

Read Alouds for the First Day of School (Part 1)

Last month we surveyed *Big Fresh* subscribers to learn their favorite literacy activities for launching the school year with students and colleagues. This week and next we'll feature suggestions for read alouds during the first week of school.

The most popular book for a first read aloud came from dozens of responders - *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes. Most teachers use it as a way to launch discussions of how everyone got their names, and learn everyone's names in the first days of school.

First grade teacher **Carrie Fischer** of **Imperial, Missouri** has another pick for a first read aloud focused on names:

*During the first week of school, I read a book called *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi. It is about a little girl named Unhei who has just come to America with her family from Korea and is starting school. Her name is pronounced "Youn-hye," which means grace, but she feels awkward about it after some teasing on the school bus. She decides to choose an American name, and her classmates help her by filling a glass jar with their suggestions. Her mother reminds her that she and her grandmother went to a name master for Unhei's name, and Unhei practices stamping her name with a beautiful stamp that her grandmother gave her. Finally, Unhei decides to keep her own name.*

After reading the book, I show the students a box that is wrapped like a present and have them try to guess what is inside. I tell them that this is the very first present that they ever received. If no one guesses, I open the present to reveal each of their names typed on a piece of tagboard. Each child takes their name home with a letter to their parents explaining the activity. Each child discusses with their parents how their name was chosen. The parent writes this information on the back of the tagboard. Then, each child colors or decorates their name however they choose. The students return their name posters the following day and share with the class how their names were chosen. Then, I hang up their names around the room and they stay up there all year.

Alice Ann Fesmire of **Baton Rouge, Louisiana** uses a more sophisticated text with her ninth graders:

*We read the essay on names from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Then each student looks up his/her name on the baby name sites until we find the root meaning of each name. We have always found some sort of meaning after we knock off all the prefixes and suffixes. Their assignment is to go home and ask why they were given that name, and many of them learn for the first time that they were named for someone. Then they write a piece, modeled after Cisneros' example, telling how they feel about their name, what they wish they had been named, how the word processing program spellchecker suggests their name should be spelled, if it's an unusual name, etc. They learn about themselves as we learn about each other.*

For **Beth Denney** of **Hogansville, Alabama**, the first read aloud is a springboard into deciding class rules:

*When I taught third grade my students helped me create our classroom rules for the year. I read aloud *Never Spit on Your Shoes* by Denys Cazet. As I read, I'd pause to discuss all the action going on in the illustrations. I used the Elmo document camera and projector to show the book on a large screen so students could see the illustrations more clearly. After reading aloud, we began discussing rules needed for the classroom for the year and listed them. Then I had students sort rule suggestions into categories, and finally we made a poster of the final short list of classroom rules to display and refer to throughout year.*

Many teachers noted the importance of talking through feelings and friendships at the start of the year, with lots of read alouds that can be used to start these discussions.

Cindy Hawpe of **Benbrook, Texas** recommends *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson, with an excellent resource

on the web:

*At a summer workshop last year, I learned about this wonderful literacy activity that also ties in a character lesson. After reading and discussing *Enemy Pie* with your class, the class creates a recipe for friendship. (Example: 2 cups kindness, 1 cup helpfulness, etc.) I took it a little farther by typing up the class recipe. After adding a class picture to the bottom, I placed one copy of the recipe in each child's memory book which she or he takes home at the end of the year. My students also enjoyed listening to Camryn Manheim read *Enemy Pie* on www.storylineonline.net.*

Tova Natwick of Sioux City, Iowa recommends *Courage* (both the book and the attribute):

*I like to begin the school year with my fourth graders by reading *Courage* by Bernard Waber. For most of the students it takes some courage, whether small or big, to begin the school year, and it helps remind them how often they are courageous on a daily basis. It fits in nicely when teaching Core Virtues, which is another focus of mine at the beginning of the year. After we read *Courage*, the students get together in small groups to brainstorm ways that they have recently used courage and write about them. We compile these and create our own Classroom Courage book. It's a good way to start all of those beginning-of-the-year conversations and build a community in the classroom.*

Camille Johnson of San Jose, California was one of many respondents who recommended *The Kissing Hand*:

*I gleaned this idea from observing in a classroom in Colorado. (Thank you Annie!!!) I read the book *The Kissing Hand* to my first graders on the first day. We talk about how the main character felt about starting school. I ask my students how they felt as they got ready for school. I give them quiet time to think, then I record their thoughts in my "thinking journal." Later we make two handprints. I use a large washable ink pad and they stamp their hands on white construction paper. I cut one handprint into about five pieces and place it into an envelope that goes home at the end of the day. (I always do this step quickly during lunch! I have prepared the envelopes ahead of time with instructions to sit with your favorite first-grade child and put the puzzle together as you talk about the first day of school. I use the second handprint for a bulletin board display. I title the board with the question "How did you feel on the first day of first grade?" then write each child's response on their handprint. Their handprints are placed in the shape of a heart.*

First Day Jitters, by Julie Dannenberg, is another popular choice across the elementary grades. **Marcia Balkin of Columbia, Missouri** extends the read aloud with an art project:

*In our first-grade class we start the year off right with a read aloud and art project. I read *First Day Jitters* and have a brief discussion about how we felt coming back to school this morning. Then we pull out the individual mirrors and dig into the construction paper and make our faces showing those feelings. Each child makes their own face collage cutting out all the parts and assembling them into an accurate face using the mirrors. Next the drawing is put onto a background. Below their face they do their best at writing a sentence about how they feel/felt. Most write "_____ (name) was _____ (feeling)". Depending on our other first-day activities, these papers can be displayed on a bulletin board or laminated and bound for our first class book of the year.*

This book remains in our class library all year and introduces new students to us, is an easy book to reread, and lets the children see their growth in May when they make a new face to go on the cover of their year-end-scrapbook.

Nadine Heifert of Chandler, Arizona has found the perfect book for discussions of first day feelings with her kindergartners:

*I use *The Night Before Kindergarten*, by Natasha Wing, to start discussions about how we're all feeling the same things. We've all been preparing for kindergarten and we're all excited about the new year. I talk about the things I did to get ready, and then I introduce class meeting procedures. Our sentence stem is "My name is ____ and I (did this thing)." The more capable ones will add "... to get ready for kindergarten."*

Ann Dettmann aims for quick, fun, and friendly in the first read aloud with her fourth graders in **Shakopee, Minnesota**:

I love reading Yo! Yes? by Chris Raschka to my 4th graders. It is a great way to talk about making friends, and it shows the struggling readers that all books have value, not just long ones!

Janet Niehaus of **Easley, South Carolina** starts with a classic tale of friendship across the ages:

I teach third grade. I begin the year reading Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox. After reading I share a bag with my own "memories" of "something that makes me laugh," "something that is precious as gold," and "something from long ago." I then ask the students to gather three objects from home that fit one of the "memory" categories from the book. The students bring in and share these objects or drawings and memories. This is used as a "getting to know you exercise." After sharing out loud I take a picture of the child with the objects. This picture is glued into their writing notebook beside a written composition about the objects. Now they have a written memory of a memory!

Scaredy Squirrel has become a new classic for talking through first-day jitters. **Kathryn Sandler** of **Taipei, Taiwan** uses it with her students:

On the first day of school in my fourth-grade classroom I like to read aloud Scaredy Squirrel by Melanie Watt. After reading the book, I discuss with my students how we might rewrite the book for Scaredy Squirrel's First Day of School. We come up with a list of ideas for the things that student squirrels might worry about. Sharing our fears for the day or even the school year can help me know in what ways I can help my students feel more comfortable. Before putting the book away, we can discuss the book's theme or message about the importance of taking risks to try new things, and how it applies to us for the school year.

Gail Tanner of **Blacklick, Ohio** presents a series of read alouds that are fun and introduce her students to other staff in the school:

When I taught second grade, I would read The Teacher from the Black Lagoon on the first day of school. Then every day for the next week or so, we would have a guest reader. The principal would come in and read The Principal from the Black Lagoon, the custodian would read The Custodian from the Black Lagoon, etc. This way, the students had the opportunity to meet the staff at our school and make a personal connection with them. It was a lot of fun, and a great way to start the year with a feeling of community.