

MUST-KNOW TIPS FOR TEACHING LITERACY

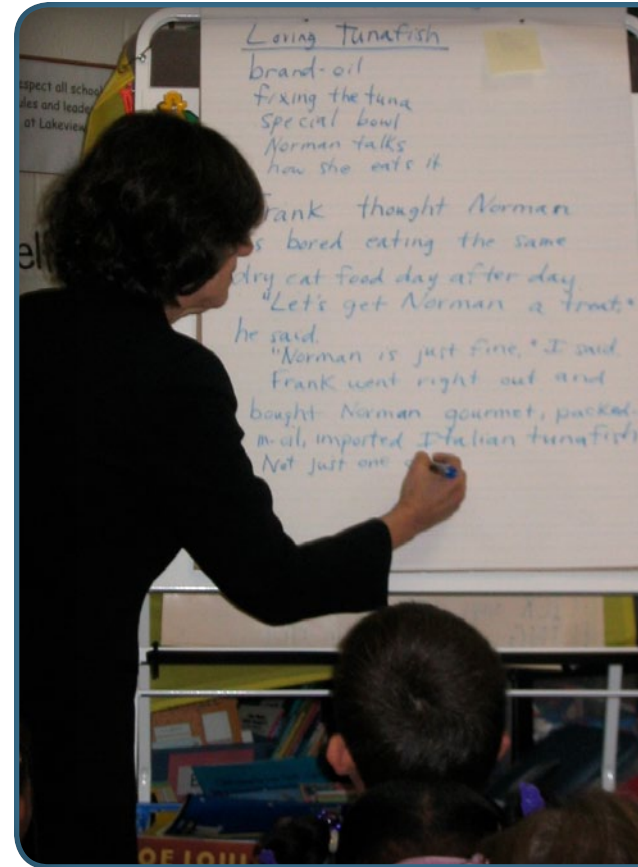
Must-Know Tips for Effective Demonstrations

By Regie Routman

Explicit and relevant demonstrations are a necessity before expecting students to successfully “try and apply” the behaviors of problem-solving readers, writers, and thinkers. Effective demonstrations are the first part of an Optimal Learning Model (Routman, 2008) where an expert, usually the teacher, models exactly how and what the student is expected to accomplish before he is gradually released to take on the learning task. Demonstrations often happen whole class, but are also integral to small group work and one-on-one conferences.

Literacy demonstrations can take many deliberate forms, such as:

- » thinking aloud while reading or writing—before, during, and after the process
- » explaining ideas, tasks, and processes through talk, text, video, or other presentation modes
- » examining a text and noting its unique features; for example, when we immerse students in text genres before reading and writing in that genre
- » noticing and commenting specifically on what an author, including a student author, has done well
- » showing precisely how to do something, such as note taking in writing or figuring out difficult vocabulary while reading



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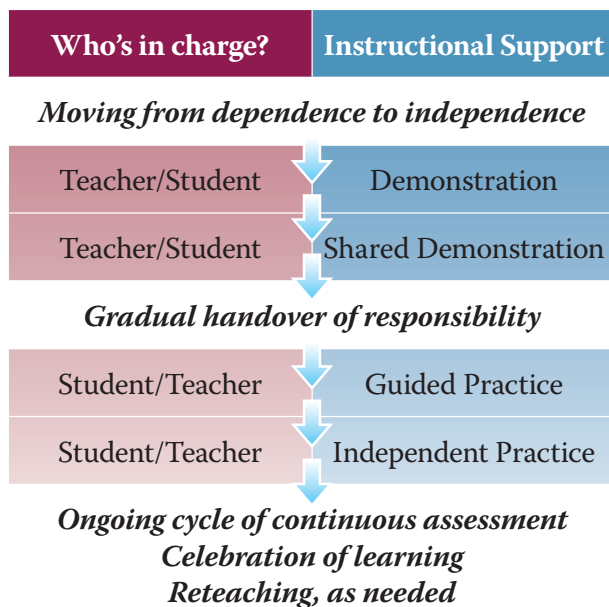
With writing, students have the opportunity to observe their teacher:

- » orally telling the story and ideas first, which is often how writers figure out what they want to say
- » making a plan before writing—even a simple one such as a brainstorming list
- » struggling with the flow of thoughts and specific words
- » rereading and revising while in the drafting/composing process (see chart)

With reading, students may observe the teacher making her thinking visible by:

- » sharing how she chooses books to read
- » noticing what an author is trying to say and do
- » struggling to make sense of a passage in front of students
- » slowing down and rereading when meaning is unclear
- » showing how nonfiction texts are organized
- » examining how and why a character is changing

Optimal Learning Model



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Note. Adapted from *Teaching Essentials: Expecting the Most and Getting the Best from Every Learner, K-8* (p. 89), by R. Routman, 2008, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright 2008 by Regie Routman.

While demonstration teaching may initially seem to slow down the learning process, we actually *hurry up* the learning for students when they are clear on expectations, purposes, procedures, and processes. Many teachers are not used to demonstrating their thinking and literacy actions in front of their students, and the first time doing so—especially in writing—can be scary. However, with time and practice, this risk taking pays off; teachers' and students' competence and confidence greatly increases.

Here are several proven ways to ensure your demonstrations go well:

Make no assumptions about what students know. Start with assessment before your demonstration. For example, before beginning a writing unit on poetry, chart, "What do we know about ...?" By finding out exactly what students do and do not know, you can tailor your demonstration(s) to fit students' most important learning needs. As an example, see the photo-chart from a first grade class; notice how we can track their growing knowledge from day-to-day by using different color markers.

Explain why you are doing what you are about to undertake. Highlight the key points you want students to notice. For example, you might say, “The reason I will be thinking out loud as I’m writing (or reading) is because I want you to be doing the same kind of thinking as you write (or read).” Without such explicitness, some students have no idea why we are making our thoughts public. Transfer of learning from a demonstration, even an excellent one, is not an automatic process for students.

Make your thinking and decision making processes visible. Make your in-the-head processes transparent by stating, for example, exactly how you get started on a piece of writing. You might say, “I can’t think of a title for this piece I’m writing, so I’ll skip it for now and come back to it later.” Or, “I need to reread this piece as I go along to see if it makes sense and to figure out what I want to say next.” Or, in starting to read a new book, you might say, “I’m going to read the blurb on this book before I begin reading aloud so I get an idea about what the whole book is about. That helps me understand what’s happening, right from the start.”

Remember that you are in charge. In this first stage of the Optimal Learning Model (Routman, 2008), you are the one doing the thinking, reading, and/or writing. Do not get distracted by taking responses and suggestions from students; it is easy to get off track, lose focus, and lengthen the modeling time. Be sure students are clear that this is their time to learn from you. You might need to say something like, “This is my time to show you exactly how I do it. You’ll have your turn soon.”

Don’t go on too long. Only demonstrate as much as the majority of students are capable of doing at the present time. Aim for 10-15 minutes for your demonstration. Set a timer if you need to. You can always continue your demonstration the next day. Stop when interest is still high so students have the energy and time left to do the work. It is through sustained practice in reading and writing that students begin to apply and learn what we are attempting to teach them. Without sufficient and sustained practice, it doesn’t matter how good our demonstrations are.

Check to be sure students “got” your demonstration. Have students say back to you what you did or what you expect them to do.

- » “What did you notice?”
- » “What did you see me do?”
- » “What can you try/do?”
- » “What questions do you have?”
- » “What do you need to do first?”

Remember that one demonstration is rarely enough.

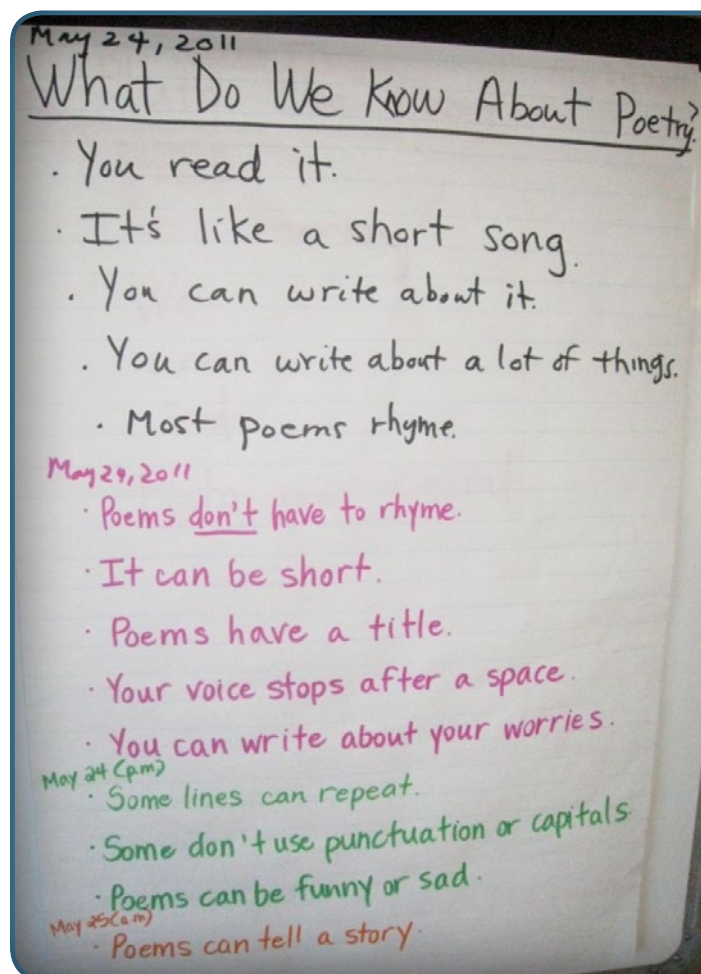


Photo-chart from first grade class.



Regie Routman is a longtime teacher and author whose current work involves weeklong school residencies where she demonstrates effective literacy teaching in classrooms, coaches teachers and principals, and facilitates ongoing professional conversations, all as a catalyst for whole school change. See www.regieroutman.com for complete information on Regie's bio, books, and her newest professional development resources, the job-embedded, DVD-based, *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching*, a series to accelerate literacy achievement for all learners.

Provide additional support as needed. Students usually benefit from additional demonstrations and/or shared experiences before being released to tackle “the work.” Shared experiences may include having scaffolded conversations between you and at least one or two students before expecting students to write, or having students talk with each other before attempting the task. (See “[Must Know Tips for Shared Writing](#)” for some examples of how that works.)

Despite our best efforts, there will always be some students who need individual or small group support before they can successfully get going on their own. Especially, with our students who struggle, they greatly benefit from the additional scaffolding and explicitness that more expert demonstrations can provide.

For many more ideas and strategies on demonstrations, see *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching*, a professional development, DVD-based, literacy series with more than 70 demonstration videos (2008, 2009) and *Teaching Essentials: Expecting the Most and Getting the Best from Every Learner, K-8* (2008). Visit Regie's website at www.regieroutman.com to learn more about these and additional professional development resources.

References

- Routman, R. (2008). *Teaching essentials: Expecting the most and getting the best from every learner, K-8*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Routman, R. (2008, 2009). *Regie Routman in residence: Transforming our teaching*, [DVD-based, literacy series]. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Available from <http://www.heinemann.com/products/E01134.aspx>