



One of the greatest challenges for us as teachers is shifting our instruction in response to children's learning. Sometimes it seems that this process changes every day, but certainly it changes profoundly over a school year and across the elementary grades. To every grade level, children bring expanded sets of knowledge and new needs. The first chapters of this book describe the sophisticated range of comprehending strategies that young readers develop throughout the elementary school years. To develop these strategies, children need extensive engaged time for reading, writing, and word study to support their learning. Across the instructional contexts of the framework, we must constantly up the ante, so to speak, by supporting more complex learning. Consequently, we need to understand the transitions that occur in learners between the end of first grade and the beginning of third grade.

The time of significant change that this chapter focuses on is the period somewhere between the middle of second grade and the beginning of third grade. Identifying just *when* to make shifts in your teaching is a decision that you make based on the knowledge and skills evidenced in the behavior of the children you teach. This chapter specifically describes second graders, because most children demonstrate these important shifts in learning between the end of first grade and the beginning of third grade. While we recognize that first-grade and third-grade teachers also will have many children exhibiting these changes, we focus on second graders to illustrate the continuum of change across the primary grades.



How Are Second Graders Changing as Readers and Writers?

Second graders experience significant changes in their literacy learning. Some examples of these changes are shown in Figure 4-1. Any class of children will have a wide range of experiential backgrounds, so we cannot precisely define any specific second grader. The descriptions in Figure 4-1 represent a continuum of change over time; you will observe these changes in some students before seeing them in others. For most children, as we have said, these changes will occur sometime between the end of first grade and the beginning of third grade.

CHANGES IN READING BEHAVIOR

Second graders are growing rapidly in their ability to read longer, more complex narrative texts over several days as opposed to short, straightforward texts, which can often be read in 20–30 minutes. Literary elements such as character, setting, and plot become more important to understanding these longer stories. In simple stories, characters may encounter some surprises or learn something, but there are usually only one or two such episodes. In longer texts, some with several chapters, characters change and develop through their experiences. The reader has more opportunity to think about how characters feel and their motivations for doing what they do.

Good examples of easy chapter books are those in the *Henry and Mudge* series by Cynthia Rylant. These books center around the adventures of a little boy named Henry and his huge dog Mudge. These Level J books have about 50 to 60 pages, organized in 8 to 10 short chapters. Chapters present different episodes, which are linked together as the plot develops. These books are easy to read: They have a great many easy high-frequency words, sentences are generally simple, and the layout is friendly to the young reader. Sentences usually start on the left margin and there is plenty of space between words and between lines. Settings for the stories are the home and neighborhood; Henry has the kinds of everyday problems that are close to most children's own experiences.

All of these factors support readers, but *Henry and Mudge* books also give them plenty to think about while reading. Rylant's language exquisitely communicates simple but powerful emotions as Henry experiences loneliness and fear. In *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* (Rylant 1987), for example, she describes Henry's imagined fears as he walked to school alone, thinking about tornadoes, bullies, biting dogs, and ghosts. "He walked as fast as he could...He never looked back" (p. 15). With his big dog Mudge at his side, though, Henry thought good thoughts—about rocks, vanilla ice cream, and rain. "He walked to

Transitions in Second Grade

FROM:	TO:
Reading simple narrative texts with straight-forward plots.	Reading narrative texts that have more complex plots.
Reading shorter texts that can be read in one sitting or one language/literacy block.	Sustaining reading over several days or even more than one week on a single text.
Reading mostly narrative texts.	Expanding to read more expository texts.
Beginning to build the background students need to read and understand informational texts.	Applying background to read simple informational texts.
Reading informational texts that are organized much like narratives.	Learning to read informational texts with several different organizational patterns.
Understanding the information in pictures with some labels.	Understanding the information in pictures and simple graphics with labels, legends, and some other print information.
Reading orally.	Reading silently.
Writing mostly short pieces that can be finished in one or two days.	Sustaining writing over several days.
Correcting errors while writing texts; seldom creating pieces for publishing.	Learning to proofread and revise some pieces of writing; publishing a few pieces.
Writing simple texts relating personal experiences.	Still describing personal experiences but producing longer texts with more detail.
Writing expressively, as ideas come to mind.	Varying writing according to purpose; e.g., sometimes incorporating notes, lists, or directions within personal experience writing.
Reading and writing a large number of easier, high-frequency words quickly and automatically.	Rapidly expanding the number of easy and harder high-frequency words that can be automatically read and written.
Understanding how to take words apart and to write words by using letter-sound relationships, letter clusters, and word parts.	Understanding how to take apart and to spell longer, multisyllable words by using a range of word-solving strategies.
Working independently in active exploration centers with low talking.	Sustaining independent work for longer periods of time and longer periods of silent, individual work.

FIGURE 4-1



school, but not too fast. He walked to school and sometimes backward” (p. 16). In another book (*Henry and Mudge Get the Cold Shivers*, Rylant 1989), Mudge gets sick and has to go to the vet. Henry is worried but takes good care of Mudge.

As they read these beginning chapter books, second graders have opportunities to expand their ability to solve words and process text, but they will also make connections across texts, make inferences about characters’ feelings and motivations, and predict solutions to problems.

Another change that is important for most children between the last months of first grade and the middle of second grade is the switch from more oral to more silent reading. While there are always reasons to read aloud (reading stories and books to children and adults, reading scripts of various kinds, reading poetry for the pleasure of the sound, and so on), reading is, in general, a silent activity. As soon as children have a basic reading process that they can employ automatically, we want them to move into silent reading. As they grow in fluent processing, they read very softly and often begin to read parts without voicing the text.

It is not necessary to force children suddenly to read silently. Some readers spontaneously begin to move to silent reading of easy texts because they find they can read faster; others need to be encouraged to try *reading with their eyes*. As they try out the process, check on understanding and talk with them about the fact that they are actually reading but not saying the words out loud. The transition may take several months for some children and happen much more quickly for others. They may read some texts aloud and others silently, depending on the kind of text, the difficulty level, and the purpose for reading.

The best way to check on how children are processing print still is to sample oral reading as part of daily guided reading lessons. Frequent conversations with students about the texts they read will demonstrate their ways of thinking about reading that go beyond the literal text. It is good to keep in mind, though, that the transition to silent reading is an essential one for students to make. Silent reading makes a higher level of comprehension possible, along with much greater speed in reading because you simply do not have to take the time to pronounce each word.

Gay recently worked with a group of children who were reading *The Stories Julian Tells* (Cameron 1981). They read the text silently and accurately; four of the six read fluently and two were fluent for the most part. The teacher’s observation of their behavior and Gay’s assessment of the quality of their processing went beyond those limited observations. This text consists of a series of short stories about family life (cooking pudding, creating a garden, etc.) told by Julian, who is about eight years old. His stories, however, are from throughout his life, so they show him and his younger brother Huey at different ages. Like any children,



Julian and Huey get into trouble, tell tall tales, and build relationships with their family and neighbors.

This Level N text is appropriate for most children at about the beginning of third grade. The writer, Ann Cameron, introduces some challenges even for students who are processing it with high accuracy. One example of her language is as follows:

My father is a big man with wild black hair.
When he laughs, the sun laughs in the window-panes.
When he thinks, you can almost see his thoughts sitting
on all the tables and chairs. (p. 2)

The text requires that readers understand and, hopefully, enjoy, the use of figurative language, because it makes the family relationships more meaningful and helps readers to understand Dad's way of working with the boys. In this text, students are required to understand new meanings for words for which they might have only one meaning in their oral vocabularies (e.g., *beating the pudding*). The text also requires readers to make inferences as to Julian's feelings (based on his behavior) and the underlying reasons for his likes, dislikes, and actions.

When Irene worked with Jeremy, Brittany, Jazmyne, Nora, Amber, Tiara, and Maya, she pointed out the interesting language to them, read it to them, and asked them to think about what it might mean. They were just beginning to encounter books in guided reading that had these complexities, and the first thing for them to learn was that the writer is not necessarily using language literally. Irene wanted them to say some of the language. They puzzled over the words *whipping* and *beating*. These words already had one meaning for them, but as many children have little experience with cooking, they were not as familiar with the author's intended meaning.

In addition, Cameron used the terms to play out the plot of the story. When the boys eat the pudding (which was to be saved for Mom), their father teasingly says, "There is going to be some beating, here now! There is going to be some whipping!" The *double meaning* made the boys scared, but the story turned out fine, because Dad had them whip up another pudding for Mom. During the discussion after reading, Brittany said that she had not been sure what kind of *whipping* was going to happen, and then two other children volunteered that they had also been uncertain. They were able to discuss the meaning of these words and Dad's sense of humor. Understanding these nuances was vital to their understanding of the text.



CHANGES IN WRITING BEHAVIOR

In second grade, writers greatly increase the number of words they can write quickly and automatically, and expand their spelling skills as well. The Buddy Study System (described in Pinnell & Fountas 1999; see also Chapters 2 and 13), helps them to learn generative principles that they can apply to the spelling of many words. The motor skills involved in writing become more fluid; everything is faster and easier, allowing students to focus more on the messages they want to communicate. They can produce longer, more complex pieces of text. As in kindergarten and first grade, students are still writing from their own experiences. Indeed, this will be true through most of the elementary grades because that is how writers learn. But second-grade students will be developing their topics more deeply and engaging in more revision of their first drafts.

First-grade students reread their work to keep the meaning of the piece in mind and make some corrections to their writing, occasionally even copying important pieces over. But they do not spend a great deal of time on editing and revision. Second graders are often in the process of learning simple proofreading skills to help them spell known words accurately and use capitalization and punctuation correctly. They also may be making greater use of technology to support their writing.

CHANGES IN LEARNING ABOUT THE LINGUISTIC SYSTEM

Most second graders know how written language works; they can spell many words conventionally and understand some basic spelling principles. They are still expanding their knowledge of the ways words work and are encountering greater complexity. For example, they might make collections of examples that help them understand larger categories of words, such as words that sound like they end in “t” when “ed” is added. They might understand simple contractions, as well as the principle that the apostrophe replaces a letter or letters, and they might expand that knowledge to harder contractions such as *should've* or irregular ones such as *won't*. But they still need explicit teaching and to engage in active, systematic word study.

CHANGES IN INDEPENDENT WORK

Second graders are able (and should be expected) to sustain independent reading and writing for increasingly longer periods of time. They therefore do not need as many different activities during independent work time. They often enjoy listening to longer books on tape and are more capable of using writing to respond to books they have read or heard. Of course, like all students, if they have to complete a writing assignment every time they read, then the result will be not much reading and a lot of tedious, empty writing. But, in general, second graders expect to



do more reflection on what they read, and some of that reflection may include writing on their own. We describe the growth of independence, as well as the introduction of reading response journals and Think Books more fully in Chapter 13. A reading response journal is a special notebook in which students record titles of books they read and also write letters to the teacher that reflect their thinking. A Think Book is a notebook to record, with teacher guidance, a wide variety of writing: note-taking, making lists, responding to a read-aloud, and so on. It is exciting to see young students begin to immerse themselves in books for much longer periods of time, and to notice how they are increasingly able to respond both orally and in writing to the texts they hear read aloud and those they read for themselves.

What Do These Changes Mean?

All of these important internal changes, signaled by students' overt behaviors, mean that students are processing and comprehending texts at a deeper level. They are using the whole range of strategies described in Chapter 2, and they are beginning to apply them to longer and more complex texts. As readers, they are still beginners, and we should not forget that. They still need strong support in comprehending more complex texts.

These students can also be seen as beginning writers because they have only recently acquired a body of words that they can write quickly and automatically, and they should be adding to this repertoire daily. Their word-solving skills make it possible to write a great many more words, but their spelling will not be completely conventional. As teachers, we want them to experiment with words, as well as to write conventionally all of the words they know. An important change is that these students can use writing more rapidly and easily, and so it is more available to us as part of instruction.

Figure 4-2 lists several implications of the profound changes seen during the second-grade year. In a sense, these implications reveal our expectations of students at this time. Some will take on the new behaviors later and need much more support and explicit demonstration. Others will forge ahead easily, becoming independent with seemingly little effort.

The ability to sustain the reading of a longer text over several days and to read silently for longer periods of time makes a qualitative difference in the educational program for these students. For example, instead of moving through several independent activities and reading several short books, you might see students becoming more deliberate about choosing texts and reading them independently. Their knowledge of texts (built both from



hearing you read aloud *and* from reading for themselves) is much richer, and they have a repertoire of language, assumptions about the way texts work, vocabulary, types of characters, plots, and so on, that they can bring to all of their reading and writing. They know a core of words that they can write quickly and automatically and can solve many more with their growing phonics and spelling strategies. Finally, they can sustain independent behavior, working alone and silently, for longer periods of time.

Summary

These attributes of readers and writers raise our expectations and call for shifts in both teaching and management. Second grade is an exciting time, and it must be both successful and challenging for our young students. Close observation helps us to detect evidence of those important changes. Observation also provides insight into the kind of teaching that will be needed to support these important changes in students' behaviors.

Implications of Shifts in Behavior, Grades 1 to 3

Students will:

- ❁ be engaged in reading silently for longer periods of time.
- ❁ become more flexible in the kinds of texts they can read.
- ❁ make connections between texts because their repertoire will have expanded.
- ❁ go beyond the texts they read to make inferences and synthesize information.
- ❁ have greater capability to sustain writing over longer periods of time.
- ❁ begin to use writing to document reading as well as to record their responses.
- ❁ employ a wider range of word-solving strategies because they are building networks of understanding about how words work.
- ❁ be able to work independently without talking to others for designated periods of time.
- ❁ reflect on and self-evaluate to a greater degree their reading, writing, and independent work.

FIGURE 4-2



Ideas to Try

1. Meet with colleagues who teach children in grades kindergarten through third grade. Make your goal to expand your understanding of the transitions students make between first and third grade.
2. Ask teachers to bring some materials to examine.
 - ❁ Ask first-grade teachers to bring student writing samples saved from the end of first grade; ask second-grade teachers to bring samples from the beginning, middle, and end of second grade; and ask third-grade teachers to bring samples from the beginning and middle of third grade.
 - ❁ Ask all teachers to bring samples of texts that their students would read in guided reading at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Kindergarten teachers may wish to bring samples from March to June only.
3. Compare the writing samples and make a list of the important changes you notice over time.
4. Compare the reading texts and discuss the changing demands on readers that you notice. You may want to make some notes on a chart to capture the important new challenges at each level. (Save these reading texts and any lists you make if you plan to discuss Chapter 6 of this book.)
5. Laying out the writing samples and reading texts in order of complexity will give you and your group a visual picture of the changes to expect. Then discuss how to shift your teaching to support students as they change over time.