

# Reading Scaffolds: Instructional Tools for Our Focus toward Grade-Level Reading

By Kandra James, M.A.T.

Grade-level reading is necessary for academic and social success as a contributing citizen in America. But many of America’s students are not attaining grade-level reading expectations. While there are potentially myriad reasons our students are not reaching this expected academic milestone, there is only one acceptable outcome: We must teach our students to read at grade level.

For many of our students who are reading below grade level, it is important to remember that these students are not lower-level thinkers. Students who are reading below grade level are often incorrectly presumed to be incapable of higher-level thinking. Indeed, lower-level readers are quite capable of doing higher-level thinking. These students think and comprehend the world at grade level—and sometimes beyond. However, they are being held back by low expectations and low exposure to grade-level content. Research has shown that high expectations of students yield high rewards. If we expect more by integrating instructional strategies that promote productive struggle, we will elicit more from students.

When we believe that our students have the capacity to achieve greatness and hold them to higher performance expectations, they will rise to the challenge. It is with this belief in hand that educators can push their students and themselves toward grade-level reading attainment by using research-based scaffolding strategies throughout their reading and content-area instructional lessons.

This paper will highlight how educators can use instructional scaffolds to bring their struggling readers to grade-level proficiency. Multiple examples of research that exemplify positive outcomes for students when scaffolded reading instructional strategies were put in place will also be identified. Several specific scaffolding strategies will be described that have been proven to be effective with readers, allowing them access to grade-level text. Additionally, this paper will address proactive strategies educators can take to prepare themselves and their students to successfully implement reading scaffolds within grade-level instruction for all students.



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# Scaffolding Defined

Scaffolding strategies are instructional methods that can be used with all students, including students who struggle with reading grade-level texts. Scaffolding was first identified and coined in a 1976 paper, "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving," in *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, in which the authors defined scaffolding as:

A process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts . . . scaffolding consists essentially of the adult "controlling" those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90).

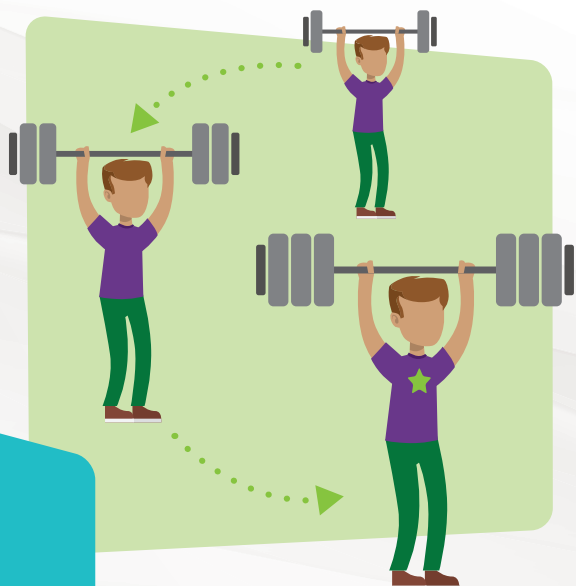
The authors also note that the student must be able to recognize a solution to a particular situation or problem before they are able to eventually independently produce the steps leading to it without expert assistance. This definition implicitly includes the understanding that teacher modeling is an important part of the scaffolding process.

Scaffolding is not the same as differentiating instruction. Both techniques are student-centered strategies that meet students where they are and move their learning forward. However, with differentiated instruction, educators may adapt the content students are asked to learn and the ways in which the student is asked to meet lesson goals (Tomlinson, 2017). With differentiated instruction, students may receive completely different instructional text that may or may not be on grade level based on their data-driven needs (Tomlinson, 2017). Scaffolding strategies are intended for use with *all* students. This is a key difference between scaffolding and differentiated instruction. When scaffolding techniques are used, all students receive

instruction using the same text with the ultimate goal that all learners have access to grade-level text.

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Incorporating scaffolds into a lesson includes intentionally modifying lesson content as it is designed, allowing all students access and success in learning the same content. This entails cognitively supporting students as they progress toward a goal by gradually shifting the weight of responsibility from the teacher to the student as the student's agility with the content becomes stronger. This goal is accomplished by breaking up the learning experience into increments and providing a tool—or a structure—with each increment.



# How and Why Scaffolding Works

There is much research on the use and effectiveness of scaffolding as a reading instructional strategy. One reason why scaffolding as a grade-level strategy is effective is it allows the teacher to keep texts and activities whole and authentic. Each student will experience the same grade-level text expectations. Scaffolding is exercised through the process—where the teacher adds instructional opportunities to various increments, or chunks, of the text and lesson delivery. It is important to reiterate that the text itself is not altered. Students experience the grade-level text with all its nuanced value, such as grade-level vocabulary and grammatical or idiomatic expressions. Intentionally chosen and placed scaffolds provide multiple and varying access points for students. Additionally, this allows students to gradually learn to manage and master content through just-right moments of challenge (Clark & Graves, 2005).

In a 2018 article, “Coursework to Classroom: Learning to Scaffold Instruction for Bilingual Learners,” published in *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Lesley University professor Dr. Laura Schall-Leckrone found that scaffolding strategies employed by pre-service and new history teachers who work with bilingual learners yielded positive results. Schall-Leckrone focused her research specifically on history content because it contains abstract concepts and complex linguistic structures that are divergent from everyday language, making history texts particularly challenging for English Learners. History texts challenge students to unpack dense, language-rich text of unfamiliar content. Endemic to history content is the expectation that students will experience long noun phrases and nominalizations or the instance when a process is turned into a noun (e.g., monetize to monetization). One concept is commonly represented using multiple terms within the same passage. Additionally, history often covers expansive time periods as well as vast geographical regions. It is for these reasons that Schall-Leckrone investigated the use of scaffolding strategies within history content-area instruction.

Teacher participants in Schall-Leckrone’s study consistently used four types of scaffolds during their pre-planned history lesson: visuals, vocabulary instruction, graphic organizers, and adapted and/or annotated texts. Participants used visuals, videos, PowerPoint® presentations, or a smart board to provide comprehensible input and, more specifically, to clarify directions, present content information, and scaffold analytical thinking. Previous research has demonstrated that these scaffolding strategies support students with activating prior knowledge, engaging with content, and demonstrating analytical skills that otherwise might be inaccessible if language were the sole medium of instruction (Schall-Leckrone, 2018).



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With the knowledge that vocabulary plays a critical role in scaffolding content and language development, Schall-Leckrone’s study participants routinely taught words associated with key historical concepts, “seeming to recognize that mastery of content-specific terms promotes comprehension” (Schall-Leckrone, 2018, p. 43). Research conducted by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan in their book, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, suggests vocabulary instruction should focus on deep understanding of a smaller number of words, and it should not just define the words, but also offer discussion opportunities and exposure to related words in rich contexts (Beck, et al., 2002). The effectiveness of this approach to vocabulary practice was evident in Schall-Leckrone’s study, as participants generally selected small numbers of content-specific words, introduced them with direct instruction, and provided multiple opportunities to apply them during the lesson (Schall-Leckrone, 2018).

All Schall-Leckrone study participants also used graphic organizers to make content more accessible to students by assisting them in processing, recording, and displaying content information from history sources. This follows previously documented research that highlights how the use of graphic organizers as a scaffolding tool helps students display relationships among concepts (Schall-Leckrone, 2018).

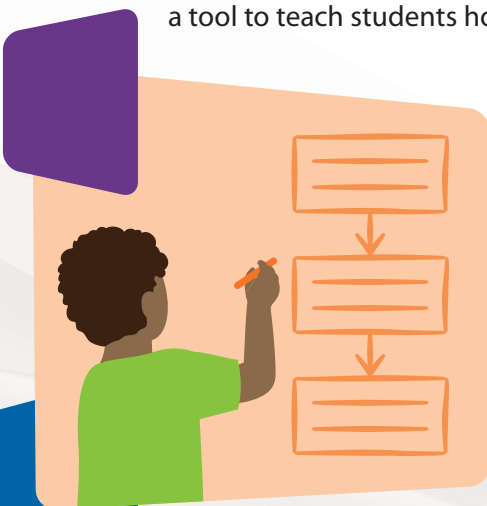
Finally, all study participants provided students with some form or adapted/modified text within the lesson. In some instances, some of the participants provided students with text that the teacher had modified visually as well as its syntax to make the text more accessible. Other teacher participants did not modify the text, yet they used the authentic grade-level text as a tool to teach students how to infer and annotate as they read. While simplified texts may be

necessary for bilingual students and struggling readers at the earliest stages, previous research highlights that most students benefited from scaffolded engagement with authentic texts as in the later described instance (Schall-Leckrone, 2018).

Education professor Dr. Beth Maloch investigated the relationship between the teacher’s role and the students’ participation within literature discussion groups in a Grade 3 classroom in her study “Scaffolding Student Talk: One Teacher’s Role in Literature Discussion Groups.” For the discussion groups to be productive and instructionally meaningful, it was important for the teacher to shift from being the instructional leader toward being a facilitator, allowing the literature discussion groups to become more student centered. Over the course of the study, Maloch noted that for this

to occur, the teacher’s interventions were metalinguistic in that teachers modeled their ability to reflect on and consciously think about the oral and written language used within the group. In this instance, teachers overtly modeling this process of how language was used served as a scaffolding strategy to highlight the discussion process for students. Influences that contributed to the active nature of the teacher’s involvement within the discussions included the amount of discussion time managed by the teacher’s tactics and students’ developing understanding of conversational strategies and exploratory talk. Maloch noted students’ exploratory (i.e., productive) talk usage. Exploratory talk usage indicates teacher-encouraged intervention.

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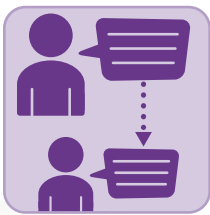
This study offers insights about the value of teachers' scaffolding language for students as they develop and enact new forms of discourse (Maloch, 2002).

A final example of scaffolding in instruction comes from the research of Dr. Wendy Cumming-Potvin, documented in her article "Scaffolding, Multiliteracies, and Reading Circles." Cumming-Potvin focused on Nicholas, a middle-school-age student, who was identified as struggling with the literacy curriculum. However, Nicholas experienced success when engaged in reading circles and other multiliteracies that extended beyond the classroom—including guided participation and particularly through technology-mediated tasks. The student was able to successfully engage with challenging text when given discussion prompts that placed the task and text within the context of real-life examples. The student was able to transfer his small group experience into another setting, in which he positioned himself as the experienced learner and scaffolded content acquisition for lesser-experienced learners when deciphering and using website-based information. Cumming-Potvin further concluded that Nicholas's literacy progress during reading circles suggested that multiliteracies and interweaving scaffolding and diverse texts in meaningful tasks encourage agency in students learning across contexts. Additionally, the process that the student engaged in suggests scaffolding should be considered as an in-school and at-home tool to increase students' literacy confidence (Cumming-Potvin, 2007).



## Effective Scaffolding Strategies

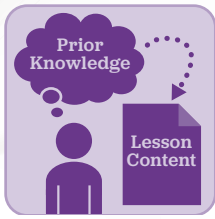
So far, this paper has examined various educators' work with scaffolding in their classrooms. The following section will review and summarize these strategies.



### SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY 1

## Modeling

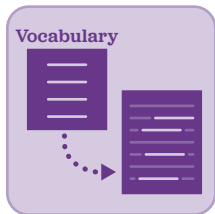
One strategy explicitly and implicitly referenced in the literature was the use of modeling where the teacher used herself as the model of appropriate behaviors, language, and processing. Modeling, as a scaffolding strategy, requires both showing and telling. Teachers show and simultaneously explain (or "tell") how a particular process is done using appropriate language. This serves as an example for students, allowing them to take more control as they engage in the task themselves. Maloch noted in her study of scaffolding strategies used within student-centered literature circles: Teachers needed to identify, model, and explain various conversational techniques for the novice students who were unaccustomed to student-led discussions and more accustomed to teacher-led discussions.



#### SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY 2

## Prior Knowledge

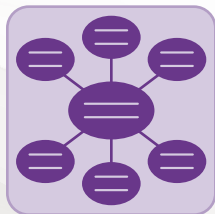
Another scaffolding strategy referenced in the literature was the need to access students' prior knowledge of content and tasks. Accessing prior knowledge is essentially a technique that allows the student to make connections between what they already know and the lesson's content. In Schall-Leckrone's study of history teachers' scaffolding strategies with bilingual students, she noted that several study participants identified cognates (i.e., similar words in two languages) from the text, believing that this would enable students to independently apply background knowledge when encountering new words. Other examples of accessing prior knowledge can be as simple as conducting a preview of the text, highlighting text features (e.g., images or headings), and asking students questions about what they see. The beauty of accessing prior knowledge is that it validates all learners because all students can participate.



#### SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY 3

## Pre-Teaching Vocabulary

Pre-teaching vocabulary is highly recommended as a scaffolding strategy throughout educational research. Thoughtfully selecting words that—according to Beck, McKeown, & Kucan—are useful, have relevance to and relationships with other words, and bring more meaning to texts offer students of all instructional needs more opportunities to access texts and understand their meaning. Pre-teaching vocabulary also heightens student engagement with and insight into text situations, such as encountering idiomatic language or Tier 2 or 3 vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).



#### SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY 4

## Visual Aids

Visual aids are also a strongly recommended scaffolding tool within reading and content-area instruction. As texts become more sophisticated, visual aids, such as graphic organizers, diagrams, pictures, charts, and graphs, offer additional support for student thinking. Visual aids were noted as an added value to the instructional lessons in Schall-Leckrone's study. As a scaffolding tool, visual aids are not the product. Rather, they serve as the conduit to understanding by supporting students' thought processes. When students are challenged to express themselves because they lack experience with academic language, the graphic organizer is the bridge between what they are thinking and what they may want to say or write. The visual aid is the vehicle that delivers their intangible thoughts to reality.



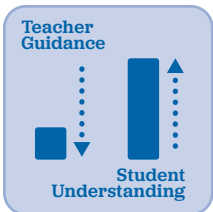
#### SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY 5

## Student Oral Expression

A final scaffolding strategy referenced in the literature and suggested in many research sources is the need to give students time to talk and express themselves orally and in writing, in relation to the content of the text being tackled. Maloch and Cumming-Potvin both noted in their studies that teachers had to intentionally allow students to take more ownership of discussions in literature circles. Providing wait time gives all learners an opportunity to process new ideas and formulate responses. It also gives learners time to delineate what they do and do not understand about a text. This process of making sense of content and responding to it is something all students can do.

## Successful Scaffolding Implementation

The instructional reading scaffolds highlighted in this paper are not new strategies within the reading community. As shown by the time span of the literature reviewed in this paper, these strategies—along with the practice of scaffolding itself—have been in service for many years. However, though many educators are familiar with instructional reading scaffolds, these strategies are not implemented as often or as consistently as they could be. For the successful implementation and regular use of the scaffolding techniques referenced in this paper, there are a few planning and management strategies that educators may want to take into consideration.



#### IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY 1

## Planning Scaffolded Instruction

In her book, *Explicit Instruction: Effective and Efficient Teaching*, Dr. Anita Archer notes that scaffolding offers extensive instructional benefits to students who have various learning difficulties, including attention challenges, working memory concerns, and poorly organized knowledge. When implementing scaffolds in a lesson, teachers will typically provide high levels of initial guidance that will be systematically reduced as students demonstrate greater understanding of and agility with the content (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Thus, Archer recommends educators invest time in planning lessons that adhere to one or more of the following elements:

1. Take complex skills and divide them into logical chunks.
2. Logically sequence skills to build upon one another.
3. Select curricular examples that progress in complexity.
4. Provide complete models and demonstrations for students.
5. Incorporate hints and prompts that help students practice new skills.
6. Provide aids, such as checklists, to help students remember processes used in a task.



## IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY 2

# Flexible Instructional Groupings

For teachers to maximize the use of scaffolding, classroom flexibility is necessary. Flexible instructional grouping strategies, in which teachers employ whole group and small group student configurations, are important classroom management strategies. This will allow teachers to address variances in student needs with a laser focus.

The literature reviewed for this essay noted that reading or literature circles were a tool that teachers used to facilitate text access. These small group configurations gave the students more agency and also allowed the teacher time to focus on a smaller number of students. The small group sessions also allowed students to have greater access to specific teacher and peer support as they experienced the productive struggle toward greater text comprehension. Flexible grouping promotes expansion of students' perspectives and challenges them to take on varying roles and practice a range of skillsets in new ways. These valuable student outcomes are achieved when teachers proactively plan instructional lessons with grade-level goals and knowledge of students in mind (Tomlinson, 2017).

## Conclusion

Grade-level reading achievement is imperative for our students. The urgency cannot be understated. Myriad educational entities and educational think-tank organizations invest heavily to produce research reports and state-level briefs that highlight the importance of reading at grade level, in particular, by Grade 3. Grade 3 reading achievement has been shown to be a predictor of high school graduation and later college and career success. While many factors contribute to students falling behind, grade-level reading is an attainable goal. Tailoring instruction to be inclusive of practices, such as scaffolding, that honor our students and validate who they are, is the launchpad toward reaching this success.

The goal of this paper is to provide educators with information about scaffolding as a grade-level reading strategy. Scaffolding can serve as our students' channel into grade-level text. Through intentionally sequenced instruction, scaffolding gradually builds students' ability to independently maneuver complex grade-level text. Many of the scaffolding strategies discussed in this paper can be easily implemented and, as research has shown, will benefit students enormously.

Educators want students to be independent readers who have ownership over their own learning. Scaffolding promotes student agency and, over time, leads to students learning to incorporate modeled strategies with little to no teacher support. Ultimately, the goal is to create readers who employ problem-solving strategies to better comprehend complex texts.



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## Additional Readings

While not referenced in this paper, the following sources can serve as valuable additional information on this topic for further research and topic knowledge.

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