

A Guide for Using Big Books in the Classroom

Why Big Books?

There's something spectacular about Big Book versions of good children's books. Neither adults nor children can resist the urge to touch and hold them, to savour the richness of their detail. Their visual appeal is a sure hook into their content.

But Big Books are also produced for *pedagogical* reasons, and using them in the classroom makes good teaching sense. An abundance of good children's literature in their lives is vitally important for young children as they strive toward independent reading. Big Books can help you to extend — or for some less fortunate children, to establish — the positive effects of home lap-reading experiences. Large print and colourful illustrations allow whole classrooms to share good stories, memorable poems and interesting books of fact. And especially when used with small groups (up to eight children), Big Books enrich oral language development through your modelled reading, through risk-free participation by the children in subsequent readings and discussions, and through the meaningful teaching of skills within context — all positive and therefore powerful learning experiences.

Why This Guide?

The teaching suggestions in this guide are based on a pattern of organization described by Priscilla Lynch in her best-selling *Using Big Books and Predictable Books*. They focus first on sharing the book as a group, to give the children confidence in their ability to "read" it. Then they highlight additional language arts potential you may want to make use of, depending on the interests and needs of the children and on your teaching goals. Finally they move beyond a strictly language focus to include across-the-curriculum activities and theme ideas for both individual and shared learning. Together these suggestions reflect a basic learning pattern for children:

- They observe someone engaged in a desirable activity.
- They emulate the activity.
- They engage in similar activities, with guidance.
- They step creatively out on their own.

Because the uses you make of an individual Big Book title will depend on the children's interest in it and on your understanding of their learning needs, we divide the suggestions into four major types, which you will likely combine in various ways for different titles:

- The book experience itself, spread over several shared reading sessions (from three to seven or more, depending on the children's familiarity with books and the nature of the particular title).
- Language learning based on the book, perhaps coincidentally with one of the shared reading sessions, or during a regular language session later in the day, or at any time over the course of the year as specific needs arise.
- Independent practice, growing out of the book though not necessarily directly related to it.
- Theme studies, linking the book to other books and/or to all kinds of common human experiences.

The Book Experience

For your initial sessions with a title, especially with young children who have little book experience, your purpose is two-fold:

- To model the basic book knowledge they need to be able to approach books with confidence.
- To share the story several times in a whole class or small group situation so familiarity will give the children confidence they can read it. We recommend at least five sessions with a title, to allow for a full and rich exploration of the book, its story and its language. Some sessions may take only a few minutes; some much longer. The best ones will be those where you look up suddenly and exclaim, "Where has the morning gone!" *We want to stress that the division into sessions is a guideline only.* If the children already have a good deal of book experience, for instance, you probably won't need to spend as much time introducing a particular title. *Only you know your children and only you can decide how much to do in each session.* Besides, as we all know, "the best laid plans . . . "

Language Learning

Because language skills of all kinds are best learned in context, it makes good sense to use as a teaching resource favourite stories the children are already confident with. Some language teaching opportunities arise spontaneously as the children respond to text during shared reading sessions; others you can plan for as you return periodically to Big Books during the year.

Independent Practice

The independent and small group activities that might evolve from the shared experience of a book depend to a large extent on the children and on your classroom situation. We suggest not only additional language-based activities but also several relating to other areas of the curriculum, such as:

- Arts activities: drawing, painting, modelling, drama, music, singing games and chants, rhythmic movement, etc.
- Math activities: number facts and concepts, graphs, charts, etc.
- Science activities: hands-on experiments, field trips, researching, making observations, sorting and classifying, etc.
- Social studies activities: community-centered research, field trips, interviewing, mapping, etc.

Themes

Many Big Books will fit easily into your current theme plans; others may suggest new topics to explore.

Evaluation

Evaluation of growth in the children's language and background knowledge resulting from your use of a Big Book will vary depending on the potential of the book and the activities you choose. For most books you will:

- Observe the children's responses to the book, to you and to their peers.
- Collect samples of their work to chart their growth in specific areas.
- Arrange a conference to share their enthusiasms and problems and to make plans for further learning.

REMEMBER! The first purpose of a Big Book is enjoyment. But these books can also be powerful motivators for learning. Shared book experiences help to model the reading process for beginning readers, encouraging prediction, providing the necessary confirmation, and ensuring the integration of new knowledge. And they provide teaching opportunities in other areas as well.

The Book Experience

(Session 1)

- Settle the children comfortably around you.
- Show them the book. Invite them to look at the front and back covers. Talk about the author, the illustrator, the dedication page, where the story starts, the illustrations, etc.
- Ask them questions like "What do you see?" "What do you think this book is about?" or "What do you think will happen in this book?" Record their responses on the chalkboard or on chart paper, placing their initials beside their contributions.

Demonstrate your enthusiasm during several encounters with the story and its illustrations. Throughout your discovery and exploration of the book, establish in a natural way such concepts as *beginning* and *ending*, *front* and *back*, *left* and *right*, *letters*, *spaces*, *words*, *sentences*, etc. You can't assume the children understand these basic concepts.

★ Session 1

- With the children settled comfortably around you, read the whole story through, enthusiastically, joyously. It's very important to indicate in your reading *your* enjoyment and interest. Your modelling will demonstrate what reading really is and how enjoyable it can be.
- Return to the children's predictions and comments you recorded earlier. Read them together and praise those that match the story.
- Invite the children to express their personal reactions to the book. Did they like the story? What was their favourite part or their favorite illustration? How did they feel about the ending? Did this story remind them of another one, or of something they've experienced themselves?
- Recap the story with the children — what happened first, next, last?

★ Session 2

- Read the story a second time, this time pointing to individual words to reinforce the left to right convention of print and the fact that the story is in the print. Pause at each page so the children can make comments and ask questions. Turn to the text and the illustrations to answer those questions and to seek clarification if disagreements arise.
- Listen carefully to what the children say and do during this reading. Watch to see how much of the story they understand, how well they express their thoughts, how willing they are to join in the discussion, what experiences they bring to the story, how many words they recognize and which ones they don't understand.
- After this reading they may want to make some personal response to the story by drawing or painting a picture or by writing something of their own, inspired by what they've just read.

★ Session 3

- Read the story again, without pausing. Invite the children to join in on remembered passages. Use your voice and facial expressions to cue predictable words, phrases or outcomes, and to confirm the predictions.
- Afterwards, encourage the children to share with the group the clues they used to help them know what to say when they joined in the reading.

★ Session 4

- Read the story a fourth time, encouraging the children to join in once again. This time they'll be more aware of the strategies they can use to predict the text.
- After sharing the story this time ask the children for any phrases or sentences they remember. Record them on the chalkboard, saying each word as you print it. Then read them together, using your finger or a pointer to underline each word as you read it.
- Transfer these phrases to chart paper for the group to refer to when writing their own stories.

★ Session 5

- Reread the story, pausing frequently to let the children fill in the words that come next. During these oral cloze activities, encourage them to return to the book and reread to confirm that what they've suggested makes sense.
- Follow this reading with some written cloze exercises, using a few sentences from the book.

For as long as the children wish, keep rereading the story. Unison reading is useful because it allows everyone to participate, although some won't be able to do more than approximate the text at first. That's to be expected since early reading approximations are similar to those of early speech.

Language Learning

- After the initial shared reading sessions you might plan to use additional readings of the children's favourite Big Books to fill specific teaching purposes of your own. Casual investigation ("What do you notice here?" or "What does this remind you of?") can bring into focus any facet of language you may want to teach.
- You might, for instance, use the book to explore letter-sound associations, compound words, verb endings, punctuation, contractions, rhyming words, etc. Familiarity with the story helps build sight vocabulary as well.
- You might also plan for some kind of dramatization of the story, such as a choral reading or a puppet play, to help the children recognize and manipulate its structure and form.

Independent Practice

It's through the shared routines and independent activities that follow their experiences with Big Books that the children grow in confidence as language users and producers. Some may want to return frequently to the same book.

- Make the Big Book available for group readings and provide small books for the children to use independently.
- A CD or cassette tape (commercially produced or your own) will provide extra opportunities for those children who need repeated practice to help anchor good oral language patterns. Always provide small copies of the book to use with the tape.
- Circulate to listen to the children reading. Encourage them to point to the text as they read and to correct themselves by rerunning.
- Talk to them about the story and encourage them to take the small book home to share with their family.
- Suggest activities that keep bringing them back to the text.
- Introduce other books with similar story structures to those children who seem ready for them.
- Suggest activities that help the children use their interest in this book to move beyond language arts activities into other areas of the curriculum

Themes

Linking Big Books to each other and to topics of common interest makes the children more aware of connections between book and life experiences and opens up your reading program to the whole scope of their world. Each discussion increases the book, language and background knowledge the children can bring to other learning.

- With the whole class or smaller groups, periodically reread and compare several books already well known to the children. Relate their details, concepts and activities to the real-life topics and themes you are dealing with.
- Use the interest in specific books to lead into a new theme or to provide a new direction or dimension to a current one.

REMEMBER! The pattern and suggestions included in this guide are not, by any means, the only way to use either this book or Big Books in general. You should always feel free to alter the activities — or to make up entirely different ones. Only you know the particular needs of your children, and YOU are in charge of their program.

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