Simple writing activities that boost reading comprehension - with Sara Marye

Triple R Teaching Podcast #229

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm welcoming another teacher to the podcast, Sara Marye. She is a former teacher and school administrator, now the owner of The Stellar Teacher Company with resources, a membership, and a podcast.

Today she is here to talk to us about how to help students better comprehend what they're reading through writing. These are many sentence level activities that you may have learned about through *The Writing Revolution*, so I'll make sure to leave a link to that book in the show notes. I love the way that Sara Marye breaks all these down for us and helps us think about how to use these activities to help students better understand what they read.

We did this interview during the summer when my kids were home, so I apologize there's a little bit of a whispering where I'm talking to one of my kids and then a lot of kitchen noise because that's where my office is! Apologies for that. I'm sure you'll still get a ton out of everything that Sara Marye shares. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Sara!

Sara Marye:

Thanks, Anna! I'm so happy to be here today.

Anna Geiger:

I'm excited to talk to you on the podcast about writing about reading, but before we do that, could you talk a little bit about your history in education and what you're doing now?

Sara Marye:

Absolutely. I am Sara Marye. I am the host of The Stellar Teacher podcast and the founder of The Stellar Teacher Company. I have been in education since I graduated college. I was an elementary education major, and then I spent about 10 years working in an actual classroom - first grade, second grade, and fourth grade. I covered all of the areas.

Then towards the end of my classroom experience, I had the opportunity to move into an assistant principal role, so I have some experience as a school leader.

When I think about my education career, anytime I've made a move, it's because I really want to make a bigger impact. So when I had the opportunity to move into school leadership, I was like, "This will give me the opportunity to impact more students and teachers." I did that for about three years.

Then towards the end of that, my principal approached me and he was like, "I'm getting ready to retire. I would love to have you take over the school and become principal."

That was this big turning point for me because I was like, “Wait a minute, do I want to be a principal? Do I want to be, I don't want to say limited, but tied to a school, and have that be the end of my ability to impact and support teachers?”

That was really when I started The Stellar Teacher Company. I left working as an assistant principal and then started The Stellar Teacher Company. Then that has evolved into the podcast, and we have our membership for upper elementary ELA teachers.

It's so great because I still get to be in education, but I get to support teachers literally all over the world in becoming more effective with their literacy practices.

Anna Geiger:

One thing I know you're very passionate about, like you said, is English language arts. But I hear a lot from you these days about teaching writing, which is why you decided to make that be your topic of today's teacher tip podcast. Why is writing about reading important?

Sara Marye:

Yeah, there are so many benefits from it. I think it's one of those things that, at least I remember when I was in the classroom, it was almost like, “Okay, we're going to read. Then we need to respond, but we're going to hurry up and respond.” Or it’s like an afterthought. I didn't ever think about responding to reading as having a lot of benefit or something that I should really be intentional about planning and thinking through.

There are a lot of benefits from writing about reading. I’ll share three that are important to take note of.

One is that it really does improve comprehension. I think we think of comprehension as happening in the moment of reading, but writing about reading has been shown to improve comprehension.

I've read a ton on this and there is a meta-analysis that Steve Graham and Michael Hebert used just to really study the effects of writing on reading. They showed that 94% of the studies that they reviewed found that students who engage in writing activities related to what they read, so things like summarizing or responding to questions even, had improved comprehension. Their study was statistically significant, which means that the improvement was not due to just chance; it was actually because of the outcome of the writing intervention that was in place.

Again, if we see in upper elementary that we have students that are struggling with comprehension, then we want to do things that we know are going to improve comprehension. Writing about reading is one of those things that will improve comprehension. So that's a huge one.

But in addition to that, writing about reading also helps make whatever content you're teaching actually stick with the students. Again, I think sometimes we have this tendency in upper elementary specifically to make the standard almost like our focus for the lesson, right? “We're going to focus on teaching the main idea,” or “We're going to focus on teaching plot structure.”

But the whole reason why we teach reading is so that way students can read and understand what they're reading, which means they need to have the ability to process it and the ability to communicate their thinking back to us. When we ask students to write about either their science, their social studies, or if you're learning about an important theme, and we have students write about it… In order for them to be successful with that writing assignment, they have to make sure that they have their own understanding solid. They might have to go back and review key vocabulary words. They might have to

practice critical reading skills. If they know that they're going to have to show their understanding through writing, they have to have the knowledge to be able to complete that writing task.

Writing about reading is also really going to help make that content stick a little bit deeper than if you skipped that step.

Another benefit that I think we often overlook is that writing about reading is going to improve students' writing fluency. I know teaching writing is one of those things that sometimes teachers get really overwhelmed by, either thinking they don't have enough time to teach writing, or they don't know how to teach writing. Writing about reading is just a really great way to improve that writing fluency.

I think we have this tendency to want to teach writing in a silo. We teach writing, and then we forget to bring all of those skills that we taught during writing into all of the other content areas. When students are writing about reading, we're giving them a really authentic opportunity to practice things like how to plan, right? You could give them a writing about reading response, and they could take a few minutes to create their outline for their response. They could practice drafting it. They could practice going back and revising it to improve for word choice or sentence structure and sentence variety.

Writing about reading is going to give your students the opportunity to become better writers as well.

There are so many benefits to writing about reading! I feel like it's one of those things that, again, rather than it being an afterthought and just something that we do at the end of a reading assignment, we want to be really intentional about planning how do we want to have our students respond through writing. Because, like I said, it's going to improve their comprehension, it's going to make the content stick, and it's going to help them become better writers.

Anna Geiger:

Those are all good things to think about because I'm right with you there. I used to just think of it as something to check off a box or if we had time. Or I thought it was a waste of time because I thought writing instruction was only useful if it was in this 45-minute block, and I didn't see the value of pieces of writing throughout the day.

But now we know. I talked to Steve Graham about this and he said we should have a certain amount of time that kids are writing. He didn't give an X number, but he said we can increase that, not necessarily by putting it all at once, but by fitting it into different subjects.

I think a challenge, though, is making that writing activity meaningful and intentional and having students treat it the way we want them to versus just dashing off a couple sentences. How do we make this writing instruction meaningful and not just checking off the box?

Sara Marye:

Yeah. When I was in the classroom, when I thought about writing about reading, my sort of go-to response was that students have a question from the text and then they write their answer. Here's the question. Here's the answer. But there are so many ways that we can expand our thinking about writing about reading.

I think one sort of category of writing about reading responses that we forget are available to us are simply sentence level activities.

Writing about reading could simply be having your students write a sentence in response to something that they read. That in and of itself is going to be so valuable. Sentences are the foundation of all other writing. That's something that most students still struggle with, how to write a complete sentence, so if

you can have your students do some sort of sentence writing in response to what they read, it's going to give you all of these benefits.

Here are some really quick and basic examples of sentence writing activities that you could use as a writing about reading response.

The first one is really easy. It's unscrambling a sentence. All you would do is you could give your students either a sentence from the text that they read or you could give them a summary that you have written from the text that maybe states the theme or a description of the character, and you're going to give that to them scrambled.

Let's say you read the book *Because of Winn-Dixie* with your students, you would give them the scrambled sentence, "because made friends Winn-Dixie of Opal more." Then students would have to unscramble it to figure out the sentence, "Opal made more friends because of Winn-Dixie."

Then you can have a conversation with students about, what's the subject of the sentence? What's the predicate? How does "because" connect two ideas? They are working on their syntax and their understanding of connective words.

Then you can follow that up with, do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Then you could either have a discussion about it or even have that turn into an additional writing prompt as well.

This is a great sort of beginner activity if your students are struggling because you're literally giving them the words and they're reconstructing it to form a coherent sentence. That's a really easy sentence writing activity that you can use as writing about reading.

Another one is to be very specific and ask your students to write four different sentence types. Again, this could be really helpful if you have students that are struggling writers and maybe need a lot more guidance or support.

Let's say you've read a nonfiction text to your students and you want them to really focus on a key vocabulary word. You could tell them, "I want you to write this vocabulary word in a statement, in a question, in an exclamation, and in a command."

By having students do that, they're going to practice writing, but in order for them to be able to use that vocabulary word correctly in different sentence types, they need to make sure that they actually understand the vocabulary word. They're probably going to have to go back into the text. They're going to have to review it. They're going to have to think about the context in which it's used in. Again, it's going to force them to be a lot more critical as they read through the text. It's another really easy sentence level writing activity that you could use as a writing about reading.

Then finally, another sort of sentence writing activity could be to give students a sentence stem that they complete. If you want to make this even more challenging, you could give them the same sentence stem and follow it up with different conjunctions. This is a called the Because, But, So activity.

For example, let's say you read *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, and you would give your students the sentence stem of "Charlotte is a good friend..." Then they would have to respond. "Charlotte is a good friend *because* she uses her talents to protect Wilbur. Charlotte is a good friend, *but* she keeps secrets about her health until the end. Charlotte is a good friend, *so* Wilbur does everything he can to protect her children."

Just by giving your students that one sentence stem and those three different conjunctions, they really have to make sure that they can understand a lot of the key concepts that have happened in the book to be able to be successful with those activities.

Those are just some examples of how writing about reading doesn't need to be complex or long, and all of those activities are going to help you see, are my students understanding what they're reading? And they're going to get the benefit of really targeted, sentence-level practice writing.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much. That was super helpful.

Now, do you have any recommendations for a grade level for these, or would you say that you would start orally and move into written work eventually?

Sara Marye:

Yeah, I think a lot of it depends on the students. I think teachers are always like, "Okay, what grades for this, or how do we support it?" Anytime you're starting out with writing about reading, and this is even if you want to do some lengthier activities, which I have some other ideas for as well, having students talk through things orally can be so helpful before they have to put their pen to paper.

With a lot of these sentence writing activities, you could do these in first grade or second grade. You might have to do them as a whole class where your class talks through them and maybe you're doing the writing, or you talk through them first before students do their own writing, or they work in a partnership. In third, fourth, and fifth grade, they can start to do these activities more independently on their own. Of course, so much of it just depends on your students.

I think if you're doing an activity like this and your students aren't successful, then you want to maybe just back up and put in some scaffolds. That might be more whole group practice, partner practice, or talk through that orally, just until they feel comfortable and can do this successfully on their own.

Anna Geiger:

Great.

Where can listeners find you? Do you have any recommended resources that you share or that you think that teachers would appreciate?

Sara Marye:

Yeah, absolutely. We have everything on our website, stellarteacher.com. I also have a weekly podcast, which is The Stellar Teacher Podcast. We have new episodes that come out every Monday, and we talk all about writing, reading, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. I feel like we cover the gambit when it comes to literacy. If they want more tips, definitely tune in on Mondays.

Anna Geiger:

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Sara!

Sara Marye:

Thanks for having me, Anna!

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode229.

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.