

## Access Without Lowering Expectations: A Structured Reading Routine for Secondary Classrooms

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Safety training manuals are often written above an eighth-grade reading level, and insurance policies and legal documents in most states must be written no higher than a ninth-grade reading level. Outside of school, text complexity is nonnegotiable.

However, in many middle-grade classrooms, teachers regularly encounter students reading below grade level and respond by lowering text complexity to support comprehension and maintain pacing. The intention is access. The unintended consequence is reduced opportunity.

Standardized assessments will not reduce complexity for struggling readers. Nor will workplace documents, technical manuals, or civic texts. Students must learn to make meaning from the texts they are given—not simplified versions of them.

Middle grades educators sit at a pivotal moment in students' literacy development. Rather than lowering text demands, teachers can implement structured, research-aligned reading routines that support students in accessing grade-level texts with increasing independence. High-quality instructional routines are “consistent, research-based, and repeatable classroom procedures designed to improve student engagement, academic, and behavioral outcomes” (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.).

When embedded intentionally, reading routines lower barriers without lowering expectations. They build engagement, provide equitable access to complex texts, and prepare students for the

literacy demands of high school, college, careers, and civic life.

### The Science of Reading Movement

While the scientific study of reading dates back more than a century (Huey, 1908), the term ‘*Science of Reading*’ gained prominence during the reading wars of the 1990s, as researchers challenged whole-language instruction with evidence from cognitive science and literacy research (Stanovich, 2000; The Reading League, 2022). The Reading League defines the Science of Reading as “a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing” (The Reading League, 2022).

The modern movement toward evidence-based reading instruction gained significant momentum beginning in 2020, prompting many states to pass legislation mandating research-aligned literacy practices (Schwartz, 2022; The Reading League, 2022).

Emerging data suggest that the implementation of these practices is positively impacting upper-grade reading outcomes. In states such as Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana, eighth-grade reading rankings have improved even as national reading scores have declined (NCES, 2022; Schwartz, 2023; Vaites, 2025). For example, Louisiana’s eighth-grade reading ranking increased by

ten places nationally during this period (Vaites, 2025).

As states adopt legislation supporting evidence-based reading instruction, middle grades teachers are working to implement these practices in classrooms that include students reading below grade level. This reality presents ongoing instructional challenges.

Middle-grade educators play a critical role in preparing students for success in high school. Early adolescence does not end at eighth grade; ninth grade—and often much of tenth—remains part of this developmental continuum. The literacy demands students encounter in high school require sustained analytical thinking, development of academic vocabulary, and the ability to navigate complex texts independently. The work of building those capacities begins in middle school.

In North Carolina, this work is especially urgent. Newly revised English Language Arts standards, approved by the North Carolina State Board of Education and set to be implemented in the 2027–2028 school year, emphasize knowledge building, academic vocabulary development, and analysis of complex texts. These updated standards require students to engage meaningfully with grade-level materials. In this context, lowering text complexity to address reading gaps may inadvertently widen them.

In my work as a secondary literacy leader and curriculum designer, I have partnered with middle and high school teachers to align instructional practice with the Science of Reading while maintaining rigorous grade-level expectations. Through this collaboration, I developed *The Reading Routine* as a repeatable instructional structure that supports comprehension, vocabulary development, and analytical thinking—without lowering text complexity.

Designed for secondary classrooms, this framework offers middle-grade educators a practical way to strengthen access while preserving rigor at a pivotal stage of students' literacy development.

As North Carolina prepares to implement newly revised English Language Arts standards, middle grades teachers are being called to strengthen alignment between instructional practice and grade-level expectations. The updated standards emphasize knowledge building, academic vocabulary development, and analysis of complex texts—demands that require students to engage meaningfully with grade-level materials. In this context, lowering text complexity to address reading gaps may inadvertently widen them.

### **The Reading Routine**

Rather than reducing expectations, middle grades educators can respond with structured, research-aligned routines that support access while preserving rigor. Instructional routines structure interactions among teachers, students, and content in ways that maintain high expectations for learning while remaining responsive to classroom interactions (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.).

*The Reading Routine* described in this article is a practitioner-developed instructional framework, informed by evidence-based literacy research and refined through classroom implementation in Gaston County Schools. When implemented consistently, the routine establishes predictable structures for how students approach new texts, building habits of comprehension, vocabulary development, and analysis.

The routine includes three components used each time a new text is introduced. Students complete each component to apply reading skills—such as

identifying a central idea and analyzing its development—through engagement with grade-level texts aligned to CCSS.ELA-Literacy RI 8.2: “Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.”

### Step One: The First Read

English language arts teachers routinely employ a wide range of reading strategies, including literature circles, book clubs, anticipation guides, Know, Want to Know, and Learned charts, think-alouds, and stop-and-jot activities. One essential, and sometimes overlooked, component of reading instruction is ensuring that students have sufficient opportunities to read and comprehend the text itself before engaging in analysis. Too often, students are expected to read independently, apply strategies, and demonstrate mastery of grade-level standards without first developing a clear understanding of what the text is about.

In *The Reading Routine*, the first instructional priority is comprehension—providing students with a structured first read to ensure they understand the text at a basic level. The first-read strategy is used by fluent readers who report re-reading a complex text to strengthen their comprehension. The purpose of the first read is not analysis but

comprehension—ensuring students can identify what the text is about before being asked to think critically about how it works. Analysis cannot be successful if students are unable to summarize the text or identify the who, what, when, and where. This raises an important instructional question: if students are not yet reading on grade level, how can teachers structure instruction so that students can access complex texts without lowering expectations?

For students who struggle with fluency, an initial read-aloud with teacher think-alouds provides critical access to the text while modeling proficient reading behaviors. This read-aloud is intentionally planned, with stopping points aligned to subsequent steps in the routine. Students follow along with the text and actively annotate, ensuring listening remains an engaged, purposeful task rather than a passive activity. I developed the initial steps in *The Reading Routine* to incorporate research-based components that align with the science of reading: Fluency, vocabulary and oral language, and text comprehension. I then used that base to develop reading practices that help students build comprehension immediately. This is especially important since instructional time was one of the factors teachers often reported as a problem with using grade-level texts to support standards-aligned instruction.

During the first read:

1. Students are provided with a copy of the text to mark up.
2. Students are provided with concept vocabulary before the first read. The teacher has pre-selected 10-15 words and phrases (or a number appropriate for the length of the text) for students to identify in the text during the first read. These should be grade-level words that students will go back to apply word analysis strategies or words you know they need support with, to assist their comprehension of the text. During the first read, the students will simply circle these words and go back to them after the text has been read.

3. Students annotate the text, which must include marking and labeling the who (key people), what (key events or ideas), where, and when details from the text. You may also teach students additional annotation symbols to use during the first read, but marking and labeling are the most important, and you do not want to overwhelm them with too many tasks while they are trying to make meaning. When you first introduce this routine, model the annotations so students can see what you are doing to the text and hear what you are thinking as you annotate.
4. Students also need to circle and add a question mark next to any additional words they do not know and want to ask about, after the first read. Sometimes they do not know words until they hear them pronounced, so students need to know what words you want them to mark for this step.
5. After the first read, students need to engage in discourse with other students about the text. What is the text about? What did they annotate? What additional words did they mark?
6. After the first read, students also need to work to determine the meaning of the unknown words they marked; these are additional words from the ones you assigned in step 2. Students need to work together first when discussing the text to support one another in defining these words. Students may need support with words they marked on their own if their group or partner cannot help. This support should be provided during the first read.
7. After participating in the discussion, students need to write a summary of the text. This can be done using any summarizing strategy you like to use with students (i.e. GIST, Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then, \$2 summary, etc.). The summary provides you a formative assessment opportunity to see who got it and who still needs additional support or scaffolds to access this text before moving on to applying reading skills and analyzing the text.

Once students have established a clear understanding of the text, instruction can shift toward deeper vocabulary analysis and application.

### **Step Two: Determining the Meaning of Unknown Words**

The next component in my suggested Reading Routine supports students' comprehension by helping them determine the meaning of unknown words. Research on vocabulary instruction demonstrates that explicit teaching of word meanings and word-learning strategies significantly improves students' ability to comprehend complex texts (Beck et al., 2013). During step one, the first read, students are given a list of concept vocabulary words to locate in the text. These words are central to

understanding the information presented. In this component, students apply previously taught strategies—such as using context clues, analyzing word parts, and examining word relationships—to determine meaning within the text.

In this part of the routine, students begin by locating the word or phrase in the text (a step that starts during the first read). They underline the full sentence in which the word appears so they can clearly see how it is being used. From there, students use strategies they have already learned to write a definition in their own words that matches the way the word is used in the passage. This helps students make sense of multiple-meaning words and avoids reliance on dictionary definitions that may not fit the context. Finally, students explain the textual evidence that helped them determine the

word's meaning. Taking time for students to share their reasoning allows teachers to identify misconceptions and provide targeted support when needed. The teacher should evaluate whether the students have provided the correct definitions and provide support in understanding them before students move on to analyzing the text.

Following the first two components of the routine, teachers can use formative assessment to better understand students' levels of comprehension and vocabulary development. These assessments may include questions that invite students to explain their thinking, demonstrate their understanding of the text, and apply key concept vocabulary in context. Rather than focusing on memorization of isolated facts or definitions, assessment within *The Reading Routine* emphasizes students' ability to analyze, interpret, and make meaning from what they have read. This approach helps teachers identify areas of strength, clarify misconceptions, and provide additional support as needed while maintaining grade-level expectations.

### **Step Three: The Close Read**

The final component of *The Reading Routine* involves students applying the explicit reading skills taught to analyze the text based on the standard they are being asked to master. In many classrooms, instruction is designed to have students practice the skills embedded in a standard.

However, teachers are not ignoring the standards; rather, instructional tasks sometimes reduce them to their component parts. Students may complete a plot diagram or an indirect characterization chart to successfully identify characters, settings, or

key events. Yet these tasks focus on describing elements in isolation rather than analyzing how those elements interact—an expectation embedded in standards such as the Common Core Standard for Reading Literature “CCS.ELA-Literacy RL. 7.3: Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).” When students are not guided to examine how setting shapes character, how events influence motivation, or how ideas build upon one another, they complete the activity but fall short of the analytical thinking the standard requires. This gap between skill practice and standard-level analysis is what the Close Read component of *The Reading Routine* addresses.

The Close Read component also allows teachers to use the same text for different purposes. Because students have already spent time comprehending the text, they are ready to move into analysis. Using a new text each time students practice analysis can interfere with the interpretation and repeated practice they need to master a standard; students often spend the available time simply trying to understand the new passage.

To reduce barriers—especially for students reading below grade level—teachers should provide the specific excerpt students will analyze. While locating evidence is an important skill, the purpose of this close read is to assess students' ability to apply the standard's analytical demand (for example, analyzing how elements interact), not their ability to search for an appropriate section of the text.

Before students complete close read analysis tasks, three instructional steps are essential:

- **Explicitly teach and model the standard through a structured mini-lesson, then apply it to the grade-level text.** Students first examine the language of the standard and identify the key academic vocabulary and analytical verbs it contains. Together, the class translates the standard into student-friendly language, so students clearly understand what they are being asked to do. The teacher then models the cognitive process required by the standard using short, low-stakes examples that isolate the skill (for example, analyzing how elements interact or determining word meaning using specific strategies). Students practice the skill in controlled examples, identify the strategy they used, and articulate their reasoning before transferring that work to the grade-level text. Anchor charts capture the steps of the thinking process so students can reference them during independent practice.
- **Select excerpts intentionally** so each section of text aligns to a specific analytical purpose (as standardized assessments often do when they reference a paragraph number).
- **Design tightly aligned tasks** that may include a scaffolded first step (e.g., identifying elements) before students answer an analysis question such as, “How does the setting shape the plot?”

Using one text for multiple analytical purposes increases student engagement and access. Students who struggle with comprehension are more likely to participate in discourse when they are familiar with the text and can discuss key people, events, and ideas with peers—rather than disengaging when they encounter a new passage independently.

During the Close Read, students engage in structured analytical work aligned to the verb and demand of the standard. Rather than simply answering comprehension questions, students are required to make the interaction between elements visible.

Students use their annotated text from the first read and their vocabulary notes to support deeper analysis. Depending on the standard, students may:

- Trace how a character transforms across sections of a text, citing specific dialogue, actions, and structural shifts.
- Identify an author’s central claim and evaluate whether the supporting evidence is relevant, sufficient, and convincing.

- Analyze how specific sections of a text contribute to the development of the author’s overall argument or purpose.
- Examine how the structure of a drama or informational text shapes meaning and supports the central idea.

Students typically begin by organizing their thinking in a graphic organizer or structured chart that isolates the analytical elements named in the standard. They then use textual evidence to explain how those elements interact. Discussion precedes writing, allowing students to articulate reasoning with peers before constructing written responses aligned to the standard’s language. This progression—from identifying elements, to examining interaction, to explaining impact—ensures that students are not merely completing tasks, but are meeting the cognitive demand of the standard.

Using one text for multiple analytical purposes strengthens students’ mastery of standards while also increasing engagement and confidence. When students revisit a familiar text with a clearly defined analytical

purpose, they can participate more fully in discourse and explain their thinking using evidence from the text. Students who may struggle with comprehension are not overwhelmed by starting over with a new passage; instead, they can focus their cognitive energy on the analytical demands of the standard. Over time, this repeated cycle of comprehension, vocabulary development, and purposeful close reading builds both skill and independence. Students learn that meeting a standard requires more than completing a task—it requires explaining how ideas, elements, and structures interact to develop meaning.

As districts both across North Carolina and the country work to align instruction with the Science of Reading and state mandates for evidence-based literacy practices, secondary educators face the challenge of maintaining grade-level rigor while supporting students who read below grade level. Lowering text complexity may temporarily ease frustration, but it does not prepare students for the demands of standardized assessments or the complex texts they will encounter beyond the classroom. Teachers need structured, repeatable routines that provide access without reducing expectations.

Through this work, I developed *The Reading Routine* as a repeatable instructional structure that supports comprehension, vocabulary development, and analytical thinking without lowering text complexity. Grounded in evidence-based practices and refined through classroom implementation, the routine offers teachers a practical framework for planning instruction that aligns with standards, strengthens student discourse, and builds independence over time. When implemented consistently, *the Reading Routine* creates a classroom environment in which students are expected to think deeply, explain their reasoning with

evidence, and engage in rigorous analysis of grade-level texts. Rather than practicing isolated skills, students learn to meet the full cognitive demand of the standard. In doing so, teachers can honor both the intent of the Science of Reading and the reality of secondary classrooms—ensuring that all students have access to meaningful, standards-aligned literacy instruction.

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