

Providing the Strongest Literacy Instruction for Middle Grade Students



BUILT ON THE
Science
OF
Reading



Middle schoolers are unique. They're not older elementary schoolers or younger high schoolers; they're at a crucial stage of development all their own.

And when it comes to instruction, they need materials that aren't merely repurposed content. They need instruction—especially literary instruction—specialized just for them.

Especially now. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report showed that **more than 30% of eighth-grade students aren't at grade level**, and that after the pandemic, national reading scores fell among both fourth and eighth graders.

Today, more and more secondary educators are looking for truly effective ways to help *all* their students: those impacted by the opportunity gap, those who are on grade level, and those who are excelling.

Fortunately, we know where to find the strongest possible literacy instruction. There are decades of research showing how students best learn to read—from phonics to fluency to comprehension of increasingly complex texts—and how best to teach students at all ages and stages.

That's the Science of Reading. What it tells us: Students need explicit, systematic instruction, grounded in research.

So far, the Science of Reading movement has focused largely on students in kindergarten through fifth grade, but it doesn't have to stop there. **The Science of Reading can support middle school students with literacy—and, by extension, with all grade-level content.**



Middle school literacy: It's science.

In the late 1990s, reading and literacy expert Hollis Scarborough, Ph.D., used pipe cleaners to create a model of the intertwined skills that make up the process of learning to read. That model grew into what we now know as the Reading Rope: the visualization that helps us understand the essential strands of reading and how they work together.



What are the main strands of the Reading Rope?

The Reading Rope consists of two strands: one focused on word recognition, and the other focused on language comprehension.

Word recognition encompasses the ability to accurately and swiftly decode printed words. Phonological awareness, phonics, and sight word recognition all contribute to this strand.

Language comprehension involves the understanding of spoken and written language, including vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and the ability to make inferences and draw conclusions. Language comprehension allows readers to extract meaning from text.

These strands are interconnected and mutually supportive, working together to create text-reading fluency. Strong word-recognition skills enable efficient decoding, which frees up cognitive resources for language comprehension. Similarly, robust language-comprehension skills facilitate deeper word understanding and contextualized reading.

language comprehension

knowledge

vocabulary

sentences

reasoning

mental model

word recognition

sounds

letters

words

increasingly strategic →

increasingly automatic →

*skilled
reading*

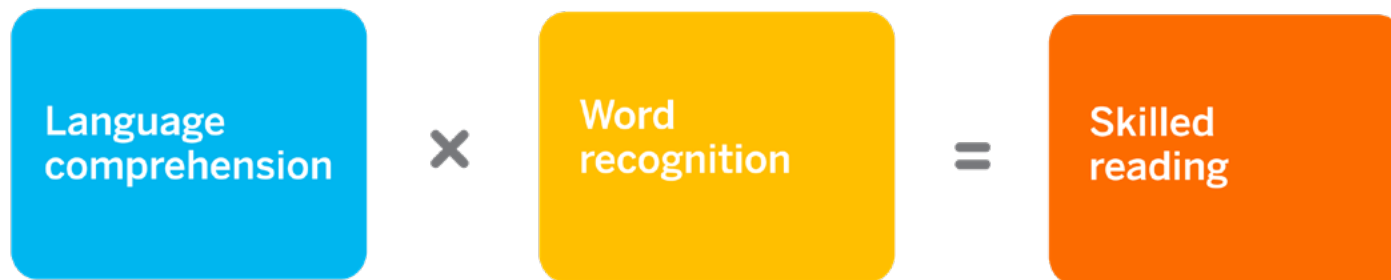
Braid diagram based on Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for Research in Early Literacy* (pp. 97–110). New York: Guilford Press.

Why middle schoolers need the Science of Reading

The Reading Rope represents not just the elements of learning to read, but also the process toward fluency. As students progress, their word recognition becomes increasingly automatic, and their language comprehension becomes increasingly strategic. They can effortlessly recognize words, allowing them to focus on understanding the text and performing higher-level thinking. By strategically applying language comprehension skills, readers get better at analyzing texts, constructing meaning, and making connections.

When it comes to middle school, we're talking about the "far" end of the rope: *skilled reading*. Middle schoolers are generally savvy at all sorts of reading-adjacent skills: they may be able to skim to get the gist and search online for information to fill the gaps. What these students need now is **systematic, explicit instructional strategies** that meet them where they are.

This is where teachers can use some support.



Literacy curriculum needs to be focused on more than just strategies, says educational leadership, literacy, and student skill development expert Katie McKnight, Ph.D. Effective literacy instruction, especially in the middle grades, emphasizes comprehension over the ability to skim.

For example, in the sentence, “The leaves were turning red, orange, and yellow, and there was a chill in the air,” McKnight says there are at least three levels of reading comprehension:



1. Literal: What color are the leaves?



2. Inferential: What season is it? (Background knowledge is relevant; this might be harder for a kid from Phoenix or San Diego than for a kid from the Northeast.)



3. Evaluative: I'd say the best season is fall. Why?

Evaluative questions can go even deeper, of course. *How can small actions make a big impact? How does history shape our future? What defines success—and is it the same for everyone?* Middle schoolers are, as you know, ready for those big ideas—and strengthening their understanding of the text unlocks deeper insights and brings more confidence to these discussions.

Science of Reading-based instructional strategies in the middle school classroom

Like K–5 students, middle grade students are best served by research-backed, proven reading instruction. Incorporating the following strategies into your instruction will help your students grow as readers, writers, and thinkers.

Text selection and sequencing

In middle school, as students move into reading more as part of their learning, there is an increased focus on text structures, topics, and complexity.

“For middle grade literacy teachers, our task shifts to thinking about what texts students need in order to build and apply their skills and knowledge,” says Deb Sabin, Amplify ELA 6–8 Chief Academic Officer. “We want to choose text that invites all students into a rich playing field where they can keep developing those skills and growing that knowledge base.”

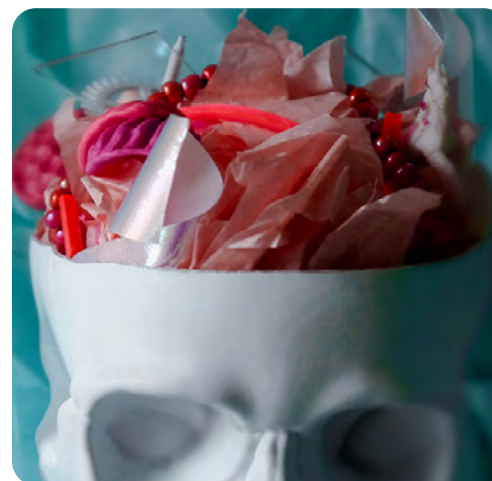
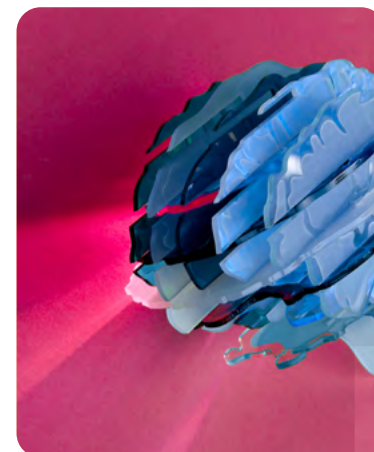
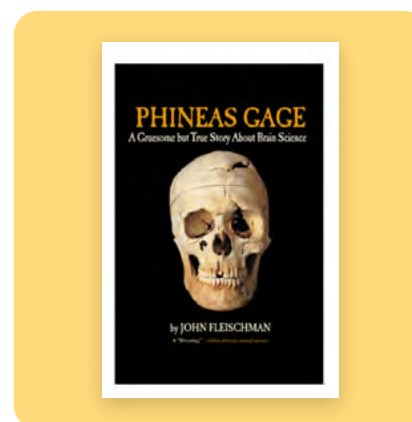


Science of Reading and Middle School: The Other End of the Reading Rope

In this presentation, Amplify ELA 6–8 Chief Academic Officer Deb Sabin details some instructional strategies that help middle schoolers at the far end of the Reading Rope.

For an example of purposeful selection and sequencing, look to John Fleischman's *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science*, a book that grips students with its gruesome narrative while building a foundational knowledge of the brain and its structure. Educators can move from this narrative text to a text on adolescent brain science, enabling students to bring their new mental model of the brain as background knowledge to support their comprehension of this more complex, informational text.

Incorporating complex texts is crucial, because it enables students to develop critical capacities and build the vocabulary, knowledge, and skills they need to succeed. The secondary grades challenge students with the study of more advanced topics and critical analysis, making it essential that teachers select and curate texts that engage students, work well with a variety of structures, and build students' knowledge and vocabulary base. Centering these types of texts in classroom literacy practices prepares students for the increasing demands they'll encounter in high school.



Questions to ask as you select text:

✓ Does this text stretch the breadth and depth of student knowledge of the world and words?

✓ Does it expose students to a variety of sentence and text structures and employ those elements well?

✓ Does it help students build content knowledge, knowledge of text structures, and even self-knowledge?

✓ Does it make sense as part of a sequence that helps students “grow up” into the text and topic?

Integrated, deliberate literacy practices

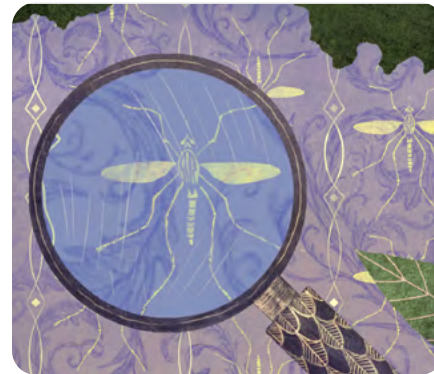
The Science of Reading shows us that instruction should be systematic—and that’s no less important in the middle grades than in elementary school.

“Core literacy practices need to be embedded within the context of a rich selection of texts, so our instruction needs to develop their fluency, their vocabulary, their comprehension, and their writing while students are working with the text,” says Sabin.



Suggested approaches:

- **Prioritize opportunities for students to listen to key passages.** This helps enhance their comprehension, as oral comprehension is generally stronger than reading comprehension for most students. Strong oral readings can also provide important models for fluency, particularly as students are introduced to the syntax and diction of a new text.
- **Ask students to diagram or draw something they're reading about.** This will explicitly help them practice building the mental models that support comprehension. (Graphic organizers can be a great tool, too.)
- **Find engaging ways to build oral fluency practice.** Have students read text passages of 100 to 200 words for five minutes a day for five days using performance and improvisation techniques to focus on prosody as well as accuracy. (Back in 2000, the National Reading Panel determined that repeated oral reading practice has an impressive impact on secondary-level students' reading comprehension.)
- **Embed formative writing within daily reading work.** Reading and writing have a strong reciprocal relationship. As students write to analyze or explain the text, they're not only building their writing skills, but also developing their comprehension of the text.



Collaborative engagement

Middle grade classroom experiences should foster critical and collaborative engagement among students. Suggested approaches include:

- **Use the text as “referee.”** Ask students a question they can answer only by using information from the text. Let them come up with their own answers first, then come together with a partner to compare answers, and finally, work to persuade each other that their own answers are correct.
- **“Storyboard” the text.** Have students work together to create visual models of the content and sequences of events in a text.
- **Try the “jigsaw” method.** Divide the class into groups and assign each member to become an “expert” on a different segment of a given text. Then have the experts teach their segment to their group, ensuring that everyone engages with the text through collaborative effort.

Note: Middle schoolers crave both interaction and independence. Make sure to implement pair and group activities purposefully, while also allowing time for students to work alone—and have their individual achievements applauded, too.

“All middle grade classroom experiences need to be centered on the critical and collaborative engagement of your students.”

Deb Sabin
Amplify ELA 6–8 Chief Academic Officer

Maintain grade-level instruction

What does the Science of Reading tell us about supporting at-risk readers?

Selecting texts to match students' reading level can benefit them in the short term, but can also limit their potential.

Lower-level texts often limit exposure to more challenging materials that can foster deeper cognitive development and advanced literacy skills. This can inadvertently cap students' progress and widen the gap between them and their peers.

It's essential to try to pinpoint where a reader's capacity is breaking down. To do that, we can return to the Reading Rope. Are they struggling with word recognition? With language comprehension? Or is something affecting their motivation?

“Successful intervention is so possible at this age.”

Deb Sabin
Amplify ELA 6–8 Chief Academic Officer



As a matter of equity and dignity, educators should continue to teach all students at grade level—and also plan to provide extra support for students who need it, where they need it. All using the same grade-level text, these supports might include:

- Working with critical vocabulary.
- Modeling text-reading fluency and offering practice.
- Analyzing text structures.
- Targeted writing and revision practice.

Sabin notes, “Successful intervention is so possible at this age.”

Though middle schoolers are unique, they still need and deserve research-based literacy instruction. Even though they may have foundational literacy skills, they are still building that foundation, and giving them enough support, challenge, and respect will help ensure they’re set up for a lifetime of success.



Want to help your middle schoolers reach peak literacy?
Visit **amplify.com/ELA** to learn more.

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