

Teacher talk

Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat

Read about evidence-based theories that underpin best teaching practices. By learning more about the theory behind teaching strategies you will develop a deeper understanding of what 'works best' for the learners in your classroom.

Teacher talk will help you to understand the pedagogic practices surrounding the '[Big Six](#)' focus areas. You will discover a range of instructional strategies that integrate these core elements of reading development.

Inclusive teaching and learning opportunities that build on the Big Six as well as students' needs, strengths and interests are vital for building student capacity in learning English. This can be a complex and challenging task. Teacher talk offers instructional strategies aimed at scaffolding the learning of a diverse range of students, including English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students and students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Try these strategies as you share *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* with your class, or use them in other aspects of your reading program. Discuss with your colleagues the instructional practices that resonate with you, and those that have been effective in your classroom.

Scaffolding meaning, vocabulary and oral language

Reading aloud and shared reading builds on children's engagement with literature, appreciation of literature and desire to read. Additionally, each time a teacher revisits a text through reading aloud or shared reading it can be for a myriad of entirely different purposes such as a chance to further explore language, vocabulary and concepts, all of which support making meaning (Cecil, 2011).

Vocabulary instruction

Reading aloud and revisiting *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* is an excellent way to implement specific vocabulary instruction. Assisting students to notice and investigate new words helps them to understand a text. Furthermore, with encouragement and reinforcement, students will have a bank of known words available for creative use in writing and speaking (Gallagher and Anderson, 2016).

One way to develop vocabulary understanding is to use a picture word wall as a basis for intentional teaching and learning of new words. Promoting word consciousness with routine investigation and ongoing review of words through picture word walls is an engaging and effective literacy practice (Gallagher and Anderson, 2016).

Gallagher and Anderson (2016) set out instructional research-based practices for supporting vocabulary learning and engagement. These practices have been adapted for reading aloud *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat*.

Use the steps below (adapted from Gallagher and Anderson) to help students learn about new and interesting words and phrases.

1. Before you read aloud, preview *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* and select several new words or phrases to highlight (e.g. stretched low, bounded, darted, twitch, graceful, sun-drenched, narrow, demolished, headed along).
2. Prepare a card for each new word that includes the word and an image that illustrates its meaning.
3. During the read-aloud, pause when these words are encountered to share and discuss the card, word meaning and image.
4. Model the [think aloud](#) process to demonstrate how important it is to notice, understand and record new and interesting words.
5. Select further words or phrases from *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* for students or pairs of students to record on a card, and find images (students could draw or use a Google image search) that portray the meaning of the word.
6. Invite students to share their cards.
7. Students display their card on the class picture word wall.
8. As students become more familiar with this strategy encourage them to take responsibility (using the [Gradual Release of Responsibility model](#)) to find out about new and interesting words they encounter through other read-alouds, and during guided or independent reading sessions.
9. Students can work collaboratively to select words and create cards to share and display on the class picture word wall.
10. Students can select their own words and independently create cards for the picture word wall.
11. Students record their words in their writing journals.
12. Classroom discussion can take place before the cards are added to the picture word wall by asking: *What do you think this word means?* Encourage students to connect new words to their prior knowledge and personal experiences.

The picture word wall strategy, incorporated with the think aloud and Gradual Release of Responsibility models, fosters word consciousness, engagement, ownership and choice. Implementing the picture word wall strategy encourages students to tune into words that are new to them, create a visual representation of words and share their representations with the class (Gallagher & Anderson, 2016). The picture word wall can be used as a reference for students, and for the ongoing review of words.

Australian Curriculum links

Foundation: [AC9EFLA07](#)

Year 1: [AC9E1LA09](#)

Year 2: [AC9E2LA09](#)

Comprehension through sequencing and retelling

Initial comprehension of texts such as *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* can be explored through reading the text aloud and identifying the text structure. Understanding literary structures like that of a narrative text requires direct instruction in the setting, characters, problem or conflict, sequence, outcomes and themes. Using exemplar texts that contain the features of the text type is key to quality comprehension instruction (Hennessy, 2021).

Being able to sequence events in order in a narrative or an imaginative recount will assist students in their attempts to organise and internalise information. Retelling can be used as an early observation technique allowing teachers to reflect on students' understanding of particular stories, students' vocabulary choices and students' control of language structure (Flight, 2017). Sequencing also supports students to be able to select important components or key events in order to summarise what has happened in a story. Students can be encouraged to use language from the text when sequencing events and when retelling.

Sequencing *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat*

Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat is an imaginative recount based on a true story that comprises a distinct sequence of events. It lends itself perfectly to teaching opportunities related to sequencing and retelling.

Use the following steps to help students sequence the key events from *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat*.

1. Revisit *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* through a read-aloud.
2. Through the [think aloud](#) process, explain to students that you will be working on sequencing events in the story so that you can retell what happened - don't forget to explain to students that sequencing is an important way to help them understand the text.
3. As you read, create a class *story sequencing map* of key events by pausing to record and discuss the main things that happened in the order they occurred (a sequencing chain can also be used).
4. Add images or drawings to the sequence to further scaffold your students' understanding.
5. As you sequence, encourage students to make connections to the events, and provide time for them to share their personal experiences.
6. Have students use the *story sequencing map* as a prop for retelling the story to you or their peers.
7. When students are retelling the key events encourage them to use language from the text.

Retelling and sequencing of the story can be done in various other ways including:

- acting it out with puppets, which offers further consolidation of understanding meaning
- having students create illustrations to make a 'story telling rope' to independently retell the story
- record the main events from the text on individual sentence strips with images, which can then be rearranged to put the events back into the correct order.

For more ideas on sequencing, including a student activity printable worksheet see the [Teaching and learning sequence](#) section.

Higher-level support for sequencing

Students can be further supported by focussing on sequencing information at the sentence level, rather than at the whole-text level. In a small-group setting, use *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* and the following framework to support their sequencing and retelling.

1. Revisit *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* through a read-aloud.
2. Highlight and read aloud this long sentence from pages 4, 5, 6 and 7 that describes where Rocky went:

*With a twitch of his tail Rocky took off ...
past Gus the bulldog in the Wilsons' front yard,
over the vine-covered brick wall,
through the supermarket car park,
and along busy High Street.*

3. Record each section of the sentence on a strip of cardboard.
4. Encourage students to talk about and make personal connections with each section.
5. Have students draw or find images that represent each section, and add these to the cardboard strips.
6. Read aloud each section with emphasis on phrasing and expression to demonstrate the sound of fluent reading.
7. Have students repeat each section aloud after you.
8. As a group, rearrange the strips of cardboard back into the correct order.
9. Now read aloud the entire sentence and encourage students to join in as you read.
10. Provide students with their own sections of text to paste in order and illustrate.

Also use the above steps for the sentence at the end of the recount:

*With a twitch of his tail Rocky took off ...
Along busy High Street,
through the supermarket car park,
over the vine-covered brick wall,
past Gus the bulldog in the Wilsons' front yard,
back through his cat door ... and up onto the bed.*

Recording students' retellings

Have your students orally retell *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat* and record them using an audio-recording device. Recording your students as they retell the text will assist you to observe their:

- understanding
- use of sentence structure
- vocabulary selection
- organisation
- fluency, intonation, tone and expression when speaking
- use of pronouns, verbs, nouns, contractions and prepositions.

More information on exploring comprehension through retelling can be found in [this article](#).

Australian Curriculum links

Foundation: [AC9EFLY05](#), [AC9EFLE05](#)

Year 1: [AC9E1LY05](#), [AC9E1LE02](#)

Year 2: [AC9E2LY05](#)

Phonological awareness continuum

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to identify the sounds in oral language such as words in a sentence, syllables in words and words that rhyme. A subset of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness, and this refers to the ability to hear individual sounds in a word.

Phonemic awareness strongly relates to success in beginning reading, therefore teachers should recognise this importance by engaging students in oral language activities that explicitly emphasise the sequence of sounds in language (Cecil, 2011). Phonemic awareness develops at the upper end of the phonological awareness continuum.

Use the title *Rocky the Neighbourhood Cat*, or words and sentences from the text, to explicitly teach and practise phonological awareness skills based on a continuum, where skill development eventually moves specifically into phonemic awareness. More information can be found here on the [Literacy Hub](#).

Examples of skills based on the continuum (adapted from Cecil, 2011) include the following:

1. Understanding that words make up a sentence. *How many words in this sentence? Can you point to the first word? Which word is the last word in the sentence?*
2. Awareness of words. *Which word is the longest - 'neighbourhood' or 'cat'? How do you know this? Use your finger to draw a circle around the word 'the'.*
3. Ability to rhyme simple one-syllable words. *What words rhyme with 'cat'? Which word is the 'odd one out', that doesn't rhyme with 'cat' - 'fat', 'mat', 'pig' or 'sat'?*
4. Ability to segment compound words and syllables. *Clap the syllables in 'neighbourhood'. What two smaller words make this word? (Repeat with other words from the text such as 'bulldog', 'supermarket' and 'storeroom'.) What word do I make if I put the words 'fire' and 'fighter' together? (Repeat with other compound words from the text.)*
5. Hearing alliteration. Have students listen for the initial sounds in words and say other words starting with the same sound. Focus on the sounds (phonemes) not the letters. *As I read listen for the 's' sound at the beginning of a word. Can you hear the words that don't begin with the 's' sound in this sentence?*
6. Listening for and sorting final sounds at the end of words, hearing the same sound at the end of a word or noticing the word that does not have the same sound. For example, ask: *What sounds can you hear at the end of the words 'woke and park?' (the k sound). Do these words end in the same sound? What different sounds do the words 'wall' and 'yard' end in? (the l sound and the d sound).*
7. Ability to blend an onset and an ending speech sound (rime). Onset is the beginning sound in a syllable before the vowel; rime is the vowel and all the letters after it in a syllable. *What would these two sounds be if they were put together - 'c' and 'at', 'str' and 'eet', 'cr' and 'ept'?*
8. Ability to segment an onset and an ending speech sound (rime). *What is the first sound in the word cat? (k) What does the ending of this word sound like? (at)*

9. Ability to hear or segment the individual phonemes/sounds in a word. *What are the three sounds in 'cat', 'chin' or 'time'?*
10. Ability to substitute and manipulate beginning sounds/phonemes. *Can you change the word 'cat' by changing the first sound to 'h'? ('hat')*
11. Ability to delete phonemes. For example: *What is 'twitch' without the 't'? ('witch')*
12. Ability to substitute middle and ending phonemes. *Can you change the word 'cat' to another word by changing the middle sound to an 'o'? ('cot')* *Can you change the word 'cat' to another word by changing the last sound to a 'p'? ('cap')* *What happens when you take off the 'd' in 'bed' and swap it with 'g'? ('beg')*

For more information on phonological awareness go to:

- [NSW Department of Education: Phonological awareness](#)
- [Victorian Education Department's Literacy Teaching Toolkit](#)

Australian Curriculum links

Foundation: [AC9EFLY10](#)

Year 1: [AC9E1LY10](#)

Year 2: [AC9E2LY09](#)

References

Cecil, N. L. (2011). *Striking a Balance: A Comprehensive Approach to Early Literacy* *A Comprehensive Approach to Early Literacy* (4th edition). Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway.

Flight, J. (Spring, 2017). Learning Language - Run, Run, as Fast as You Can, what might be possible in 3 weeks of Reading Recovery lessons? *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 16(2), 19-34.

Gallagher, M. A. & Anderson, B. E. (2016). Get all 'jazzed up' for vocabulary instruction: Strategies that engage. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(3), 273-282.

Hennessy, N. (2021). *The reading comprehension blueprint*. Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.



This document is part of the **Literacy Hub's shared reading set**.
[Access more texts and related teaching materials.](#)