

Building Reading Skills in Middle and High School

Many Voices Literature Series and Student Achievement



“American youth need strong literacy skills to succeed in school and in life.”

—*Reading Next*

“To meet the demands of life in the 21st century, today’s adolescents must develop and use sophisticated literacy skills.”

—*National Institute for Literacy*

There is no more important educational building block than a student’s ability to read. Research conducted by a variety of groups—including the National Academy of Sciences’ National Research Council, the National Reading Panel, and the Alliance for Excellent Education—clearly demonstrates the teaching and learning practices necessary to empower students with the reading proficiency they need to succeed.

To date, much of the research on effective literacy instruction has focused on early literacy and foundational instructional building blocks, focusing on the specific components necessary to transform every starting student into a proficient reader. These building blocks, which serve as the foundation for both federal and state student reading achievement standards, include

- phonemic awareness—the ability to manipulate the sounds that make up spoken language
- phonics—the understanding that there are relationships between letters and sounds
- fluency—the ability to read with accuracy, speed, and expression
- vocabulary—the understanding of the meaning of the words in a language
- reading comprehension—the ability to enhance understanding and enjoyment of what they read

This focus, though, has left many asking what the research states on transforming middle grade students into strong, confident readers.

In its *Reading Next* study, the Alliance for Excellent Education built upon the early grades reading research to identify those learning components necessary to build successful adolescent readers. The landmark study moved beyond the five core instructional practices needed to build reading skills, focusing on

- direct, explicit comprehension instruction
- effective instructional principles embedded in content
- motivation and self-directed learning
- text-based collaborative learning
- strategic tutoring
- diverse texts
- intensive writing
- technology component
- ongoing formative assessment of students

Since the release of the *Reading Next* study in 2004, independent third-party data has further validated the Alliance’s findings, articulating that research-based, effective adolescent literacy programs require

- emphasis on reading comprehension strategies
- collaborative learning that provides student-focused learning opportunities
- strong emphasis on writing and the development of writing skills
- effective assessment of student progress and achievement




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Many Voices Literature Series

Perfection Learning's *Many Voices Literature Series* is based on decades of scientific research on adolescent literacy and embodies the recommendations of *Reading Next* and subsequent reading research efforts focused on middle grades instruction. Introduced to schools in 2002, *Many Voices* provides a series of anthologies for middle and high school classrooms, empowering educators with classroom content that is age, reading level, and subject matter appropriate. Building on both fundamental early reading skills and the strategies necessary to transform middle and high school students into proficient readers, *Many Voices* is a research-based approach to reading and critical thinking for virtually all students.

The Perfection Learning program provides classrooms with a wide variety of genres, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, fables, cultural folktales, and legends. Unlike traditional anthologies where less than 50 percent of the text is reading selections, nearly 80 percent of *Many Voices* is actual content. This emphasis on relevant and interesting selections provides a flexible anthology designed to develop real and measureable student reading and learning skills.

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Emphasize Reading Comprehension

“Comprehension is critically important to the development of children’s reading skills and therefore to the ability to obtain and education.”

—National Reading Panel

For reading instruction to have lasting impact, it must emphasize direct and explicit comprehension skill acquisition. **Through comprehension instruction, readers are able to understand what they read, while gaining the strategies and processes necessary to achieve, both in English/Language Arts classrooms as well as in other academic subjects.**

With middle and high school students, it is particularly important for research-based instructional programs to focus on a range of learning strategies, including questioning, predicting, clarifying, connecting, summarizing, and evaluating. These strategies—articulated by the National Reading Panel and endorsed in subsequent reading research studies—are core to the instructional design of a scientifically-based research program and are key to the academic success of classroom instruction.

Comprehensive instructional programs such as Perfection Learning's *Many Voices* equip teachers with the materials, approaches, and professional development to ensure that these strategies and a strong emphasis on comprehension skill acquisition are integrated into the daily instructional process. Each Teaching and Assessment Resource contains direct instruction of active reading skills for both fiction and nonfiction selections. Students practice and apply the skills of predicting, questioning, clarifying, connecting, summarizing, and evaluating. Students then use these essential skills as they read and connect with the selections in the text.

The research base also demonstrates that programs such as *Many Voices*, which embed instructional principles in content-area texts, enhance reading comprehension skills by providing instruction and practice in both reading and writing tied to specific subject matter. By focusing on instructional strands such as literary genres, literary themes, and historical eras, successful educators can strengthen reading comprehension while cultivating student interest in other academic subjects measured as part of the state assessment.

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Reviewing

What's the Worst That Could Happen?

Discussing the Selection

1. What do you find funny in this story? List all the things that tickled you, such as fresh and funny language, character details, and dialogue. Be specific.
2. Explain why Murphy agrees to act in the play. Does the play unfold as you expected?
3. In the very last line, Murphy says, "I don't even want to think about what might happen next." Predict what might happen.
4. Why do you think people always remember their most embarrassing moments?

Writing an Anecdote

An anecdote is a brief, often comical story describing a memorable incident. Write an anecdote on the theme of embarrassing moments. Feel free to give it a twist. For example: "The Most Embarrassing Moment: I Can Imagine," or "My (Pet/School Bus Driver/Ancestor's) Most Embarrassing Moment."

About Bruce Coville (1950–)

New York writer Bruce Coville grew up in the fifties and early sixties, a self-described "bookaholic" who also enjoyed reading "zillions of comic books." In sixth grade, he found that he enjoyed writing fiction as much as reading it. Before he could support himself as a writer, however, he worked as a gravedigger, toymaker, and elementary school teacher. Now he's the best-selling author of over eighty books, including *My Teacher is an Alien*. A lot of his books are science fiction and fantasy titles that display his unstoppable sense of humor. "I try . . . to make my stories the kinds of things that I would have enjoyed myself when I was young: to write the books I wanted to read, but never found."

28 Unit One Who Am I?

Establish Collaborative, Student-Focused Learning

“As students progress through the grades, they become increasingly ‘tuned out,’ and building student choices into the school day is an important way to reawaken student engagement.”

—Reading Next

NAME _____ CLASS _____ DATE _____

Active Reading Practice: Nonfiction
Elephants Cross Under River, Making Hearts Rise by Michael Kaufman

Use Active Reading strategies to answer the questions on these pages. Write your own Active Reading observations on the lines provided and mark the text as you read.

Text: The night was cool and the wind was churning as the eighteen elephants prepared to cross by foot into Manhattan from Queens. It was a little before midnight, and up ahead, the Empire State Building glowed brightly as the mahouts and keepers slid open the animal cars on the circus train.

Without a single snort of protest, without an elephant sneer, they emerged wallowing in grace like fat chorus girls happy to be back in town. Without anyone's saying a word to them, they lined up and bowed their heads to make it easier for their handlers to put on the red bridles with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey insignia.

For the elephants, it was a matter of routine. Sure, they were about to play the Apple, but all of them have done that before and the fact is, walking into town is part of their act. It's what they do and they have done it all over the country. When they walk, people notice. They are good at it and they know it. But elephants once crossed the Alps with Hannibal, so you can see how they might think that walking under the East River was no big deal.

But if the elephants were blasé, the handful of circus executives and their very few guests were awestruck as they waited. After all, how many among us have walked with elephants? Probably even fewer than have danced with wolves. Even the police were excited.

"This is amazing," said Lieut. John Rohe of the highway safety unit, who had helped plan the operation involving dozens of patrol cars and scores of uniformed men and women on both sides of the river. "It's the first time I've seen it."

Rodney Hisey a vice president of the circus who was on his first animal walk to Madison Square Garden, explained that not only were such parades "traditional" but also they were the most practical way to transport animals other than lions and tigers from the train.

Midnight came and Mark Oliver Gebel, the twenty-four-year-old lion tamer and chief animal trainer, said, "Go, Jenny, go." And Jenny, the pleasant lead elephant, led the way across Jackson

Questioning: What are elephants doing in Manhattan?

Clarifying: How will the elephants 'play' the Apple?

Connecting: Would walking with the elephants excite you? Why or why not?

Many Voices Themes Perfection Learning Corporation • REPRODUCIBLE 25

In recent years, researchers have identified more and more data on the importance of collaborative learning and the value of student-student and student-teacher interaction as part of the learning process. This is particularly true in adolescent literacy instruction, where student interaction serves as a motivator and an internal progress monitoring system.

Research suggests that there are three primary options for incorporating text-based collaborative learning in the classroom.

- Teaching the entire text with all students reading each selection and discussing their reactions in small or large groups
- Teaching part of the text in a shorter time frame by assigning students to read essential selections and share their findings
- Incorporating the text into a novel study, using titles at a variety of reading levels so students can read a book that is accessible to them and share their findings with students who have read other titles

Successful middle grades programs also empower the classroom teacher to tailor classroom discussions and dialogues to specific student interests. Rather than following a scripted set of study questions, research-based programs such as *Many Voices* enhance the collaborative learning process by allowing students to relate specific readings to cluster questions as they read. The selection and unit questions in the *Many Voices* student texts allow students to think critically about the reading and share their thoughts with their peers. Teachers continue to monitor progress and provide individual instruction while boosting student engagement and interest in particular lessons.

This collaborative process naturally leads to a learning continuum that provides clear student motivation and self-directed learning. Working together, students build motivation to read and learn, gaining the instruction and support needed for independent learning tasks they will face throughout their lives. The thematic organization of the *Many Voices* program encompasses issues that are highly relevant to young people, such as identity, family, friends, school, community, and neighborhood. The relevant issues provide additional motivation to read and share their ideas with their peers. *Many Voices* offers educators a unique instructional design that motivates students through highly relevant and intriguing selections while providing ongoing self-synthesis of what is learned. Such an approach is recommended in the *Reading Next* study.

Focus on Writing

“Writing is essential to success in school and the workplace. Yet writing is a skill that cannot be learned on the spot; it is complex and challenging.”

—National Writing Project

While early grades reading research, such as that put forward by the National Reading Panel, focused on the core skills needed to become reading proficient, middle and high school literacy research correctly emphasizes the importance of writing as part of the literacy process. Not only does writing provide a practical application of core reading skills (including vocabulary and comprehension), but it provides all students with the kinds of skills necessary to succeed in secondary and postsecondary education, as well as the workplace.

In the middle and high school classroom, research-based instructional programs often end each unit of study with a writing component, asking students to respond to a particular question, integrating their reading comprehension skills with their writing ability. At the end of each unit in the *Many Voices* program, students are given writing prompts that require them to respond to intertextual questions as they compare and contrast, generalize and draw conclusions, and evaluate.

In addition, each Teaching and Assessment Resource offers full writing workshops that focus on writing about literature, writing to inform and explain, and writing to persuade.

According to Bloom's Taxonomy, this approach—which is a core component of Perfection Learning's *Many Voices* program—is one of the highest levels of thinking. By utilizing this approach, every successful student is both a reader and a writer.

Utilize Effective Assessment Strategies

“Both the teacher and the student use formative assessment results to make decisions about what actions to take to promote further learning. It is an ongoing, dynamic process that involves far more than frequent testing, and measurement of student learning is just one of its components.”

—Stephen Chappuis and Jan Chappuis, *Educational Leadership*
(December 2007/January 2008)

Even the strongest of research models requires clear and ongoing student assessment. In today’s era of state tests and Adequate Yearly Progress, it is no longer sufficient for schools to simply assess students once at the end of the year. Instead, current research protocols call for ongoing formative assessments that can track student progress and can be used by educators to offer specific interventions or added assistance to those students in need.

The *Many Voices* program allows teachers to utilize informal assessments of student achievement as part of the daily classroom learning experience. Through regular discussion questions, selection and vocabulary quizzes, writing activities, and section-by-section discussion questions, teachers can gain the data they need to track student progress and achievement. These strategies, along with carefully-crafted writing rubrics, empower teachers to conduct the ongoing formative assessments required by the U.S. Department of Education and most state education offices.

Instructional partners such as Perfection Learning have been at the forefront when it comes to integrating ongoing formative assessments into the instructional process, and programs such as *Many Voices* provide a range of informal assessment options designed to meet the needs of specific teachers, classrooms, and school districts.

Conclusion

For middle and high school grades literacy programs to be effective, they must focus on the core instructional strategies proven to work with adolescent learners. Through research identified by the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Reading Panel, the National Research Council, and many others, we know that a high-quality adolescent literacy program includes: 1) an emphasis on reading comprehension strategies; 2) collaborative learning that provides student-focused learning opportunities; 3) a strong emphasis on writing and the development of writing skills; and 4) effective assessment of student progress and achievement.

Through its *Many Voices Literature Series*, Perfection Learning provides school and school districts with the literature, instructional approaches, and support necessary to build literary development skills in young adults. Built on the latest research and what is proven effective in literacy instruction, *Many Voices* serves as a strong classroom-based tool to boost student reading achievement in middle and high school classrooms throughout the United States.

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