

LEVELED READING SELECTIONS

A Key to Differentiation

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An advocate for literature and reading, Harvey Daniels is known for his passionate work on literacy and student-led book clubs, as recounted in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2002) and his newer title, *Minilessons for Literature Circles* (2004). Also known as “Smokey,” Daniels has been a classroom teacher, writing project director, author, and university professor.



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We have all watched it unfold. You select a wonderful book or article for your class to read. You hand it out to the students and what happens? The text is way too hard for some kids, and far too easy for others. So you “teach to the middle of the class,” earnestly trying to keep everyone on board, but always worrying about all the kids who are falling off both edges. Not a good feeling. Happily, research on differentiated instruction shows a better way: leveled selections. Let’s say that we want to teach the ingredients of narrative: plot, character, setting, and theme. To do this, we can offer two levels of text. Then, all students can understand their selection and learn the necessary skills—and no one is left behind.

Why Leveled Readings Are So Important

The whole-class study of “common texts” is a staple of language arts teaching, for some good reasons. But decades of research warn us that students grow fastest when they study text that’s precisely leveled to provide challenge without frustration. That’s why *Pearson Prentice Hall Literature* offers two leveled selections for almost every lesson—one more accessible and one more challenging. With these choices, you can teach the same literary skills (and meet all the relevant standards) using either reading selection, or both. Every student learns the same skills, but each works in a text that’s accessible. Following are research findings that support this approach:

- If we expect kids to try hard at literacy, they must spend at least part of each school day with text they can read. Kids cannot learn, retain, and apply skills if they cannot understand the print in front of them. (Allington, 2001)
- A prime determinant of comprehension is prior knowledge. The more a reader knows about the setting, topic, focus, or theme, the better his or her comprehension will be. Having a choice of texts means more kids will have the needed background. (Keene and Zimmerman, 2007)
- Student interests can weigh more in determining text difficulty than a Lexile score. Even kids who flounder with academic selections often read quite challenging text outside of school. (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002)
- Offering leveled selections helps us to meet the needs of students with reading difficulties or disabilities, as well as our non-readers and won’t-readers. Giving a choice, even the modest one of deciding between two alternatives, can create a sense of ownership and control for kids who feel powerless, overwhelmed, or bored. For advanced learners, consistently having a more challenging selection to study provides an advantage as well. Here’s the best part: when we make accommodations like leveled selections, we often find that such accommodations make learning work better for everyone. (Schwarz, 2005)

Strategies for Using Leveled Texts in the Classroom

Pick One Selection for the Whole Class. If you are committed to a common text, you can decide which of the two offered selections matches the general reading level of your class. If you have a group filled with below grade-level readers, you may wish to use the more accessible selection for everyone. Similarly, if you have an honors or mostly above grade-level group, the more challenging selection may be just the ticket. The Teacher’s Edition provides all the support you need to introduce, teach, and assess either choice.

Match Selections to Individual Students. With your knowledge of your kids as readers, along with the help the program provides (see the Accessibility at a Glance Charts in the TE), assign the best selection for each student. Even better, let students make their own choices, thus bringing topic interest and prior knowledge into play. Though most of the leveled selections share a common genre, many differ greatly in their content. Letting kids choose can double your chances that students will be engaged in the selection they are reading.

Once Students Have Chosen or Been Assigned a Text, How Do You Teach Two Different Selections at Once?

Approach One: Splitting the Class

Before Reading: Because the skills taught with either selection are the same, you can introduce the target skills (making predictions, paraphrasing, analyzing plot) as shown in the TE. Encourage students to use their text-reading strategies in the margins, both to record personal responses and to address the provided prompts about literary analysis, reading skills, factual recall, critical viewing of visual elements, and vocabulary building.

During Reading: As students read and study the text, make quiet check-in visits with individuals, pulling a chair up close and asking questions about the text so far, discussing marginal notes, and answering questions. Aim for one-to two-minute conferences, so that with a typical lesson, you’ll be able to meet with five or more students during the reading time. Keep quick notes of your conferences, both as raw material for assessment and also to help you remember ideas to share or students to call upon later.

After Reading: Place students in pairs who have read the same selection. Suggest two steps of discussion: first, students should share personal responses to the selection; next, they should review the selection in light of the focus skills of the lesson. They can use their own text markings to develop a list or chart of key passages where key elements appear. Finally, re-gather the whole class to elicit examples from both texts as a way of summarizing the lesson focus.

Approach 2: Setting Up Heterogeneous Group Workshops

Mini-lesson: Begin with a short mini-lesson that can apply to both selections. Whatever topic your mini-lesson addresses, it will involve your modeling, explaining, or thinking aloud for students. You might focus on key elements of the genre being studied (rhythm in poetry, text structures in nonfiction). You might teach about a particular strategy that smart readers use (visualizing, inferring). Or you could show specific literary devices that are common to both pieces (character development, figurative language). There are plenty of such suggestions in the Before You Read page for each selection.

Guided and Collaborative Practice: Now have kids read their chosen text, applying the concepts from the mini-lesson and jotting down their thinking as they read. After reading, form heterogeneous groups of four, with kids who have read different selections. Tell groups to have a two-step discussion: first, they should offer a quick summary of their piece. Then, members should take turns pointing out examples of where their selection manifests the target skill or literary element. During these meetings, move around the room listening in on a few groups, coaching, assessing and redirecting where necessary (you may want to jot down some notes as you go). Invite students with interesting work to share with the whole group later.

Debriefing and Wrap-up: Finally, pull students back together for a whole class meeting. Reiterate the day's target structure or skill, and then ask students who have read both texts to offer examples and share their thinking. Reinforce the mini-lesson focus.

Have All Students Read Both Selections. There are several reasons why you might have everyone read both pieces:

To deepen understanding. If you want to teach the genre under study more thoroughly, then reading both selections can help kids dig deeper, even in a heterogeneous class. Start with the more accessible piece to establish a core understanding, using the ample apparatus provided in the TE. Then move on to the more challenging text. Read aloud key passages to the whole class to enhance access for all, and use brief paired "turn and talk" activities along the way to help students think out loud as you read. Next, invite students to search back through both texts to locate common, genre-specific elements as well as note any structural, content, or value differences between the two readings.

To prepare students for standardized tests, college and work. In some areas of the country, high-stakes state exams feature pairs or even "triplets" of related pieces which kids must first read, and then seek connections, draw inferences, and make comparisons across texts. This kind of reading is both challenging and true to real-life tasks. Coordinating our thinking among multiple texts is one skill that proficient readers rely upon every day, in school, at work, and as citizens.

For enrichment or independent reading. Let kids read the other text for pleasure and to build their background knowledge for future reading. Make any accountability measures gentle—perhaps just a quick conference, so students can really read "just for fun."

Supporting Research

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