Literacy Guide

Volunteer Tutor’s Role: Strategies for beginning and maintaining your tutoring relationship.

As a volunteer literacy tutor you can provide invaluable support and enrichment to students who are learning to read and write by:

- offering individual or small group attention where that may not be available
- engaging children in enjoyable experiences with literature — writing, reading and listening
- helping children feel successful by giving positive feedback and support
- helping with homework in ways that extend children’s understanding and interest
- modeling through your own actions that reading and writing are pleasurable and valuable activities

Your role is not to replace the work of the teacher. Instead, you can extend or support the literacy learning that is going on in and out of the classroom.

Tutoring programs vary widely from setting to setting. You might work in a school during the school day, tutoring an individual child, or helping out in the class with a small group. Other programs take place before or after school offering homework help and skills instruction or enrichment. They may be located in a variety of community agencies, including places of worship and hospitals.

Some programs offer special training or use particular kinds of instructional methods and materials. Other programs welcome volunteers’ own initiative. In some situations, you will need to bring your own reading and writing materials and create your own lesson plans, with little training or guidance; in others, you will be given assigned books or homework and specific structures to follow. Even within one school setting, there may be a variety of approaches and expectations for volunteers, depending on the individual teachers and ages of children. Being flexible in how you approach your role as a volunteer tutor may be the key to a smooth working relationship as you begin work. It will also help if you try to find out as much as you can about where you will be before you get there. Here are some questions to ask:

- Where and when does the program take place: during or after school? In the library or other location?
- Have they had other volunteers before? If so, can you talk with any of them?
- Will you be working with a small group, or with a single child? How often? For how long?
• What is the age of the child(ren) you will work with? What kinds of reading materials are appropriate?
• Is there someone to supervise you or to whom you report? Or who will answer any questions you may have about the child or help you with scheduling or any other problems at the site?
• What are the expectations of your work?

You may know some of the answers to these questions. Others may not be clear until you get started. But thinking through these issues ahead of time should help you prepare for your first day.

**Strategies: Communication**

Below are a series of suggestions for making the process of communicating with your student easier for both of you:

• Simplify your language by using short and simple sentences when speaking to a student for whom English is a new language.
• Do not assume that the child is understanding what you say. Accompany your words with pictures, gestures, and movements that will help to convey your meaning.
• Do not ask too many questions at first. Remember that the student will not understand everything you say and that he or she may nod his or her head just to please you.
• Do not force the child to make eye-contact with you. Prolonged eye-contact between a child and an adult may be interpreted as disrespectful in some cultures.
• Slow down when you speak with your student.
• Do not raise your volume when speaking. Loudness does not compensate for lack of understanding, and may be interpreted as anger towards the student.
• Accept a student’s initial silence as a natural stage of development.
• Do not force your student to speak, especially in front of other children or adults.
• Do not cajole your student with expressions such as: “I know you know the name of this, “or “I’m waiting for you to say something.”
• Do not “over-celebrate” the student’s first efforts at English. “Good, Kim,” or “That’s great language, Juan,” will suffice.
• Do not correct the student’s errors when she or he attempts to speak English. Instead, model the correct form in your response. For example: If the student says: “I like that car, she is so fast!” You may respond: “Yes, it is fast.”
• If you do ask questions, incorporate the answer into the question, or give the student choices so as to give a child a base to work from. Instead of asking: “Whose shoes are these?” ask: “Are these shoes the children’s shoes, or the teacher’s shoes?” The child can then use your own language in his/her response.
• Allow plenty of time for the child to answer a question or wait a bit and then rephrase the question in simpler language. Don’t jump in with the answer. Remember, when answering a question, your student first must be sure to understand the English words you have used, then he or she must figure out a response to your question, and then she or he must remember the English way of saying that response. Keeping these steps in mind will help you to allow your student plenty of time for considering and responding to your questions.

**Strategies: Contact**

**Use your contact with Teacher and Caregivers, or Program Coordinators to collect some basic information about your student:**

- The student’s name and age
- The student’s first language and country of origin
- Information the teacher would like to share about the student’s prior educational experiences
- Information the student would like to share about the student’s social interactions with other children, and about the best situations in which they learn.
- The student’s place of birth
- When did the student arrive in the country?
- How long has the student been in school in this country, in his or her country of origin?
- Do caregivers teach the student songs or poems in his or her first language?
- Do they read to the student in his or her first language?
- Does the student have books in his or her first language?
- What general topics have been covered in the student’s class so far?

**Strategies: The Tutor’s Attitude**

**Children need a safe, risk-free environment in order to flourish and to learn. Here are some tips on how to establish this environment during your tutoring sessions:**

- Be mindful of the complexities of learning a new language and culture. There are many different circumstances that bring families to a new country: job transfer, planned migration, war or refugee status.
- Be aware of your body-language and tone of voice around your student. Children are extremely sensitive and they feel acceptance or rejection from you long before you utter your first word.
- Be positive and encouraging when your student begins to experiment with new words, focus on the meaning of a student’s effort to communicate rather than on the pronunciation, grammar or correct choice of vocabulary.
• Try to learn the proper pronunciation of your student’s name. Do not put the onus on the child by giving him or her a “new American name.” The effort should come from the tutor and will validate the child’s identity.
• Recognize your student’s hard work and willingness to begin learning a new language. Immigrant groups recognize the value of learning English in our society and want their children to learn English.
• Your interest in the child’s culture and language should be infused in each of your sessions. For example, ask your student to make connections between your activities and the student’s prior activities.

**Getting Started: Breaking the Ice**

**Establish the Relationship:**

Not surprisingly children may be shy or unsure of what is expected of them in this new arrangement. From the very start your most important goal will be to establish a pleasant and trusting relationship, setting a tone so the child(ren) will be comfortable working with you and willing to take risks. Don’t be surprised if this takes some time. In the early sessions you will want to try a number of different ways to “break the ice” such as bringing a special object or photograph to share and discuss, or drawing and exchanging pictures of where you live, your favorite foods or activities.

**Avoid Putting Child on the Spot:**

If you know the age and reading interests of your student, you can choose specific books along those lines to read to him or her. But be careful not to put the child on the spot. Initially, don’t even expect the child to read to you, unless he or she offers to do so, and then be sure it is a familiar text so as to avoid any risk of failure.

**Ensure Success:**

Especially in these early sessions, plan activities in which you are confident the child will succeed and feel good. For a few sessions stick with materials that are familiar and comfortable. This will help you learn what the child already does know and can do well. It also helps the child feel secure and competent. Be sure to comment positively on the successes and avoid pointing out errors in these early encounters.

Beginning a dialogue with your student is important in establishing a tutoring relationship. One of the greatest challenges in working with young children can be getting them to relax enough to talk to you. You may want to begin your first tutoring session with a child by introducing yourself and explaining why you are there:

“Hi, my name is Naomi and I am going to be your reading tutor (or reading partner/reading buddy) for the next 4 weeks. What do you think about that?”
—Allow plenty of time for child to answer. Try to avoid questions that can be answered with only a “yes” or “no.”

“What do you think a (tutor/reading buddy) is? What do you think we might do together?”

—Again, allow time for child to respond. If nothing is forthcoming you might explain:

“It’s someone who will read books with you, will talk about stories with you, and will write stories with you. Can you tell me about a favorite book that you have heard or read? Is there one that we could read together?”

Don't be surprised if it takes some time before the student feels comfortable enough to answer your questions. You can encourage this by allowing plenty of time for students to respond, by listening carefully, and by showing interest and asking follow-up questions or making positive comments. For example, if a students simply nods “yes” when asked if he or she has a favorite book, you can follow up with: “What is it called” or “why do you like it?” Or make a comment that is confirming or appreciative: “Oh, yes, I remember reading The Cat in the Hat. It’s one of my favorites too.”

**Valuable Hints for Successful Tutoring**

Once you agree to be a volunteer, here are some pointers to help make your experience successful:

**Flexibility, Patience, Humor, Caring, Friendliness, and Respect**

These are invaluable traits of effective and satisfied volunteers. Remember that schools and volunteer literacy programs are complex organizations with many hardworking and talented professionals who are trying hard, usually with inadequate resources or support. Your help will be greatly appreciated, but try not to be hurt or surprised if you are not always acknowledged, or if there are mix ups and confusions from time to time.

**Be On-time For Your Tutoring Sessions:**

Maintain regular, prompt attendance: remember that the children and teachers or agency personnel are counting on you to be there when you said you would be. Consistent attendance is also instrumental in building your relationship with the learners, and will facilitate their progress and increase your satisfaction. If you must miss an appointment, be sure to let the child and agency know in advance! On the other hand, you may not be able to count on the same kind of consistency or punctuality in return. Children’s and teacher’s lives are often complicated, and not entirely in their control, and schedules do change. Try to develop a sense of humor about the confusions and missed appointments that will undoubtedly occur.
Establish Relationships Early on with All Involved:

It is important to try to establish friendly and respectful relationships with teachers, parents, supervisors, and of course, the children. When everybody works together in the interests of the child, real progress can occur. Remember that parents and teachers are the real experts about the children you see and can provide insights and support. Parents care deeply about their child’s success, as do teachers who see the children daily and are responsible for their progress through the year. At the same time be sensitive to the fact that teachers are busy with many other children besides those with whom you work, and parents too may be struggling with complex obligations. It may not be easy to maintain contact, but this does not mean that they aren’t interested in your work and the child’s progress.

Your relationship with the student is, of course, most important. Here you have a fine line to tread. You will want to be friendly, warm, and supportive, setting a tone that encourages risk taking. But you also need to be clear about your role and goals. Have fun, but remember that you are there with a specific purpose – to help the child learn to read and write. You are not the teacher or a disciplinarian, so you can vary in certain kinds of activities, but you also need to set limits, and follow the school or agency rules. You want to show interest and caring to the child, but not become over involved in personal issues. Humor and flexibility are key.

Involve Students In Planning And Implementing Tutoring Sessions:

Whenever possible, use a collaborative approach so that students feel invested in the goals you set and the work you do together. In your encounters, be a good listener, elicit students’ ideas and interests, and share or alternate responsibilities for reading, writing, setting up and putting away materials, etc. Offer some choices, but not too many: rather than the open-ended “What would you like to do/read?” ask “Which of these two books would you like to read first?” Avoid questions that can be answered with a negative: instead of “Do you want to write now?” you can say: “Now it’s time for some writing; what would you like to write about today?”

Allow For “Wait Time”

When talking with your student keep in mind something called “wait time”. This is the time you allow for your student to say something—either a response to a question you’ve asked, or a unique thought or question that he or she may have. It is important that you don’t jump in too quickly when students are silent. Learners need time to problem solve, to try things out, to make discoveries. You want to be available to help and give support, but not too quickly. You also want to model that thinking is valued and takes time. On the other hand, if you’ve asked a question and the student has not responded, after a bit you might ask “do you need some more time to think about this?” Or, “Are you stuck?” Then be ready to help.
**Provide Positive Feedback**

When responding to a child’s reading and writing efforts focus on the things they do right and give positive feedback rather than constantly correcting and pointing out errors. For instance, a young child reading a book with a picture of a bird in a tree may read the word “tree” when the print actually says “branch.” Our instinct might be to say “no, that’s not ‘tree’, it says ‘branch’.” Thus the child who actually tried a reasonable strategy of looking at the picture, would hear a negative response, and be reluctant to try again in the future. Instead, if we can respond with an encouraging, “That’s a good try, that is a picture of a bird sitting in a tree. But what do you think the first letter of the word “tree” would be?” then the child is more apt to keep trying.

This kind of positive feedback provides the support a child needs as he or she learns more about the connections between pictures, story meaning and print. It will encourage him or her to use more reading strategies such as looking at the initial letters, and thinking about what would make sense to make more accurate predictions without the fear of making a reading error. Specific comments such as: “I see you worked hard to figure out that word. I saw you go back and reread that sentence. That was a good strategy. You were really using your brain to think about what word would make sense there and match the print.” These kinds of comments reinforce good independent problem solving, and help children feel competent.

This will be true in other areas too. If the child is attempting to write something and we focus only on the misspellings, she or he will be less interested in continuing; or if we constantly correct children as they discuss events in a story, they will not be willing to give their opinions or interpretations.

**Be Prepared and Keep Records**

Allow adequate time before a tutoring session to prepare. Check on your supplies, on the books you will need and on any additional items you may want to bring. Also, be sure to allow time at the end of a session to record your tutoring activities so that you have a record of your work with your student, and so that you can plan your next lesson based on the work of previous sessions.

*These suggestions are adapted from: B. A. Herrmann, 1994; and F. Johnston, C. Juell, M. Invernizzi, 1995.

**Getting Prepared: What to Bring**

Here are several things you can do before arriving at your first tutoring session in order to get your tutoring relationship started smoothly. Assembling the materials you may need is the first step. Materials, including books, may be readily available at the place where you will be working, but even so, it is important to locate or gather these together before actually sitting down with your student(s).
In some settings, materials are in scarce supply so you may need to augment them however you can.

**Essentials:**

- several sharpened pencils with erasers
- blank paper
- lined paper (widely spaced lines are best for younger children)
- 2 – 3 books appropriate to child’s reading level and interests (see Suggested Books)
- a book for you to read aloud
- a game (see Sample Games for some ideas)

**Other useful items:**

- notebook with lined or blank pages
- index cards (helps to have at least two different colors) and a file box
- folder or large envelope to hold child’s work
- child-safe scissors
- glue stick
- a post-it pad — small or medium size
- other arts materials
- occasionally, especially in your first sessions a special object (photo, book, animal, puzzle, toy) to share and discuss to “break the ice”

**Pre-Reading Strategies**

These activities can help students to:

- Activate Background Knowledge and Make Connections
- Stimulate Predictions
- Form a Purpose for Reading

**Predicting:**

Examine the cover illustration (if there is one) and read the title of new book. Ask child to predict what it might be about based on either the cover picture, the title, or both. If the title and illustration are not helpful in giving the student a sense of what the story is about, you can provide a brief summary of the book. For example, when looking at a book with a picture of a cat on the front, you can say: “This story is about a cat that moves to a new house and has some adventures while trying to make new friends.”
Activating Background Knowledge:

Ask the student to tell you what he or she knows about the subject of the story or if he or she has had similar experiences, or heard or read a story like this or by same author. “You said you have a cat. Tell me what your cat does all day and who its friends are. What kind of friends do you think the cat in this book might find?” If the topic is totally unfamiliar, reconsider book choice, or take extra time to build the necessary background knowledge through some kind of concrete experiences. For example, if you choose a book about a farm and the student has never been to a farm you may want to begin by looking at pictures of farms and farm animals, and having a brief discussion about what kinds of things happen on farms: what animals live there, what things grow on farms, etc.

Conducting Picture Walk:

With Emergent and Early readers conduct a “Picture Walk” through the book, or chapter, by covering the print, and encouraging or guiding the student in a discussion of what could be going on based on the pictures. If there is vocabulary that may not be familiar to child such as “cupboard” or “bonnet” point the words out and explain them in connection with the pictures and the context of the story. “You’re right, in this picture the teeny tiny woman is putting on her hat, except in this book it’s called a ‘bonnet’ (pointing to the word) which is another word for hat. She is putting on her teeny tiny bonnet. Do you think she is getting ready to go somewhere? ” In your discussion of the pictures, be sure to use as much of the actual book language as possible, especially if there are repeated patterns or refrains. (The Teeny Tiny Woman, Barbara Seeling).

Noticing Structure of the text:

Where appropriate, point out or help the child notice the structure of the text and connect it with other similarly structured texts heard or read. “Yes, this is a fairy tale. We’ve read several fairy tales together. What do you know about fairy tales? What have you noticed that is the same about the three tales we read?”

Forming Purpose for Reading:

Formulate and encourage the student to come up with two or three predictions or questions before reading. “This is a story about a boy who wants a dog, but his mother won’t let him have one. What do you think he is going to do first? Why do you think that?” “You already know a lot about dinosaurs. What are some things you want to find out about them when you start reading this book?”
During Reading Strategies

1. Cueing and Self Monitoring Systems

Successful independent reading involves integrating three sets of cues. Efficient readers use all three to predict, confirm and self correct as they read.

- Meaning or Semantics: Readers use their background knowledge of vocabulary and word understanding. They also use the context of the sentence, the paragraph or the whole text to figure out what the text is about, and what would make sense. Readers continually evaluate the information they take in, asking: “Does this word make sense as I read it?”
  “Does this sentence make sense as I read it: ‘The girl was a dog running’?”
- Syntax or Language Structure: Readers use their knowledge of English grammar to make sense of text.
  Does the sentence sound like real language? (“She went into she house”) Does this word fit grammatically in this sentence?
- Visual information or graphophonics: Readers use information in the text including pictures and print and other knowledge of print conventions including:
  format details
  details and shapes of letters and words
  directionality
  voice/print match
  letter/sound associations
  punctuation

Volunteers can help young readers use these cues by modeling and encouraging them to ask themselves questions as they read. For example, if a child reads out loud:

“She rode the house into the barn.”

a tutor can say:

“Hmm, does that make sense? Did she really ride a house? What else could she ride? What word begins with an “H” that you can ride? The word ‘horse’ looks a lot like the word “house”—that was a very good try at reading that word, but it also needs to make sense, doesn’t it?”

Gradually, after you have provided a lot of this kind of model questioning, you can encourage students to ask these kinds of questions of themselves as they read.

- What would make sense here?
- Did what I just read make sense?
- If not, how can I fix it?
- What word would fit here?
• Does it sound right?
• If not, how can I fix it?
• Do the letters and the pictures match up with what I read?
• If not, how can I fix it and still be sure it makes sense and sounds right?

2. Helping an Oral Reader Who is Stuck or has Miscued

Beginning readers often substitute their own words for those in print. While we want readers to eventually become accurate readers, that should not be the primary goal. Making sense and getting meaning from the text is more important.

Even expert readers sometimes make errors or substitutions in the text without realizing it. Unless those substitutions change the meaning, you don't have to worry about them. Instead of calling them mistakes or errors, we call them Miscues. A miscue is any deviation from the text.

Some things for you to keep in mind:

• If a miscue doesn't change the meaning, or changes it only slightly, you can ignore it. “He rode his bike in/on the road.”
• Try not to jump in too quickly; wait and give the reader a chance to self-correct or problem solve.
• Show confidence in the child’s ability and be available to help.

Some things readers can be encouraged to do when they are trying to figure out a word or get stuck:

PICTURE PROMPT: Direct reader to look at the picture, or to close eyes and imagine what is happening.

RERUN: Suggest rereading the sentence or phrase to clarify the meaning so far. This can help in predicting the upcoming word, giving the reader more time to access it.

CONTEXT PROMPT: Ask the reader if what he or she just read made sense; use this information to help the reader predict what words would “make sense” or “sound right” in a sentence. Then help the reader check the print to confirm the prediction.

READ-ON: Beginning readers can be encouraged to skip over the unknown word and read to the end of the phrase or sentence, substituting a grunt in place of the mystery word. “I never [’mmm’] what to give my mother for her birthday.” This helps readers use the meaning (context) of the surrounding words, and sometimes the initial letter(s) to figure out the problem word.

COMPARING: Ask if reader has seen a word that looks like the troubling one; or write a similar word, i.e. if the hard word is “fright”, point out or write down “night.” (Be sure to
use a word that you are sure the child will recognize.) Helping the child see that a word part is similar to another known word can help too. A fluent reader can think “If I know ‘her’ and ‘taps,’ I can figure out ‘perhaps’” (assuming she or he has heard and understands the word).

STRUCTURAL PROMPT: Tell or ask the child to notice the word’s parts: play-ing; out-side. Help the reader cover the appropriate part of the word.

LOOK BACK TO PREVIOUS CONTEXT: Sometimes beginning readers recognize that they’ve seen a word somewhere else. Looking back or identifying the former context can help the reader recall the word.

After the student figures out a difficult word, or after he or she self corrects, be sure to encourage him or her to ask: “Does this make sense? Does this sound right? Does this look right?” Once the child is satisfied that the sentence does make sense, give specific praise for using good strategies to figure out words. Encouraging students to constantly ask themselves “Does this make sense?” when reading reinforces the purpose of reading: we read to understand the meaning of the text, not simply to translate the printed letters into spoken words.

**Strategies and Techniques Readers Use**

Beginning readers learn to use several clues or problem solving strategies to figure out unknown words and to make sense of written texts. Individual learners develop and use these techniques in varied ways and at different times. Emergent readers and writers generally start out using just a few strategies, such as looking at pictures and using memory, and as they become more fluent, they add more. As a tutor it is important to see what a child already knows and does use so that you can build on that knowledge and extend it. Ultimately the goal is to help readers learn and integrate the whole range of strategies, so that they do not overuse just one.

**Memory.** Emergent and Early Readers successfully use their memory of story and specific language patterns to help them “approximate” or “role play” reading. This is an important first step. That is why patterned stories, and repeated reading of engaging texts are successful for these very beginning readers.

**Picture Clues.** Most children will be attracted by illustrations, and as beginning readers they should be encouraged to use that source of information as they try to make sense of print. Emergent readers will use pictures and memory to construct the story, with little attention to the print; gradually they will use the pictures to help them predict and confirm individual words in the text. Eventually, as they develop other strategies and become more fluent readers, they will rely less on the pictures. However, even fluent readers, should be encouraged to create mental images, to visualize, as they read texts with fewer illustrations.
**Context Clues.** Successful readers use the surrounding ideas and words of a sentence, as well as their own background knowledge, and sense of language to figure out words, and to understand text. For example: “Do you know — time it is?” is easily read by using the surrounding words to predict the missing one. Early Fluent and Fluent readers, too, should be taught to use this strategy, building on their expectation that written language will make sense and sound like spoken language.

**Visual Clues.** In addition to pictures, early fluent and fluent readers learn to use the configuration of words (length, shape, specific visual details) to recognize whole words. Gradually, too, they notice patterns of letters within words to figure out new words (ear in hear; -ing in thing, swing...). Caution: While successful readers will eventually learn to recognize many, many words instantly, especially exciting content words like “elephant” and “Exterminator” some of the more common words (high frequency words) such as “the”, “this”, “what”, “who”, “then”, “there” are much harder to learn because they look so much alike to a new reader. Rather than drilling these and other similar words in isolation, they can be better taught and read within the context of whole sentences (i.e.: “Who is that at the door?” “What time is it?”) (See Sample Games document)

**Phonetic Clues.** Readers use knowledge of letter sound associations, especially initial and ending consonants to help them figure out words. This is sometimes called “sounding out” and works best when it is combined with the use of context or picture clues. Tutors can help Emergent and Early readers develop “Phonemic Awareness” (awareness of the sounds and sound patterns of spoken words) through a variety of reading and writing activities and through games (see: Sample Games document).

Early Fluent and Fluent Readers and writers gradually learn to distinguish more sounds within words and to apply that knowledge in reading and writing; they are increasingly aware of the middle sounds, or sound patterns such as “tion”.

**Caution:** Although phonemic awareness is important for reading, mastery of phonetic knowledge is not a prerequisite; many children gain knowledge of the sound system of language in the course of listening to and reading meaningful books, and through opportunities to write. Furthermore, while phonetic clues are useful as one technique, it is usually not very efficient to sound out entire words. Phonetic clues work best when combined with other strategies.

Also, remember that beginning readers should not be expected to sound out words such as names or concept words that are not already part of their spoken vocabulary.

**Structural Analysis (Word Parts).** Early Fluent and Fluent Readers can use their increased awareness of the structure of words (word parts) to help figure out new words. They can be helped to notice roots and endings (play, played, playing; fast, faster, fastest) and suffixes and prefixes (un/help/ful). They also can learn about “compound words” (some/thing, every/body).
Remember: No single element works all the time for everyone. Successful readers use different combinations of strategies and word analysis skills. Some approaches are easier for some readers than others. That is why it is essential to help beginning readers learn to use all the approaches as they become ready to do so.

**Strategies for Asking Questions**

*An important strategy to use before, during and after reading to enhance interest and comprehension*

Engaging students in a dialogue about something they are about to read can clarify their thinking and help you find out what they already know or expect from the material. Questions and discussion also clarify understanding during and after reading. One way to begin this dialogue is through asking questions that elicit responses reflecting the student’s thoughts and understandings about the reading.

Too often questions are used only at the end of reading, asked by the teacher or tutor to check comprehension. In fact, successful readers ask themselves questions throughout the reading process. Beginning readers need modeling and practice to learn how to do this.

Effective questions encourage real thinking, not just yes or no answers. Notice too that different kinds of questions require different ways of finding the answer:

- Factual or “right there” questions can be answered with a single word or phrase found right in the story: “When did the story take place?” “It was midnight, the 25th of October…”
- Inference or “think and search” questions require finding and integrating information from several places in the story and relating one’s own knowledge as well. “When did the story take place?” “The harvest moon hung high in the sky, shining on the field of ripe orange pumpkins waiting to be picked for Halloween…” Using our background knowledge of concepts like “harvest” and “Halloween” as well as the words “ripe pumpkins” we figure out that this story takes place one night in late October, even though those words aren’t used in the text.
- “In the head” or “On my own” questions require bringing in one’s own information, (background knowledge). These can be answered without reading from the book. “We have read a lot of fairy tales, what kinds of things usually happen in fairy tales?” Or, “You told me you have a cat. What might happen in a story called Puss in Boots? Do you think it could be true?”
- Remember to focus on the positive aspects of the child’s responses to encourage future attempts.
Questions before reading should help the reader:

- Make connections between background knowledge and the topic of the book: “This book is about Anansi the Spider: do you remember the other Anansi book we read? What kind of character is Anansi? What kinds of things did he do in that story? How do you suppose he will behave in this book?”
- Set a purpose for reading: “Here is a new book about sea turtles. What are some things that you would like to learn about these creatures?”
- Make predictions: “The title of this book is The Missing Tooth, (Cole, 1988). Who do you suppose the two boys on the cover are, and what do you think this book might be about? What happens to you when you lose a tooth?”

Questions during reading should help the reader:

- Clarify and review what has happened so far: “What are some of the things that made Arlo and Robby such good friends?”
- Confirm or create new predictions: “Now that one boy has lost a tooth, so they aren’t both the same, what’s going to happen? I wonder if they will stay friends.”
- Critically evaluate the story and make personal connections: “Could this really happen — that two good friends could have a fight because one of them had something the other wanted? How would you feel if you were Robby? What would you do?”
- Make connections with other experiences or books: “Does this remind you of another story/character, what happened in that story? Could that happen here?”
- Monitor the child’s reading for meaning and accuracy: “Did that word ‘horned’ make sense? What is a ‘horned toad’?”

Questions after reading will help:

- Reinforce the concept that reading is for understanding the meaning of the text, and making connections: “In this story about Amy’s first day in school how did she feel before going into her classroom? How did you feel on your first day?”
- Model ways of thinking through and organizing the information they have taken in from reading a text: “What did Amy’s teacher do when she walked into the classroom? How does Amy feel now? How do you know that?”
- Encourage critical thinking and personal response: “What do you think might have happened if the teacher had not done that? Why do you think the author decided to write this story? Would you have done what Amy did?”
- Build awareness of common themes and structures in literature: “What other story or character does this sound like? What parts are the same? What parts are different?”

When children respond to your questions it is important to listen carefully to what they say, and to respond to any questions they may have. Also, if a student has
misunderstood a section of a story you may want to go back to that part of the book and reread it, clarifying any difficult vocabulary if necessary, to help the student understand what is going on.

You might say:

“You said that the rabbit was laughing at the pig at the end, but you know, I remember something different. Let’s look at that part of the book again and see what it says.” (Then reread the appropriate segment of the book.)

“Here it says: ‘The rabbit ran through the door and slipped past the man who was laughing at the pig.’ Do you know what it means when someone “slips past” something?…”

The most important thing, however, when talking about a story with a child is to let them know that their ideas about what they have read are important and that you value what they have to say.

*These suggestions are adapted from: R. Huntsman, 1990; L. Rhodes and C. Dudley-Marling, 1996.*