READING TO LEARN
Preparing for Reading and Writing
About this book

This book introduces the Reading to Learn program, including 1) the R2L model of learning, 2) Strategies for teaching your students to read and write whole texts, and 3) Knowledge about pedagogy and language that underpins the program. You should read each section in sequence, and do each of the activities provided. This will give you the foundations to start practising these strategies with your students.

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Section 1: What is Reading to Learn?

Reading to Learn or R2L is a set of strategies that enable teachers to support all the students in their classes to read and write at the levels they need to succeed. The strategies vary according to the needs of students, their year levels, the subject area, and the kinds of texts they are expected to read and write. But the aim is for all students to be reading and writing at the levels they need to succeed in their grade and subject areas.

Early years

In the first year of school, the strategies support all children to become independent readers and to write successful texts. They use the illustrated story books that teachers read with their classes, to teach all the skills involved in reading and writing, such as comprehension, word recognition, spelling, letter formation, sentence construction and story writing. Because these skills are learnt in the meaningful, engaging context of shared reading books, children can acquire them much faster than through traditional early years activities such as alphabet, phonics and sight word drills. Early years strategies are described in Book 6.

Primary school

In the primary school, the strategies support all children to engage in reading and writing stories for pleasure, to learn from reading and writing factual texts, and to evaluate texts, issues and points of view in their reading and writing. They use texts in the subject areas that the class is studying, to teach skills in reading and writing, at the same time as learning the content of each subject area. They support all students to read and write texts at the same high level, rather then giving them texts at different ‘ability levels’. In this way they ensure that all students are ready to succeed in secondary school.

Secondary school

In the secondary school, the strategies support all students to learn the content of each curriculum area through reading and writing. They use the texts that students are expected to read in each subject area, to guide them to learn through reading, and to demonstrate what they learnt through writing. They enable teachers to balance the curriculum demands for ‘covering the content’, with teaching the skills that students need to independently learn the curriculum from reading and writing. They are designed to ensure that all students are well prepared for further education after school. Primary and secondary school strategies are described in Books 1, 2, 5 and 9.

Further education

In further education, including university and vocational education, the strategies are designed to embed skills in reading and writing in teaching and learning the curriculum content. They enable tertiary teachers to support all students in their classes to read academic texts with comprehension, and to use the information they learn from reading to write successful texts for assessment. Strategies for academic reading and writing are described in articles under Further Reading below, and can be downloaded from www.readingtolearn.com.au.
Closing the gap with R2L

The writing samples on this page show the kinds of growth you can expect within a few months with Reading to Learn.

**Early years**

The writing to the left is common for low achieving students after the first year of normal early years literacy practices. Without R2L, this student would probably have continued in the failing range throughout primary school. Within 2 months of R2L teaching, the same student has independently written a detailed, coherent and legible description on a topic the class has studied.

The writing to the left is common for low achieving students in middle primary. It is an unfinished recount based on the movie Shrek. The text below was written independently by the same student, after 2 months of R2L. It is modelled on a literary description studied in detail by the class, but the content comes from the student’s own imagination.

The little text to the top right was written by a low achieving student in junior secondary. It is a book response with just two sentences. The review below on “The Recruit” was written independently by the same student after 2 months of R2L. It is the first page from a two page book review, that discusses the book’s themes, characters and literary techniques.

These are typical examples of improvements with consistent implementation of R2L strategies.
Tracking students’ literacy growth

In the R2L program, teachers track their students’ literacy growth by assessing their writing each term.

The charts below show the results of these assessments. The first chart shows the scores before R2L teaching for the low, middle and high groups in each school stage. The second chart shows the scores for each student group and school stage, after 3 terms of R2L teaching. (The R2L writing assessment is out of a total 42)

At the start of Kindergarten (or Prep), all children’s literacy is near zero, and the gap between low and high achieving students is small. By the start of Yr1/2, the high group are now reading and writing independently but the low group is still near zero. The gap has tripled. This gap then continues throughout the years. The high group stays in the high average range, the middle group in a low average range, and the low group in the failing range, near zero. These are typical patterns across year levels, as experienced teachers all know.

After 3 terms of R2L teaching, average scores in Kindergarten/Prep have risen by 70%, and the gap between low and high achieving groups has halved. In the other year levels, growth is 30-40% (which is double the standard growth rate), and the gap is reduced to 20-30%.

In addition, 80% of students accelerate at 2-4 times average growth rates, and 80% of teachers achieve this growth with their whole classes (Report for Western NSW Region 2010). These are typical results for R2L programs (see Further Reading below).

The R2L Writing Assessment is set out in Book 3.
The R2L model of learning: learning cycles

Activity: Read the following pages and highlight key information as you go.

The model of learning in R2L is central to the power of the program. The R2L learning model is neither “teacher-centred” nor “learner-centred”. It is focused on how teachers and learners interact to build knowledge.

Learning happens through activities that involve a sequence of steps. We call these sequences learning cycles. The main steps in each cycle are Prepare, Task and Elaborate. This model is used throughout the R2L program to analyse and design learning activities.

Learning tasks

The central step in each cycle is the learning task. All learning happens through tasks of some kind. Only learners can do the task, a teacher cannot do the learning for them.

This understanding underlies most teaching practices and theories, whether it is made explicit or not. There is no difference on this point between “teacher-centred” and “learner-centred” theories. The disagreement is about where the knowledge comes from. Learner-centred theories believe that knowledge comes from inside the learner, while teacher-centred theories believe the knowledge comes from outside. In R2L, we believe that knowledge comes through teacher-learner interactions.

Preparing for learning tasks

By definition, a learning task is a task that learners have not done before, at least not successfully. Learning happens when a task is done successfully, and learners are more likely to do succeed with a task if they are supported by a teacher. As teachers cannot do the task, they must give the support first, and then hand control to the learners to do the task themselves. We call this first supporting step preparing.

This gives us two roles in the teacher-learner relationship. The learning task is the role of learners; preparing for the task is the role of teachers.

Often in school, preparing and learning tasks are not distinguished. For example, new knowledge may be presented by the teacher demonstrating and explaining. The learners’ task is to watch and listen, which some students may be more able to do than others. Or learners may be expected to “construct” knowledge for themselves without teachers preparing. If the tasks of learners are not understood, or the preparing roles of teachers are not recognised, learners may not be able do tasks successfully.

In R2L, we carefully analyse each learning task, and design our preparations to ensure that all learners can do each task successfully.