective Literacy Centers



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Introduction

Characteristics of Effective Literacy Centers



Effective literacy centers have a consistent structure throughout the year.



When working with instructional reading groups, the teacher takes notes on how well students are reading the text and asks questions to determine students' understanding and use of skills.

3. *Effective literacy centers have a consistent structure throughout the year.*

"While the structure of the center can stay the same, the activities within them can change with relative ease" (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p. 714). This consistency helps the students focus on instructional content rather than on the materials' organization.

4. *Effective literacy centers are aligned with curriculum.*

The literacy curriculum of the local school district, in combination with state standards and expectations, serves as the foundation for all activities in the literacy center. The goals and procedures for the center are displayed and describe how they will help students meet the curricular guidelines. Lesson plans include notations about how the center activities are aligned with the curriculum. These methods allow the connections between classroom instruction and literacy center activities to be explicit.

5. *Effective literacy center activities are based on ongoing assessment.*

Teachers use assessment and observation to determine student needs and then design specific literacy center activities to address these needs. For example, when working with instructional reading groups, the teacher takes notes on how well students are reading the text and asks questions to determine students' understanding and use of skills.

The teacher may ask, "Do students need repeated practice with the text? Do they need to read with a partner to better understand the text? Do they need to write a response to what they have read? Would listening to the text on tape help with fluency?" (Ford & Opitz, 2002).

The answers to these questions help teachers develop and determine the activities in the literacy centers.

6. *Effective literacy centers have a built-in accountability system.*

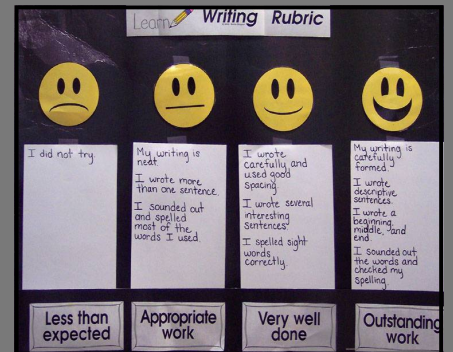
The teacher's expectations for high-quality work must be explained, modeled, and demonstrated before students can be expected to work independently. Provide examples of high-quality work, gathered from previous years or from other classrooms. Students can refer to these models as they set performance standards for themselves and work on their own.

Rubrics help clarify expectations and the characteristics of high-quality work (Kingore, 2002).

Guidelines for Managing and Organizing Groups of Students

- * Begin with a simple and manageable grouping strategy that is highly structured. For example, introduce a rotation system that sequences the order of required centers and gradually build in free-choice centers as students develop self-management skills. In this way, a wide range of grouping strategies will eventually be employed (Reutzel, 1999).
- * Begin with a positive emphasis on management. At the year's start when classroom procedures are introduced, it may seem that an inordinate amount of time is spent focusing on small steps. Remember that every effort made to establish routines at the beginning will pay off later in instructional time saved (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Characteristics of Effective Literacy Centers



Adapted from Kingore, B. (2002). *Rubrics and more!* Austin, TX: Professional Associates Publishing.

Effective literacy centers have a built-in accountability system.

Guidelines for Managing and Organizing Groups of Students



Remember that every effort made to establish routines at the beginning will pay off later in instructional time saved.

(Fountas & Pinnell, 2001)

Introduction

Teaching Students to Work Independently



Learning routines helps students work independently and productively in a series of literacy centers.



- ✱ Arrange the classroom space so it is conducive to effective student management. For instance, set up centers that accommodate only a small group of students.

Teaching Students to Work Independently

Introduce procedures one step at a time. At the beginning of the year, teach students a procedure for how to locate their assigned center. An example might be: “Always check the work board before moving to the next center.” Also teach a procedure for how to leave a center, such as, “Always clean up your materials and place your completed work in the finished basket.”

Use explicit instruction, demonstration, and guided practice to teach specific procedures before expecting students to perform the corresponding tasks independently. Talk about the practice and demonstrate it. Have one or two students demonstrate for the class and provide them with positive feedback. Gradually, students learn routines that link several procedures together. Some examples of such routines include checking the work board to find out which center is next in the rotation, asking designated students for help in specific centers, and knowing what to do when center supplies are depleted. Learning routines helps students to work independently and productively and to apply that general ability to specific literacy centers.

Guidelines for teaching students to work independently include the following suggestions.

- ✱ Discuss the learning and behavior expectations for literacy centers. Create rules that are easy to follow and keep them to a minimum. Record the rules on a class chart and provide visual supports. For example, if the rule is that students are expected to speak softly, provide a visual support that reminds them to use their quiet voices.

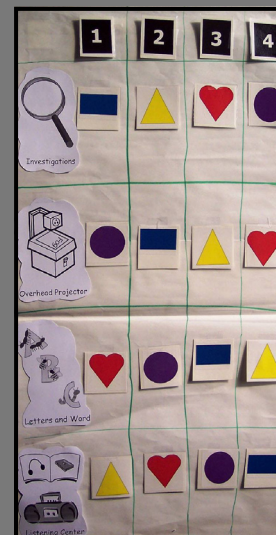
- * Teach students how to make appropriate choices. When students can choose their learning activities and understand the expectations for each activity's outcomes, they are more likely to be productive during independent work time.
- * Provide a system that reinforces self-regulation. Use work boards, individual contracts, and self-assessment rubrics for independent and group work.
- * Provide ongoing activities for students to turn to as they finish assigned work.
- * As students perform the practice independently, encourage and praise their self-managed behavior.
- * Observe students until they consistently follow the procedure independently and are considerate of others and of the materials.
- * As students become more competent, build on these skills and expand students' repertoire of independent activities (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Evaluating Literacy Centers

Teachers can use the following criteria to assess the quality and design of literacy centers.

- * The center is designed so that students can manage and complete the work independently. They understand the rules and procedures of the center. An example of a *rule* is, "Use quiet voices when working together." An example of a *procedure* is, "Clean up the center when you are finished."
- * The activities emphasize application of previously taught skills rather than teach new skills.
- * The activities are open-ended. There are multiple entry points, paths to solutions, and possible outcomes.

Teaching Students to Work Independently



Provide a system that reinforces self-regulation. Use work boards, individual contracts, and self-assessment rubrics for independent and group work.

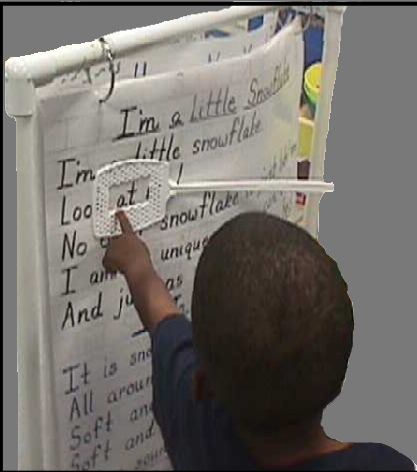
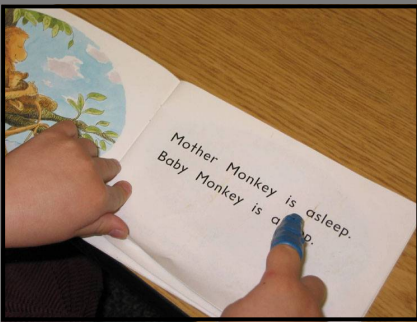


Provide ongoing activities for students to turn to as they finish

Introduction

Evaluating Literacy Centers

The center provides an opportunity for students to read, write, listen, and/or speak.



- * The center supports the literacy goals that are set for students. The link to reading and language arts curriculum is posted in each center and for each activity.
- * The center provides an opportunity for students to read, write, listen, and/or speak.

Adapted from Kingore, B. (2004). *Centers in minutes!* Austin, TX: Professional Associates Publishing; Marriott, D. (1997). *What are the other kids doing?...While you teach small groups.* Cypress, CA: Creative Teaching Press.

Assessing the Quality of Instruction

Teachers can use the following criteria to assess the quality of instruction they provide when introducing literacy centers.

- * What is the objective? The teacher describes the purpose of the literacy center in student-friendly terms.
- * What is the activity? The teacher explains the new activity and links it to similar previous activities or learning whenever possible.
- * What does a student do with the materials? The teacher models the proper use of the materials in both whole-group and small-group demonstrations.
- * What are the rules and procedures? The teacher explains both the rules for the center and the procedures for completing the activity.
- * How will the students learn the rules and procedures? The teacher follows up whole-group instruction on rules and procedures with guided practice in small groups. The students demonstrate their understanding of these practices, and the teacher provides corrective feedback as needed.

- * How will the activity be monitored and/or assessed?
The teacher provides examples of high-quality work and the criteria for successful work.

Assessing Student Procedures

Teachers can use the following criteria to evaluate the procedures students use in literacy centers.

- * Students know what to do when they need supplies or materials.
- * Students know what to do with completed products.
- * Students know how to use the center as well as the expectations for their learning.
- * Students know how to clean up and organize the center for the next students.
- * Students know how to work without disturbing others.
- * Students know how to make the transition between activities.

Adapted from Kingore, B. (2004). *Centers in minutes!* Austin, TX: Professional Associates Publishing; Marriott, D. (1997). *What are the other kids doing?...While you teach small groups.* Cypress, CA: Creative Teaching Press.

Putting it All Together

The following Literacy Centers chapter explains how the principles of designing, implementing, and evaluating effective literacy centers can be applied to the materials included in the *Designing Effective Literacy Centers* kit. Each literacy center section includes information on setting up the center, teaching students to use the center, and evaluating student work. At the end of each center section is a list of possible activities to extend the center throughout the year.

Assessing Student Procedures



Students know what to do when they need supplies or materials.



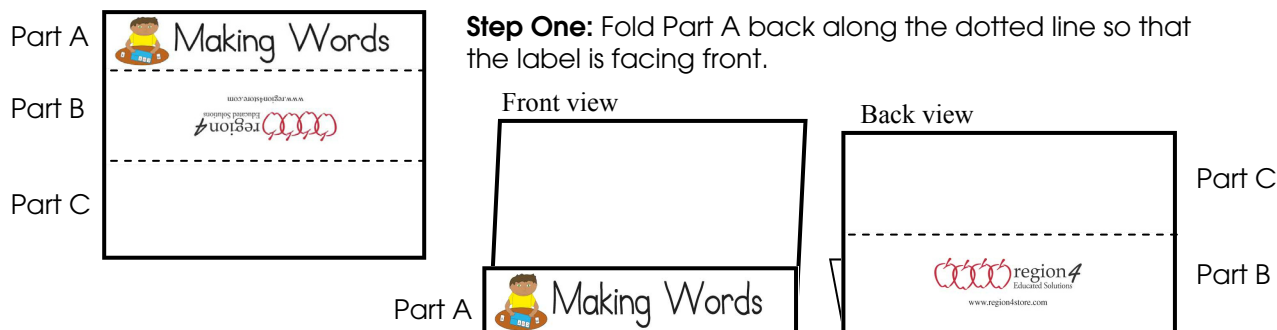
Students know what to do with completed products.

Kit Contents and Assembly Instructions

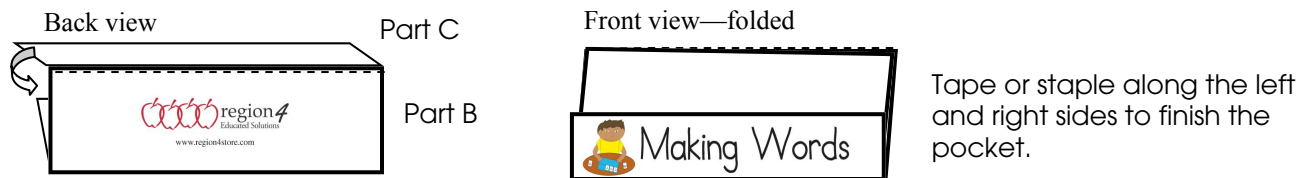
The Designing Literacy Centers Kit includes this book along with the following materials.

- * 14 Center posters
- * 24 4x4 pocket chart cards with Center icons & titles
- * 90 3x3 pocket chart cards with Center icons & titles
- * 90 3x3 pocket chart cards with Center icons only
- * 28 3x3 pocket chart cards with shapes
- * 1 *Designing Literacy Centers in Kindergarten, First-, and Second-Grade Classrooms: Supplemental CD*
- * 6 Making Words Holders (see assembly instructions below)
- * 6 sets of Making Words Letters
- * Center Rotation Wheel (see assembly instructions below)

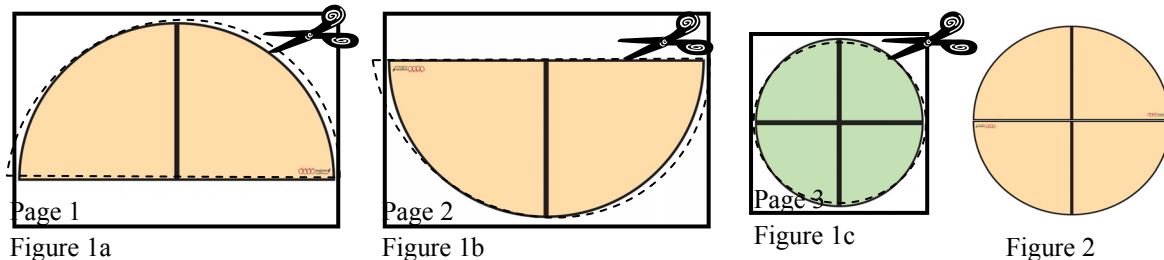
* Making Words Holder Assembly



Step Two: Fold Part C down along the dotted line toward the front, tucking it down into the crease from the first fold.



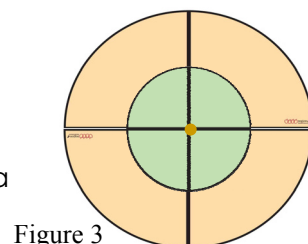
* Center Rotation Wheel Assembly



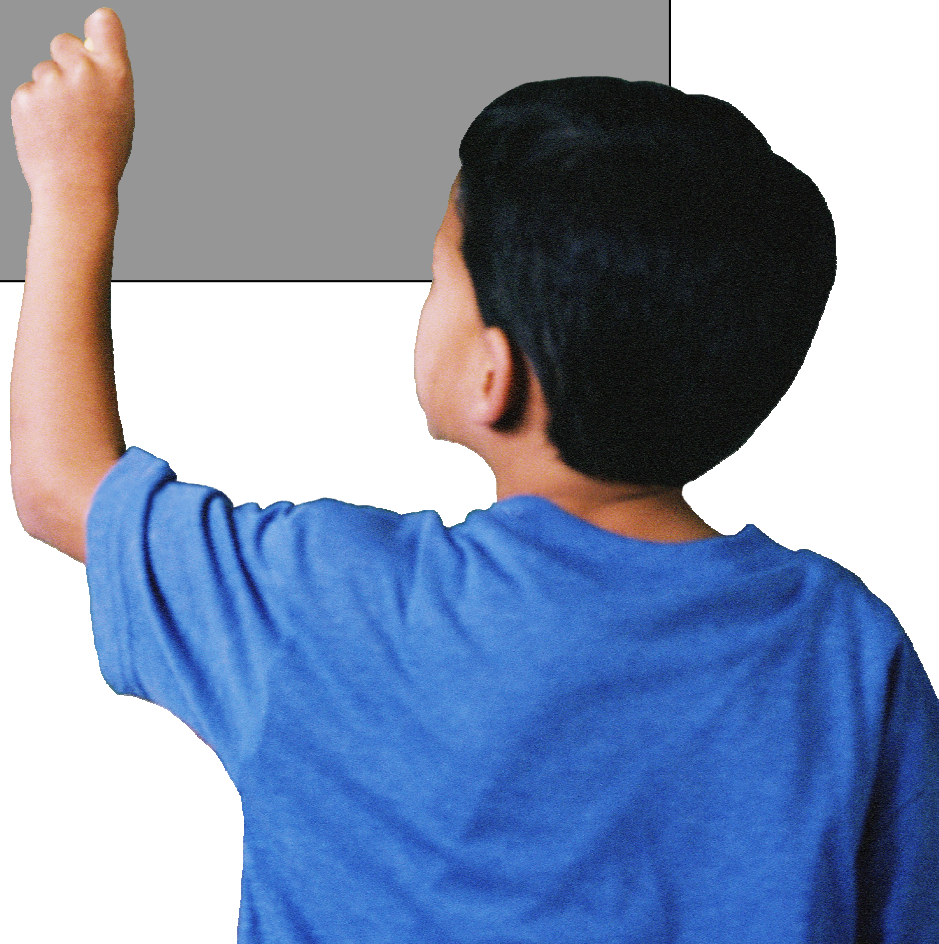
Step One: Cut out all pieces along the outer edge of the picture (Figure 1a-c).

Step Two: Tape Page 1 and Page 2 together on the blank side at the middle to make a circle (Figure 2).

Step Three: Place the small circle in the center of the completed large circle. Punch a small hole through the center of both circles and insert a brad to create a spinning "wheel" (Figure 3).



Literacy Centers



Center Goal

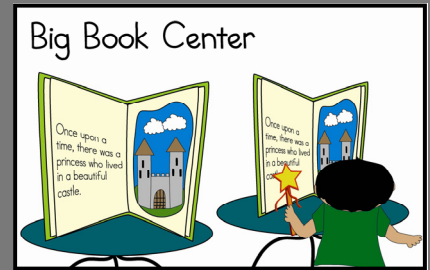
The Big Book Center reinforces strategies and skills introduced during shared reading. Shared reading is a type of read aloud in which the teacher reads and rereads an enlarged text, or big book, with student participation. In first grade, shared reading is used to teach strategies for word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. As Diller (2003) notes, “the more the teacher models with Big Books during shared reading, the more successful students are at reading on their own. The clearer and more explicit the teacher, the more children take on reading strategies as their own” (p. 39).

The text selected for the Big Book Center should be at the students’ instructional-reading level, which is text that can be read with a 90% accuracy rate and has no more than 1 in 10 words that are difficult for the reader. The Big Book should be of high interest, sustaining students’ attention over several rereadings (Lapp, Flood, Moore, & Nichols, 2005). It should present sufficient challenges so that students must apply word-solving strategies in order to read it.

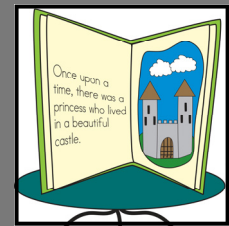
Activity

The Big Book Center provides the opportunity for students to practice reading and rereading text. The activities that students engage in are usually ones that the teacher has modeled during shared reading. At the beginning of the first-grade year, these activities include rereading the text with a pointer, finding specific letters and words and marking them with highlighting tape, and attending to punctuation cues. As the year progresses, the instructional focus shifts to more sophisticated word identification strategies, such as using structural cues, syllable patterns, and

Display the Center Poster



Prepare the Materials



- * Big Book Center poster
- * Big books, commercially produced or class-made
- * Big book easel
- * Wands, pencils with large erasers, wooden spoons, rulers, chopsticks, fly swatters with the center cut out, or other pointers to track text
- * Highlighter tape
- * Materials to create original text: chart paper, markers, pencils, and staplers
- * Props used during shared reading

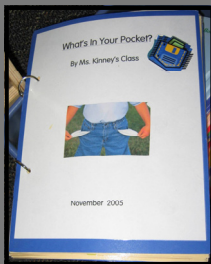
Link to Standards



Students recognize that different parts of the book, such as the cover, the title page, and the table of contents, convey information.



Students start reading by pointing to the first word on the page.



knowledge of syntax and context to support word identification and confirm word meaning (Texas Education Agency, 1998).

Materials for the Center

- * Big Book Center poster
- * Big books, commercially produced or class-made
- * Big book easel
- * Wands, pencils with large erasers, wooden spoons, rulers, chopsticks, fly swatters with the center cut out, or other pointers to track text
- * Highlighter tape
- * Materials to create original text: chart paper, markers, pencils, and staplers
- * Props used during shared reading

Link to Standards

Identify state and district standards that relate to concepts of print and print conventions. The students will

- * Recognize that different parts of the book, such as the cover, the title page, and the table of contents, convey information
- * Start reading by pointing to the first word on the page
- * Recognize that sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a period, question mark, or exclamation point, and that punctuation and capitalization help the reader comprehend the text
- * Demonstrate awareness of the "return sweep," the continuation of text from one line to the next

Identify standards related to word identification strategies. The students will

- * Learn and apply knowledge of all common letter-sound correspondences to read decodable text, including consonant blends such as *-sk*, *-sh*, and *tw-*; consonant digraphs such as *-th*, *-ng*, and *-ch*; vowel digraphs such as *-ay*, *-ea*, and *-oa*; and vowel diphthongs such as *-ai*, *-ea*, and *-ow*
- * Use common spelling patterns, such as *-ake*, *-ing*, and *-ight*, to read and spell words
- * Use structural cues, such as word parts and inflectional endings, to read words
- * Read multisyllabic words by using common syllable patterns
- * Apply knowledge of syntax and context to support word identification and confirm word meaning
- * Read high-frequency words automatically

Adapted from Texas Education Agency. (1998). *Texas essential knowledge and skills for grade 1*. Austin, TX: Author.

Finally, look for standards that relate to student response to texts, especially standards related to active student participation during read alouds.

Post the identified standards in the center so that all classroom visitors can read them. The link between the standards and the Big Book Center activities should be explicit.

Teacher Preparation

Analyze the information from early reading assessments and other assessment data to determine the students' knowledge of concepts of print, letter knowledge, print conventions, letter-sound associations, word identification strategies, and phonemic awareness

Link to Standards



Students read multisyllabic words by using common syllable patterns.

Students apply knowledge of syntax and context to support word identification and confirm word meaning.

Procedures for the Big Book Center



Use a pointer to track the words on the page. Pointing to words helps students “pay attention to print and notice how print works.”

(Diller, 2003, p. 39)

Monitoring Student Progress



Observe the students during shared reading and in the Big Book Center.

skills. Use this information to identify the specific skills and concepts that will be addressed through shared reading and then in the Big Book Center.

Select a text that is appropriate for the selected skills and concepts. Make a lesson plan that targets a specific skill each time the Big Book is read aloud. Call on students to assist in the read aloud, and provide guided practice as students participate in the shared reading of the text.

Prerequisite Small-Group Instruction

Although shared reading is most often conducted with the entire class, it is also appropriate for small groups of students. In a small-group setting, the teacher can tailor the lesson to the group’s specific needs, and also provide more opportunities for student participation and discussion.

Procedures for the Big Book Center

Explain the procedures for completing the activities in the Big Book Center. The students will

1. Select a previously read big book to read aloud.
2. Use a pointer to track the words on the page. Pointing to words helps students “pay attention to print and notice how print works” (Diller, 2003, p. 39).
3. Read fluently by decoding quickly and accurately, by chunking words in phrases, and by using inflection to reread the book aloud just as the teacher did during the shared reading.

Monitoring Student Progress

Observe the students during shared reading and in the Big Book Center. Notice whether they exhibit the following reading behaviors.

- * Begin at the start of the book and place the pointer on the first word on the page, turn the pages from left to right, and track print from left to right and top to bottom when reading.
- * Use highlighter tape to select words that are examples of the targeted skill or skills, such as words that follow a specific spelling pattern, begin with a specific blend or digraph, or include a derivational ending introduced in word study instruction.
- * Use the reading strategies modeled by the teacher during shared reading.

Additional Activities for the Big Book Center

- * Cover specific words in the text by placing a sticky note labeled with a question mark over the selected word. Have students suggest other words that would fit in the sentence without changing the sentence's meaning. Students write a synonym on another sticky note and place their suggestion over the hidden word, then reread the text to determine whether the word fits in the sentence, using their knowledge of syntax and context to confirm.
- * Select words from the text and write each word on an index card. Students match index card words to those on the page.
- * Conduct a Scavenger Word Hunt to find all the words in the text that meet certain criteria, for example, words that end with *-ed* or *-ing*. Students search for words with the same feature throughout the text and record these words on the Scavenger Word Hunt Chart.
- * Locate high-frequency words in the text that are on the word wall.

Additional Activities for the Big Book Center



Locate high-frequency words in the text that are on the word wall.



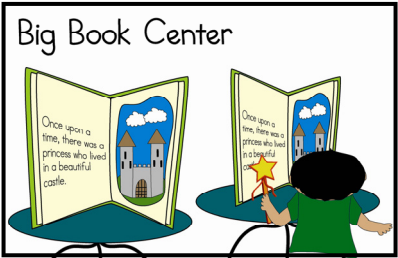
Conduct a Scavenger Word Hunt to find all the words in the text that meet certain criteria.

Big Book Center Scavenger Word Hunt

MASTER

Name: _____

Date: _____



I went on a scavenger hunt to look for words that follow this pattern: _____

These are the words I found.
