

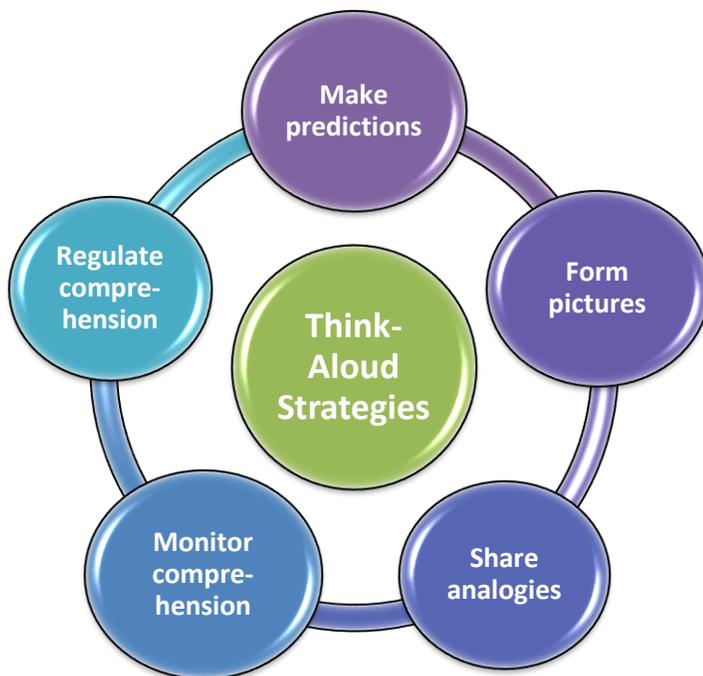
Think-Aloud



A Routine to Support Reading Comprehension in the Content Areas

Students rarely realize that *good readers employ a number of strategies* to help them comprehend complex texts. That's what **Think-Alouds** are for. They guide students to "*see*" what *goes on in the head* of a good reader.

What the Teacher Does: In general, teachers model the thinking that goes on in the heads of good readers by explicitly verbalizing their thoughts while reading a passage orally.



Adapted from Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011

Procedure:

First, Teacher:

- 1) Select a "difficult" passage to read aloud. Consider passages that have unknown words, confusing ideas, contradictions, or other that contains "points of difficulty." (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).
- 2) Direct students to follow along as Teacher reads and to pay attention to how the Teacher works through "trouble spots."
- 3) Read the passage out loud, stopping whenever there's a confusion or difficulty. At that point, Teacher verbalizes thinking, questions, predictions, etc., that a good reader goes through as s/he navigates confusing ideas. [Teacher Tips.](#)
- 4) Direct Students to work with partners to practice Think-Alouds.

Then, Students:

- 1) Practice with group members the same process as the Teacher modeled: read, think aloud, and critique their thinking with each other.
- 2) Practice the skill of thinking aloud individually perhaps for homework. A [checklist](#) helps students self-assess their efforts and achievements.

Finally, Teachers:

- 1) Integrate the practice of Think-Alouds with other lessons
- 2) Spiral the routine into daily and weekly plans, including Students demonstrating the Think-Aloud for difficult passages.
- 3) [What do I do IF... ???](#)

Some Important Tips for Effective Think-Alouds

Choose a short piece of text. Think alouds are often the most effective when they are focused and well paced. A brief think aloud delivered using a passage of one to four paragraphs will have more impact because student interest is maintained. As well, it prevents the temptation to model too many strategies.

Let the text tell you what to do. Don't plan to think aloud using cold text, because your teaching points will be unfocused. Read the text several times and make notes about the comprehension strategies you are using to understand. These will provide you with ideas for the content of your think aloud. Annotate the text so you will have something to refer to as you read.

Keep your think alouds authentic. It can be a little disconcerting to say aloud what's going on in your head. Most teachers adopt a conversational tone that mirrors the informal language people use when they are thinking. An overly academic tone will sound contrived. It's better to say, "Hey--when I read this part about the penguins, right away I saw a penguin in my mind," rather than, "I am metacognitively aware and activated my visualizing strategy to formulate an image of a penguin as I read that paragraph."

Think like a scientist, mathematician, historian, artist, literacy critic . . . Your shared reading texts are chosen because they have content value. Thinking aloud doesn't mean that everyone suddenly has to be reading like an English teacher. Make your think alouds authentic by telling students how you process text through the lens of *your* content expertise. This elevates the think aloud because you are showing them how your understanding of content text is influenced by what you know about the content.

Tell them what you did. Using an authentic voice doesn't mean you can't name the strategy. Tell your students what strategy you used to help you comprehend. This allows them to begin to form schemas about reading comprehension. Underline or highlight words or phrases that helped you understand and encourage students to do likewise, if possible.

Resist the urge to "overthink." The meaning of the passage should not be sacrificed for the sake of the think aloud. Don't insert so many think alouds into the reading that the intended message is lost. Fewer well-crafted think alouds will have far more impact than a stream-of-consciousness rap that leaves the students bewildered by what just happened.

On Your Own: Think-Aloud Checklist

Read each statement below.

Put a 1 for **Do Often**, 2 for **Do Sometimes**, and 3 for **do rarely**.

When I pause to think aloud . . .

_____ I make my mind try to visualize the scene.

_____ I try to figure out which parts have confused me.

_____ I compare what has happened now with what happened previously.

_____ I ask questions about what's going on in the text.

_____ I make myself connect what I know to what's happening in the story.

_____ I make comments about what I like or don't like.

_____ I anticipate what a character might do next.

_____ I make comments about what the author is doing to give me hints about the characters or plot or setting.

_____ I wonder what the author wants me to figure out at this point.

_____ I try to figure out if I need to reread a section.

_____ I predict what will happen next.

_____ I try to imagine what is happening in the text.

_____ I think about characters or events to see how they are alike or different.

_____ I ask myself how this is like something else I've read or maybe a song I've heard.

_____ I try to figure out if I should read on.

_____ I stop and ask myself if I understand what I've read so far.

What Do I Do IF...? Some Pitfalls to Avoid

What Do I Do IF...

1. **students make comments for every sentence?**

Sometimes that's necessary. But if you think students are stopping too often, then check your modeling to make sure you are showing students **how to chunk** their reading. It's important for them to see how to stop after every few sentences or even a paragraph to make comments.

2. **students want me to tell them what kind of comments to make?**

Generally, the answer is DON'T DO IT. However, very dependent readers sometimes need that extra scaffold of knowing exactly where in the text to stop, exactly which part of the text to respond to, and exactly what type of comment they are to make. This type of cued think-aloud focuses students' thinking. Your job is to monitor their ability to work with cues so you know when decrease the scaffolding.

3. **students' comments are questions they have about the text?** Should I answer their questions?

Not as the think-aloud is in progress. Often, confusion about what is going on in the text—whether that means wondering what a specific word means, which character is speaking, or what is happening next—is cleared up as the student continues reading. That's when you'll hear comments like, "Oh, I get it," or "I bet that part meant . . .," or "It must have been his character who said" Remind partners to keep track of questions and to see if the reader can clarify his own questions as he moves through the text.

4. **students were taught the Say-Something strategy and get confused? Isn't think-aloud similar to the Say Something strategy?**

It's the role of the partner that is the biggest difference between these two strategies. In the Say Something strategy, two or three readers work together, with one saying something one at one point in the text and the others responding. When they reach the next stopping point in the text, they switch roles. In the think-aloud strategy, one person is doing the reading and the thinking aloud. The partner's role is to capture the statements on paper or sticky notes and, when the think-aloud is complete, discuss with the reader what he or she did during the process.

5. **I want students to be quieter? Do students always have to do a think-aloud orally?**

Not at all. You can have students think through a text by responding to it on sticky notes. Then you can later give pairs time to "share and compare" to start a student-centered text conversation.

Sources for This Strategy

Beers, K. (2003). *When kids can't read: What teachers can do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2012). *Improving adolescent literacy: Content area strategies that work*. Boston: Pearson.

Vacca, R., Vacca, J., & Mraz, M. (2011). *Content area reading: Literacy and learning across the curriculum*. Boston: Pearson.

Image of “thinking brain” obtained from <http://www.dailywhat.org.uk/2012/02/mind-reading-breakthrough.aspx>