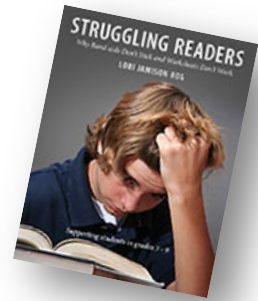


WRITING ABOUT READING: THE BROCCOLI OF LITERACY

Adapted from *Struggling Readers: Why Band-aids Don't Stick and Worksheets Don't work* by Lori Jamison Rog



For most struggling readers, there's only one thing worse than reading: it's writing about reading. Ask any struggling reader and he'll tell you what you can do with writing: can the comprehension questions, junk the journals and scrap the sticky notes. After all, pretty much all of our struggling readers are struggling writers. But the truth is, writing about reading is kind of like eating broccoli. You may not like it, but it's really good for you.

There is extensive research to support writing as the single best way to support reading for students from kindergarten to college (Graham & Hebert, 2010). When we write about what we read, we must reflect on the ideas in the text, connect them to our own ideas and beliefs, and organize and integrate our thoughts into words on a page. As Steve Graham and Michael Hebert say, in their meta-analysis of the research on "writing to read", "writing about a text should enhance comprehension because it provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing and manipulating key ideas in a text" (p. 13). This is even more important with informational reading. In terms of remembering what we read, Graham and Hebert found that writing about a text was more effective than rereading it, or discussing it.

The good news is that writing about reading has been shown to be particularly effective for lower-achieving students. The bad news is that if these students are not explicitly taught how to craft well-written responses, the effects on reading improvement are negligible. Good teaching is essential.

"If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write."
(Graham and Hebert, [Writing to Read](#), Carnegie Foundation, 2010, p. 2).



FIVE TIPS FOR HELPING STRUGGLING READERS WRITE BETTER RESPONSES

- **Teach students what good responses look like.**

Modeling may very well be the most important tool in our pedagogical toolkits. Sometimes the teacher composes a response and “thinks aloud” his own processes as s/he writes. At other times, the students are invited to collaborate on composing the response, with the teacher doing the scribing or the students sharing the pen. Providing students with a weak response and having them revise it is an excellent activity; it’s always easier to revise someone else’s work! It’s also important to provide students with support and guidance as students learn to compose their own responses.
- **Provide opportunities to talk first, then write.**

Give struggling readers the opportunity to sort out their thoughts and organize their ideas by talking to a partner before they write. When they plan out loud ahead of time, they have more mental energy to devote to getting those words on paper.
- **Focus on 3 E’s: explanation, elaboration, evidence**

Too often, our struggling readers simply answer the question or write a sentence and they think they’re done. Teach students to elaborate – give more details – about their response, and to explain their ideas using evidence from the text.
- **Chill out on Conventions**

One of the biggest challenges for our struggling readers is managing the conventions of writing – spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence structure. Reading responses are technically, first-draft writing; perhaps we need to back away from the “getting it right” and focus on the “getting it good” – putting words together to convey ideas with power and precision. As long as it’s readable, spelling and conventions can be fixed later.
- **Make expectations and criteria for evaluation clear.**

Too often, our students simply don’t know what’s expected of them. They answer the question or give their opinion about the reading in a sentence and then they’re done. Sharing the criteria for success helps guide students in developing strong responses. Here is a sample rubric:



<p style="text-align: center;">5 Insightful</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4 Thorough</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">3 Basic</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">2 Marginal</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1 Inadequate</p>
<p>Insightful and well-crafted response that extends beyond the obvious or expected and includes strong support from the text</p>	<p>Thorough response with strong support from the text</p>	<p>Credible response with limited support from the text</p>	<p>Marginal response reflects some comprehension of the text but lacks elaboration or support.</p>	<p>There is a response, but it reflects negligible understanding of the reading and/or the task.</p>

