



# The Art and Function of Reading Aloud

by LESTER LAMINACK

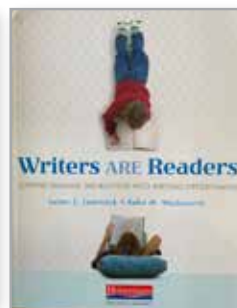
*Story lets us see ourselves in a world larger than we can imagine on our own. Story lets us see others as part of this one shared world, as members of this one human family. Story lets us imagine more. Story gives us a context, a frame of reference for considering the ‘what ifs’ and ‘why nots’ in life. Story helps us to be more to outgrow our current selves, and to see beyond the horizon of our current circumstances. Story is essential to our existence.*



## LESTER LAMINACK: LITERACY CHAMPION

Lester L. Laminack is Professor Emeritus, Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where he received two awards for excellence in teaching. Lester is now a full-time writer and consultant working with schools throughout the United States and abroad. He is the author or co-author of 18 professional books including *Learning with Zachary*, *Spelling in Use*, *Volunteers*

*Working with Young Readers*, *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts*, *Learning Under the Influence of Language and Literature*, *Reading Aloud Across the Curriculum*, *Climb Inside a Poem*, *Cracking Open the Author’s Craft*, *Unwrapping the Read Aloud*, *Bullying Hurts: Teaching Kindness Through Read Aloud and Guided Conversations*, *The Writing Teacher’s Troubleshooting Guide*, *Writers ARE Readers: Flipping Reading Strategies into Writing Instruction*, *Reading to Make a Difference*, *The Ultimate Read-Aloud Resource: Making Every Moment Intentional and Instructional with Best Friend Books*, 2nd edition, and *The Ultimate Read Aloud Collection Fiction and Nonfiction*.





Lester is also the author of several children's books including *The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins*, *Trevor's Wiggly-Wobbly Tooth*, *Saturdays and Tea Cakes*, *Jake's 100th Day of School*, *Snow Day!*, *Three Hens and a Peacock* (2012 Children's Choice K-2 Book of the Year Award), *The King of Bees*, and a forthcoming book tentatively titled *The Enormous Egg*. He lives in Whittier, North Carolina, with his husband Steve and their two dogs, Bailey and Sora. They are the proud grandparents of a brilliant little girl named Everette.

## One to Know: The Gift of the Read-Aloud

Read-aloud experiences are gifts. When you stop what you are doing and step out of the flow of your busy day to draw close to a child with a book, you are giving a gift. It is a gift of undivided time and attention. It is a gift of the heart and soul. It is a gift of both academic and emotional value, one that keeps giving long after the book is closed. In our busy world children are rarely given the intense one-to-one attention they receive when a cherished adult shares a book.

During the read-aloud experience there is the physical connection, the sense of being safe and secure in the protection of one you trust. In addition, there is a singular focus on the book, moving through the pages on the flow of the language, touching something in the art, scaffolding new language and concepts, and more. It is indeed one of the more magical and memorable experiences of childhood. Chances are that when you reflect on a beloved childhood story you associate it with the person who shared it with you. Perhaps just thinking of the book evokes an aroma (my grandmother's rose water and dusting powder, my grandfather's pipe, the sandalwood incense that lingered in the room where we read, etc.) or texture (the soft feel of a chenille robe, the nubby surface of a tweed jacket, the smooth surface of a leather chair). Time spent reading with children is an investment in lifelong memories.

## **A Dozen Reasons for Reading Aloud to Children**

- Hearing the rhythms and cadence of texts read aloud attunes the ear to the sound of written language.
- Listening to fiction read aloud builds a vocabulary of more specific language.
- Listening to nonfiction read aloud builds a vocabulary of content-specific language.
- Participating in read-aloud experiences with illustrated books pairs new vocabulary and images to help develop new concepts.
- Listening to fiction read aloud helps children become aware of perspectives different from their own.
- Listening to nonfiction read aloud provides exposure to the natural world, introducing flora, fauna, and landforms beyond one's own experience.
- Listening to texts read aloud ignites imagination and creativity.
- Listening to texts read aloud opens conversation between children and their significant adults.
- Listening to various texts read aloud exposes children to different topics, genres, authors, and illustrators which helps them form personal tastes in reading.
- Reading to a child is one-on-one devoted attention and creates a bond between adult, child, and books.
- Modeling the read aloud demonstrates to children the power, purpose, and joy of literacy.
- Reading aloud develops focus and the ability to attend.

## **What to Do**

Read-alouds, when done well, are like a storytelling performance. The reader must take the time necessary to preview and rehearse the book, just as a storyteller would. The voice is the instrument that brings life to the language of the writer, and that voice has to convey the tone of the characters and the narrator, the emotion of the scene, and the mood of the situation. We cannot reasonably expect that our children will hear those features of a story in their own minds unless we provide a demonstration for what is possible.

## **A Few Things to Consider When Selecting Books**

It is important to be attuned to your child's developing facility with language and evolving interests as you select books for read-aloud experiences. As language becomes more robust and interests become more varied, you will find it helpful to include your child in making the selections. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- When children are very young, focus on books that are more simple, uncluttered, and straightforward.
- As children develop language and begin to demonstrate interest in the world, gather books around those expressed interests (birds, butterflies, truck, dogs, picnics, etc.).
- For younger children, select stories that are presented with colorful illustrations that strongly support/match the text.

- As children develop language and concepts, move toward books that elaborate and extend the basic ideas introduced. Illustrated texts remain important as the illustrations (photographs or art) help the child to envision what the text is describing and aids in the development of new concepts.
- Ask yourself, will the book stimulate the child's imagination?

### **A Few Things to Consider When Reading to Children**

- Sit beside the child and position the book so that each of you can see the full spread (both pages visible) as you read.
- Read the book at least once or twice aloud to yourself before reading it to a child. You want to find the flow and rhythm of the language before sharing it with a child. Reading it aloud as rehearsal will let you hear how your voice conveys tone and mood.
- Think about the tone or the attitude of the narrator (serious, snarky, silly, etc.) and be sure your voice reveals that.
- Think about the mood or how the text makes you feel (humorous, energetic, reflective, cheerful, dreamy, etc.) and let your voice, pacing, and inflections evoke that as you read.
- Consider the age of the child. Very young children may be much more interactive and want to touch the page, ask questions, or seek clarification. Older children may be more likely to listen intently throughout the story and engage in conversation after.
- Be patient. As excited as you may be about introducing a new book, the child may insist on revisiting a favorite. Honor the child's preference for a favorite book. After all, isn't that love of a book exactly what we are striving for?
- Be attentive to the child. In one sitting, the child may be completely focused on the story for the duration of the reading. Then, the next time, the child may engage for a page or two and insist on a different book, or even a different activity.

## **More to Know and Do**

Read often with your child. Make the read-aloud experience a routine. Consider using a read-aloud as a transition to signal an event. For example, two stories before bedtime, or a favorite poem you recite together while getting undressed and ready for bath time. Relying on literature to signal those routine events can make the transition more predictable for the child.

### **Contact Information**

You can find more information about Lester on his website [www.LesterLaminack.com](http://www.LesterLaminack.com)