

## Chapter 1

# Five Foundational Principles

*Explaining Reading* provides 30 sample lessons you can adapt for use when preparing students to meet the Common Core State Standards for reading in grades K–8. It is divided into two parts: Part I consists of five introductory chapters; Part II consists of the 30 teaching examples.

The book is governed by five foundational principles.

- First, examples are keyed to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts because the Common Core will drive reading assessment for the foreseeable future.
- Second, each teaching example illustrates how to explicitly explain a particular type of Common Core reading standard because research has established the effectiveness of explicit explanations, especially with struggling readers.
- Third, every teaching example is embedded in an authentic literacy task because we want students to experience reading as worthwhile and useful.
- Fourth, teacher professionalism is emphasized because each teaching example is hypothetical and must be thoughtfully adapted.
- Finally, a literate classroom environment is assumed because explicit teaching is most successful when embedded within an enticing setting.

### THE FIRST FOUNDATION: THE COMMON CORE

The Common Core State Standards represent the most recent evolution in a longstanding national effort to improve classroom instruction. For

instance, the reading standards reflect such recent insights about how to improve literacy instruction as:

- Emphasis should be on building knowledge throughout the grades.
- Comprehension should be emphasized.
- Information text should be emphasized as much as narrative text.
- Close reading of complex text, with a focus on analysis and evaluation in a variety of content areas should be emphasized.
- A major instructional goal should be reading for purpose and understanding.

These insights represent a shift in emphasis, not a major change. We have long understood the need to emphasize comprehension; to feature expository text as well as narrative text; to develop higher order thinking such as analyzing and evaluating; and to ensure that reading skills and strategies are not taught in isolation. What the Common Core does is make these things official.

It does so by specifying benchmarks for student assessment, which means that teacher accountability will be based, at least in part, on how well students perform on tests of these standards. But missing from the Common Core is what teachers should do if students cannot meet a particular standard. This book meets that need.

The book's mission is to describe for each type of Common Core standard (1) how to determine whether students are ready to meet a standard and (2) if they are not, how to explain the standard explicitly. To make the book as useful as possible, the Part II examples match the order and organization of the Common Core (see also Chapter 4).

**Be cautioned, however:** The book follows the order in which standards are listed in the Common Core and is not intended for use as a sequential reading curriculum or as a reading program to be followed in order.

## THE SECOND FOUNDATION: EXPLICIT EXPLANATIONS

All the sample lessons in Part II illustrate how to provide explicit explanations. An explicit explanation is a set of verbal statements describing how to do a particular reading skill or strategy or standard. The goal is to make visible for students the invisible mental processing good readers

use when they read. When students struggle to meet one or another skill, or strategy, or standard, explicit explanations “demystify” what for them is a mystifying task.

We do not employ explanations routinely; we employ them only when students are struggling. You do not need a formal test to assess whether students are struggling. Informal “kid watching” is quite adequate. Each Part II example provides suggestions for what to watch for to assess whether students are ready to meet a particular type of Common Core reading standard.

When we notice that students are *not* ready to meet a standard, it is time to say, “Let me show you how to do it.” This “showing how” includes:

- A clear statement of what is to be learned and why it is important (the objective).
- A statement about what students must particularly pay attention to (the secret).
- A verbal description of the thinking involved in doing the skill or strategy (modeling the thinking).
- Gradually reduced amounts of assistance (scaffolded assistance).
- Continued applications to reading.

Chapter 4, as well as each Part II example, describes each of the above components in detail. The goal is to help you provide students with explicit information about the mental processing involved and to help you guide their learning through scaffolding and application.

This book is useful because when students do not meet a standard you will need to teach them how to do it. That is, you must describe the mental processing involved. As veteran readers, we are seldom conscious of the mental processing we employ as we read, so it is difficult to come up with an explicit explanation on our own. Part II helps with this problem by providing a “starter” you can adapt when faced with the task of explaining how to meet a particular standard.

Explicit explanations are effective, but they are not magic. The poverty and family difficulties often associated with struggling readers will still make instruction difficult. In the end, what makes the difference is creative and patient teachers who insist that all students can learn to read and who are relentless in providing explicit help.

## THE THIRD FOUNDATION: BALANCING STANDARDS WITH “REAL” READING

Standards are helpful benchmarks. But when they focus only on skills and strategies, students think reading is a narrow, isolated task. The Common Core itself recognizes this problem and tries to counter it by making “reading for purpose and understanding” a separate standard under the heading of “Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity” (Standard 10). Because of the central importance of this standard, I have not provided a single teaching example to explain it. Instead, each Part II teaching example is situated “inside” a motivating task that focuses on reading for purpose and understanding.

### An Example of Teaching “Inside” a Larger Task

Consider the following example of a second-grade teacher. Consistent with the Common Core standard for Informational Text (*RI.2.5: Know and use various text features (e.g., captions, bold print, subheadings, glossaries, indexes, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text efficiently*), she must teach her students what an index is and how to use it. She could simply provide an explicit explanation of how to use an index and then give them a worksheet for practice. But she does not do that. She wants her students to see that indexes are useful when they are doing purposeful reading tasks. Consequently, she uses students’ concern about new animal control laws passed by the township and suggests writing to the town council to influence how the new laws are being enforced. In preparation, she suggests informational text for her students to read. But in the midst of doing that reading—that is, *inside* the larger activity of searching for information useful in influencing the town council—the teacher provides explicit instruction about how to use an index. By first involving students in a purposeful reading task and then teaching them how to use indexes *inside* that task, she accomplishes three goals: She motivates students by engaging them in reading they see as purposeful, she teaches indexes as a practical and immediately useful tool for accomplishing that task, and she gives students experiences that help them learn to value reading.

The “reading for purpose and understanding” standard is crucial because “what they *do* is what they think it is.” That is, if students do skill sheets most of the time, they tend to think reading is skills; if they read for authentic purposes much of the time, they tend to think reading is for

enrichment and empowerment. We must provide them with experiences that cause them to draw the latter conclusion.

As with the “starter” modeling and scaffolding provided for each example in Part II, the “real reading” tasks in each example cannot be used exactly as written. I invented them to illustrate what *could* be done; your situation will be different, so you must create your own “reading for purpose and understanding” tasks for your students. While none of us are creative enough to come up with the perfect motivating task every time, we can all try to ensure that instruction in Common Core standards does not begin and end with skill sheets, practice exercises, and tests. Whatever you can do to help students see reading as purposeful is better than focusing exclusively on skills and testing.

### The Game at the End of the Week

We can better understand why reading for “purpose and understanding” is motivating if we consider a sports analogy. For instance, kids love to play baseball. They will practice skills such as fielding ground balls for hours without complaint. Why? Because there is a game at the end of the week. That is, they are learning to field ground balls *inside* a larger and (to them) more important task—that of playing the game at the end of the week. Students can be equally motivated to meet Common Core standards or to learn reading skills and strategies if they see that the standards or skills or strategies are going to be used to do something important and are not just isolated things learned to pass a test.

## THE FOURTH FOUNDATION: ADAPTIVE TEACHERS

This book is a practical tool and a useful resource. However, it does not eliminate the difficulties of teaching or the need for professional thought.

For instance, the Common Core expects every student to meet every standard on an arbitrary schedule. But every teacher knows that kids learn in different ways and on different schedules. Individual student differences require teachers to be creative in orchestrating lessons so that each student learns what is needed when it is needed. Such differentiation of instruction will continue to be required when using this book.

Also, while the 30 examples in Part II appear to be packaged lessons, they cannot be used that way. They are all hypothetical situations. None will be an exact fit for your students or your teaching situation. You will

have to invent your own authentic reading tasks, and you will have to adjust every suggested explanation to fit your situation.

Scaffolding students' understandings will especially require thinking on your feet. No matter how well you plan, students do not always understand explanations in the way you expected. Responding on-the-fly is essential.

And to make it even more difficult, you must be thoughtfully adaptive in a world that today seems to discourage thoughtful teaching. Recent federal and state pressures, directives, mandates, and assessments, as well as highly prescriptive commercial reading programs, seem designed to limit teacher decision making and creativity.

But this book is not for teachers who want to avoid making decisions or being creative. To the contrary, it assumes that the hallmarks of exciting and effective classroom teaching is teacher adaptation and creativity, and that scripts and highly prescriptive instructional programs make for boring instruction. Consequently, while the 30 examples in Part II may appear to be prescriptive, they are just a framework. For them to be effective, you must view each as merely a "starter" or a guide you can use to make your own assessment decisions, to create your own authentic literacy tasks, and to create your own explanations.

## THE FIFTH FOUNDATION: A LITERATE ENVIRONMENT

Skill and strategy instruction is most effective, and standards are more easily met when the classroom context invites students to engage in literate activity. While Part II of this book is dedicated to explicit explanations of Common Core reading standards, explicit explanation is only one part of a good reading program. For explanations to be most effective, they must occur in a classroom that invites literate activity. The following six suggestions are illustrative:

1. *Create a text-rich environment.* If exciting and interesting texts are available in the classroom, students are more likely to read. Consequently, students should have access to a wide range of high-quality trade books, both narrative and informational. The usual guideline is at least 30 trade books per student, including a wide range of genres and levels of difficulty attractively arranged to encourage browsing. The environment might include beanbag chairs or rocking chairs in an area where trade books are displayed to further entice kids to read. Additionally,

there should be lots of non-book texts, including maps, globes, computers, student-generated texts, and charts produced by both teachers and students, and magazines and newspapers.

2. *Do daily read-alouds.* There are many benefits when teachers read stories and informational text to their classes. The most important one is that it models the teacher's own love of and commitment to reading. Reading aloud also acquaints children with different kinds of text and provides them with background knowledge they might not otherwise encounter on their own. And, finally, read-alouds are relaxing times. The implicit message is that reading can be fun. As such, it sends an important message and is an important instructional support.

3. *Ensure that students have lots of time to read.* Free reading is sometimes squeezed out of today's classrooms by the pressure to prepare for tests. That is a mistake. You cannot learn to do anything unless you do it a lot and have some choice about it. This principle is as true for learning to read as for anything else. Students cannot become enthusiastic readers unless they read a lot and can choose the books they want to read on their own. The general guideline is that students should do 45–60 minutes of free-choice reading a day. The time can be broken up, with 15 minutes during a designated free reading time, 7 minutes during a break in activities, and so on. But the bottom line is that they probably will not become enthusiastic readers unless they can read lots of books that excite them.

#### Focus on Connected Text

Most of the reading students do should be connected text. *Connected text* is text that contains a coherent message. A story is an example of connected text; a chapter in a social studies textbook is connected text; a newspaper article is connected text; graphic novels are connected text. However, fill-in-the-blank worksheets or word lists are not connected text. Students become readers by reading connected text.

4. *Make knowledge building a priority.* Knowledge depends on the experiences you have. The more experiences you have, the more words you know; the more words you know, the more knowledge you have, and the better you read. Consequently, it is crucial to build knowledge. Content areas such as social studies and science are the best sources of new experiences, new knowledge, and new vocabulary, and they should be an integral part of a literate environment.

5. *Integrate writing into your reading instruction.* Writing and reading are mutually supportive. The more students write, the better they read; the more they read, the better they write. Consequently, writing in journals, writing stories, writing letters, writing notes to friends or family, and writing informational text in support of a class project all support the development of reading skill. For that reason, each Part II example provides a suggestion for linking that Common Core reading standard to a Common Core writing standard. As much as possible, Common Core reading standards should be taught together with or linked to Common Core writing standards.

6. *Conversation is important.* Just as reading and writing are mutually supportive, reading and oral language are mutually supportive. Discussion in which students have a voice and an active role is best, while traditional question-and-answer formats in which students are put in a passive position are less effective. To be most effective, classroom talk should be collaborative rather than submissive, active rather than passive, and conversational rather than interrogative.

## SUMMARY

This edition of *Explaining Reading* is organized to match the Common Core's structure. It provides an example of how to explain each type of Common Core standard, and it reflects the Common Core emphasis on reading for purpose and understanding. It is designed with struggling readers in mind. While some students will not need explicit explanations, others will struggle to meet Common Core standards. The resources of this book are provided for these students.

But this book also has another purpose. While explicit explanations are featured, the undergirding argument is that the Common Core standards are not enough by themselves. Also needed are adaptive, thoughtful teachers who value differentiated instruction, who creatively use instructional resources within a larger literate context, and who understand that standards are merely steppingstones to the ultimate goal of reading instruction—students who value reading as an important part of their lives.