

GUIDE

Teacher's guide to classroom practices that accelerate reading and science growth



In “[The power of connectedness: A case for a coherent instruction system for reading and science improvement.](#)” we described how district and school leaders built a coherent system to support teachers and strengthen instruction across classrooms. Based on teacher and principal interviews in this district, this guide highlights the classroom routines, teacher moves, and learning conditions that supported fourth- and fifth-grade students at one elementary school in growing at nearly double the national rate in reading and science.

Four features of strong instruction in the school

We found that students were regularly expected to engage in rigorous intellectual work through (1) reading complex, grade-level texts; (2) writing to explain ideas and support claims; and (3) participating in structured opportunities for academic discourse. Across all three, teachers used responsive instructional supports that enabled students to access challenging tasks without reducing rigor. Together, these practices combined rigorous intellectual work with the supports students needed to engage with it successfully.

Strong instruction = Rigor + Access

Rigor

Students do the intellectual work

- 1 Read complex, grade-level texts**
Students make meaning from complex texts.
- 2 Write to explain and justify ideas**
Students use evidence to develop, connect, and clarify thinking.
- 3 Engage in structured academic discourse**
Students process ideas aloud, respond to peers, and revise thinking.

Access

Teachers make the same rigorous work accessible to all students

- 4 Teachers support access without reducing rigor**
Teachers monitor understanding, provide timely scaffolds, and keep all students engaged in meaningful learning.

Bottom line: All students engage in rigorous intellectual work, with support to do it well.

1. Reading complex, grade-level texts: Positioning students as primary sense-makers

Core idea

Students do the reading and thinking. Teachers preserve the complexity of the text while providing the support students need to make meaning.

Across classrooms, instruction is anchored in a shared expectation that all students engage directly with complex, grade-level texts and ideas. Teachers do not simplify or interpret the content for students; instead, they support students in doing the reading and thinking themselves. As one participant explained, the goal is for students “to read and understand complex text and be able to think deeply about complex text.”

“Every student has an observable reading job.”

What this looked like

- Students read complex, grade-level texts across genres and content areas.
- Teachers supported students in acquiring and using challenging vocabulary rather than simplifying the text.
- Students were expected to make their reading and sense-making visible.

In practice

Preserve the complexity of the text while making students’ reading, thinking, and sense-making visible. When planning a lesson, ask whether students—not the teacher—will do the reading and sense-making, and identify the supports that allow students to stay with the grade-level text.

2. Writing to explain and justify ideas: Using writing as a tool for thinking

Core idea

Writing helps students develop, connect, and clarify their thinking, not just show what they know.

Reading serves as a key source of knowledge, while writing helps students articulate and refine their thinking. This connection is especially visible in science, where students write in response to investigations, observations, and texts.

“There’s more writing happening in science, and that writing really, truly supports what’s happening in reading.”

What this looked like

- Students wrote in response to texts, investigations, and observations.
- Students made claims, supported them with evidence, and explained their reasoning.
- Teachers connected claim-evidence-reasoning in science to opinion and persuasive writing in reading.

In practice

Students are regularly asked to make claims, use evidence, and refine their thinking through writing. When planning a lesson, ask whether students will be expected to write to connect ideas, not simply recall information.

3. Structured discourse routines: Making thinking visible through talk

Core idea

Structured talk gives every student repeated opportunities to process ideas, respond to others, and refine their thinking.

Teachers use consistent routines that require students to speak, listen, read, and respond throughout a lesson. Participation is embedded in the structure of instruction rather than left to chance.

What this looked like

- Students participated in structured discourse routines, such as ABBA conversations and think-pair-share.
- Teachers used sentence frames, modeled language, and other supports to help students express ideas clearly and use academic vocabulary.
- Students listened and responded to peers, building on others' ideas and revising their own thinking.
- Teachers varied participation structures through speaking, writing, drawing, collaborative tasks, and movement.

In practice

Talk is planned as deliberately as reading and writing, giving every student repeated opportunities to make their thinking visible. When planning a lesson, ask whether students will be expected to respond to one another's ideas by agreeing, disagreeing, asking clarifying questions, or offering counterevidence.

4. Supporting access across rigorous reading, writing, and discourse

Core idea

Access and rigor are tightly linked. Teachers respond to student needs without reducing the complexity of the work.

Teachers continuously monitor student understanding and adjust instruction in real time. They use evidence from discussions, written work, exit tickets, checklists, and other formative assessments to identify who needs additional support.

What this looked like

- Teachers tracked specific “look-fors,” such as use of text evidence, academic vocabulary, and understanding of key concepts.
- Students worked with the same core texts, tasks, and concepts, even when they needed additional scaffolds.
- Teachers used supports such as sentence stems, strategic questioning, small-group instruction, visuals, frontloaded vocabulary, cognates, and structured opportunities to help students speak and write.
- Supports were added to rigorous tasks rather than substituted for them.

In practice

Teachers use evidence of student understanding to provide timely supports while keeping all students engaged in the same rigorous work.

The bottom line

Strong instruction asked students to do the intellectual work and gave them the support to do it well. Across reading and science, teachers maintained high expectations while making rigorous work accessible through responsive supports.

The result was instruction that combined rigor with access. All students were expected to engage deeply and were provided the support needed to access challenging work.



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