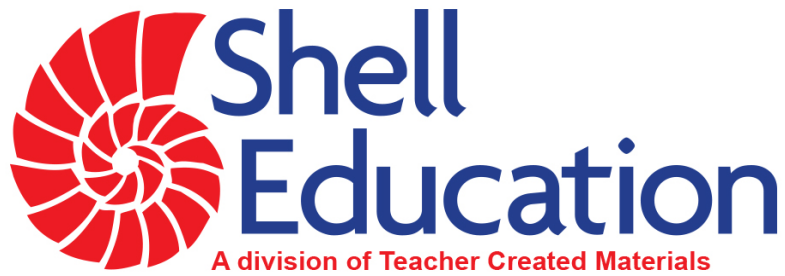


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# SHORT Texts, BIG Impact

**35** Strategies  
for Strengthening Reading  
and Writing Skills

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Well-crafted short texts, from billboards to social media, are plentiful, creating opportunities for more frequent engagement with reading and writing. By the time students become teenagers, most of the text they engage with will be short: captions, videos, and text messages. It makes sense to help young people navigate the reading and writing that surround them so they can consume and produce short texts with clarity and critical thinking.

## Why Short Texts Can Have a Big Impact

From a purely practical standpoint, short texts leave more time for practice, discussion, and reflection. Spending three days reading an entire “short” story leaves little space for learning. We spend more time getting through it than we do talking about it. According to Mike Schmoker, “Our curriculum must be liberally infused with frequent opportunities for students to read, discuss, argue, and write about what they are learning” (2018, 28).

### EVERYDAY SHORT TEXTS

- Social media posts
- Photo captions
- TikToks
- Memes
- Signs and billboards
- Songs
- Text messages
- Emojis (Yeah, I said it!)

## Lessen the Cognitive Load

Brain research has consistently shown that short-term, or working, memory is limited by time and space (McLeod 2023). The number of things we can retain in our working memory is called *cognitive load*. Like any heavy load that you carry, you might be able to hold onto it for a little while, but eventually, you have to set it down.

The same is true with learning. “When our working memory is overloaded, learning is minimal” (Hattie and Clarke 2019, 84). When students are weighed down trying to decode words or remember details from earlier in a passage, they have less cognitive space for other tasks. They may even run out of space. If the cognitive load of a text is too heavy, there is little space for the working memory to determine the main idea or grapple with a text feature.

Working with shorter texts can lessen the cognitive load for students. There are fewer details to manage, fewer names to keep track of, and fewer plot points to remember. John Hattie and Shirley Clarke emphasize that awareness of cognitive load is important when designing instruction: “We should avoid overloading students with additional activities that don’t directly contribute to learning” (2019, 85). They recommend “break[ing] learning into parts that can be linked,” which is the beginning of “deep understanding” (2019, 85).

## Provide Access to Challenging Texts

For students struggling with reading fluency, grade-level texts may feel out of reach for instruction. But the instinct to provide easier texts doesn’t pay off in learning dividends. In “The Challenge of Challenging Text,” Timothy Shanahan, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey acknowledge that working with a complex text is, well, complex: “Teachers may be tempted to try to make it easier for students by avoiding difficult texts. The problem is, easier work is less likely to make readers stronger” (2012, 62). For students striving to read complex, grade-level texts, shorter versions of those texts can give students practice that feels possible.

Providing all students access to complex, grade-level texts is critical. Students benefit from reading a text even if it requires more of an instructional lift. According to The New Teacher Project (TNT), “Students spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren’t appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn’t ask enough of them—the

equivalent of six months of wasted class time” (2018, 4). However, “in classrooms where students had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, students gained nearly two months of additional learning compared to their peers” (5).

Working with a more complex text requires careful planning and scaffolding. According to Frey and Fisher, “If students are going to access complex texts, they must be given the time to read and reread, to respond to questions that encourage them to return to the text, and to discuss their ideas in the company of others” (2013, 15). Shanahan writes, “The idea of teaching with more complex text aims to expand the role of teaching to maximize the amount of student learning” (2020b, para. 25).

A rich text in a smaller form means students still engage with the complex text without the task itself overwhelming students. By keeping the complex text short, we have time and space for teaching and supporting students. We can provide important vocabulary, build up content knowledge, and untangle complicated syntax bit by bit.

## NAVIGATING COMPLEX TEXTS

All students deserve access to rich, powerful, challenging text. Engaging students with texts of grade-level complexity should spark their curiosity and garner interest. Complex texts build students’ knowledge and vocabulary, equipping them to comprehend increasingly challenging material. Exposure to complex texts allows students to grapple with rich content, deepens their understanding, and promotes critical thinking. Access to complex texts requires ensuring students have the right tools in their toolboxes to tackle them.

Complex text doesn’t have to be long. Excellent shorter text selections feel more manageable to students, while still providing practice with the skills needed to navigate challenging vocabulary, syntax, and text structures. Consider chunking, or breaking, texts into smaller, manageable sections. This provides students with access and opportunities to engage meaningfully with challenging material without overwhelming them. We often think that every word of a text is essential, but sometimes, a specific section holds the crux of a text’s meaning and is most valuable for students to focus on. Purposefully breaking text into smaller sections allows students to dive deeper and find meaning in a few powerful lines, making longer texts more accessible and impactful.

—Jennifer Jump, coauthor of the *What the Science of Reading Says* series

## Provide More Frequent Feedback

John Hattie’s synthesis of research on effective classroom practices has consistently shown that frequent and actionable feedback has a “powerful impact on student learning” (Fisher, Frey, and Hattie 2016, 32). But not all feedback is created equal. To have the most impact, feedback should be specific, actionable, and timely. In *Flash Feedback*, Matthew Johnson writes, “It makes

a lot of sense that regular feedback given shortly after a task is completed would have a larger impact than intermittent feedback received weeks later” (2020, 12).

Learning activities with short texts and short writing allow for more frequent and targeted opportunities for feedback. We don’t have to wait until we get to the end of the book or chapter. Ideally, students should receive meaningful feedback every day instead of waiting for the teacher to grade, record, and return assignments days, or even weeks, later. Receiving feedback on an essay weeks after it was written doesn’t help students become better, more confident writers. However, when students write and revise a few sentences, the teacher can give feedback in the teaching moment or during the next class session.

You can learn more about ways to provide brief feedback in part 3.

## Create Small Wins

There’s another benefit to shorter reading and writing tasks: Students see the progress they are making much more quickly. The idea that they will become better readers and writers by the end of the school year is hard for students to see in October. Having students compare writing at the beginning and end of the year is great, but why wait until June to see what all the hard work was for?

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer studied employees to understand what brings joy and engagement at work. They found that “of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work” (Amabile and Kramer 2011, para. 3). Though students are not employees, no one would argue that school and learning are not *work*.

If we think of a classroom like a workplace, teachers are similar to managers seeking to motivate workers. Students are motivated when they feel like they are making progress. Mike Gaskell writes, “Incremental victories, or small wins . . . can give a much-needed boost to students’ confidence and motivation” (2021, para. 1). He explains, “Data presented toward progress can encourage even the most reluctant learners to improve” (para. 9). Students’ small wins can create a self-reinforcing progress loop where one step toward a goal leads to motivation and drive to keep working to the next step.

Imagine these two scenarios and think about which teacher is supporting students step-by-step.

**Scenario 1:** *Class, remember that your final persuasive essays are due next week. They need to have a works cited page and at least four pieces of evidence.*

**Scenario 2:** *Yesterday, we crafted and revised your claim statements for your persuasive essays. If I didn’t meet with you one-on-one yesterday, I left you a few notes on your exit tickets. Today, we will work to find one great piece of evidence to support that claim and learn how we can embed it into our writing.*

In the second scenario, each small step of the assignment has a checkpoint for feedback. It is progress toward a larger goal. The monster task of writing a persuasive essay is split apart and practiced in smaller sections. Questions and concerns are addressed early, before moving onto the next step.

At the end of the day, who doesn’t like crossing everything off a to-do list? Making that little checkmark on each task makes it easier to move on to the next one.

## How to Use These Strategies

This book is divided into two main sections: short reading strategies and short writing strategies. In addition to descriptions of the strategies, I have included some ideas to help make them your own.

- Teacher Talk is a sample script or think-aloud to share with students.
- Teaching Tips are based on lessons learned in the trenches, when students misunderstood or became confused about what we were learning.
- Make It Happen with Any Text gives support for selecting texts to do this work.
- Make It Happen at Any Level shows you how the strategy looks across different grade bands or with different groups of students.
- Make It Better has extension ideas and next steps.
- Make a Big Impact shows how the strategy accomplishes a bigger literacy goal.

I also included some text pairings and short texts that you might use in your classroom to try these strategies out. As you're reading through a strategy, be sure to turn the page, as many strategies continue on the next page.

When I taught, I mixed these strategies in the same class day. We would read a short bit of text, talk about what it meant and how it was structured, and then write a little bit. Some days there was more reading and some days there was more writing, but I always tried to include both.

As students completed these short reading and writing opportunities, I used the time to walk around and lean over the shoulder of every student at least once a day to provide informal feedback. Sometimes it was a conversation, sometimes it was a thumbs-up stamp, sometimes it was just a nod. I made notes on my clipboard to remind me which students I needed to circle back to and spend more time with tomorrow. Not every day was perfect. Not every day was even good. Pep rallies, fire drills, afternoon malaise, and spring field trips got in the way. But every day was about making a little progress toward the big goal: creating confident readers and writers.

The strategies in this book can be mixed and matched, combined and modified, shared, and transformed to meet your instructional goals, your students' needs, and the demands of the text you are working with. Each one is about ending the day by getting a small win. And who couldn't use more of those?

## A Final Thought on Making a Big Impact

Teaching is hard. Sometimes we are the ones who need the win. When I could see that students used something I taught them right away, we all got to celebrate. When we made it through a hard text together as a class, we all got a gold star for the day. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fix every need my students had. But I could help students grow just a little stronger as readers and a little more confident as writers each day.

My former students are now professors, entrepreneurs, engineers, screenwriters, teachers, and so much more.

That was my big impact.

## Evidence Battle

Many states have standards and assessments asking students to respond to questions about the text and to support those answers with relevant or well-chosen text evidence. Formulas like ACE (Answer-Cite-Explain) or ATE (Answer-Text-Explain) help students understand the structure and organization of a response but do little to help students select the best text evidence.

Finding text evidence is easy. Students can simply choose almost any sentence in a text and copy it as their answer. Finding the right text evidence is much harder. Students need to be taught how to choose the *best* or most relevant text evidence to answer the question. This requires students to compare and evaluate text options to determine which best supports the answer. This higher-order thinking takes time and intentional, explicit instruction.

### Problems with Text Evidence

- The answer is wrong.
- The evidence isn't the strongest example in the text.
- The evidence needs paraphrasing or context.
- The evidence doesn't connect to the answer the student has written.

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz says that having too many options makes it harder to choose (2016). Too many options can overload our brains and paralyze us, keeping us from deciding anything. Looking at an entire text, even a short one, provides countless options for textual support, making it difficult for students' brains to make the best choice.

Evidence Battle focuses squarely on the process of evaluating text evidence based on four options.

1. Select a text. You can use any genre of text, but I find informational or opinion/argumentative texts to be a little easier to use with students.
2. Have the class complete a first read of the text.
3. Pose an open-ended question. (See page 119 for text-dependent writing prompts.)
4. For example: *After reading "What's Right at All Costs," how would you describe José Arturo Castellanos Contreras? Support your answer with evidence from the text.*
5. As a class, brainstorm answers to the question. Work together to determine the best answer. For the text "What's Right at All Costs," the class might brainstorm these adjectives to describe Contreras: *brave, compassionate, dedicated, and a good friend*. After a discussion, the class might decide on *brave* as the class answer.

### Teaching Tip

There can be more than one answer to the question, but coming to a single class answer is critical in the “battle” for the best evidence.

6. Ask students to reenter the text and find the best piece of evidence from the text to support the answer. In this example, we are looking for evidence to support the answer that Contreras can best be described as *brave*.
7. Students write their best text evidence on a sticky note.
8. Move students into groups of four. Have them number off, from 1 to 4, so each student has a number. (See page 123 for an Evidence Battle template.)
9. Working in rounds, students “battle” their text evidence. In each round, two pieces of text evidence face off in a battle for dominance.

Round 1: Call for students 1 and 2 to battle for the best text support. Students 3 and 4 debate which of the two pieces of text is the winner and why.

Round 2: Reverse the roles. Call for students 3 and 4 to battle for the best text support. Students 1 and 2 debate which of the two pieces of text is the winner and why.

Round 3: The winners from rounds 1 and 2 compete for the best text evidence. The group determines the champion text evidence for the table.

Round 4: Bring all the groups back together to have the evidence-battle champions face off against each other. When finished, crown the class champion of text evidence.

10. Ask students to integrate the winning text evidence into their original responses.

The battles and debates can be a little loud and rambunctious, but that is part of the charm of this activity. I like to use a timer for the rounds to keep things moving. It is important to point out after all the battling that sometimes the first or most obvious piece of evidence might not be the best piece of evidence. When you have two or more options to consider, you often wind up with a better answer.

Use any short text with a text-based writing prompt. You can find a list of possible prompts on page 119. The example here uses the text “What’s Right at All Costs” (see page 108 for the full text).

FOR USE WITH PAGE 44

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### EVIDENCE BATTLE

**Directions:** Write your best text evidence on a sticky note. Work with your group to determine the overall best text evidence.

<b>Student #1</b>	<b>Student #2</b>
<div style="border: 2px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 50px; height: 50px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <b>Question</b> </div>	
<b>Student #3</b>	<b>Student #4</b>

© Shell Education 123

**Make It Better**

There are hidden mini-lessons and teachable moments living in this activity. Consider teaching students the difference between a direct quote and a paraphrase, how to punctuate with quotation marks, how to cite evidence, or even how to weave textual support into an existing sentence.

**Make It Happen at Any Level**

Emerging Readers and Writers (K–2)	Experienced Readers and Writers (6–12)
Challenge students with <i>This or That</i> . Provide two pieces of text evidence and ask: “Which is better evidence—this one or that one?” Have students vote for the best answer.	Have students write out their textual support with proper citations and an explanation to bring to battle. This gives students practice in providing context and explanations for their textual support.

## 10% Off Revision

Revision, at its core, is adding, deleting, combining, and rearranging ideas in writing. Though we often ask students to go back into their drafts to add more detail, we typically do not provide as much support for helping writers see what to take out.

Deleting is a simple way to improve writing. Jeff Anderson and Deborah Dean call it “one of the most useful revision decisions a writer makes,” since they are “getting rid of words that aren’t really doing any work” (2014, 19–20). William Zinsser’s classic work *On Writing Well* urges writers to “look for clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly” (2001, 17). By focusing on deleting words, we can help students determine what is most important. 10% Off Revision is a strategy that gives students practice finding and deleting unnecessary words to make their writing more powerful and succinct.

1. After students complete a short bit of writing, have them each count the number of words in their draft and write it at the top of the paper.
2. Explain that revision is not only adding text, but it can also be choosing text that should be deleted. This could be words, phrases, or even whole paragraphs. Model with sample writing and ask students for help deleting words.
3. Ask students to review their own writing and try to eliminate 10 percent of the words. Have students put a bracket around words that are not necessary and could be deleted. Bracketing is an important first step that allows students to weigh whether the words are necessary before eliminating them (Zinsser 2001).

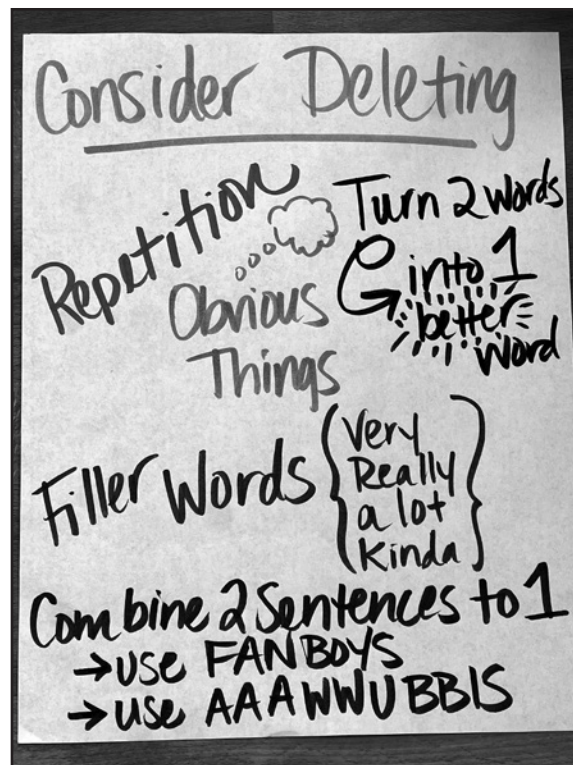
### Teaching Tip

Giving students a percentage of text to delete (rather than a word count) makes this task naturally differentiated. Writers who are more verbose will have more words that could be deleted. You can always increase the percentage, but 10 percent is a good place to start.

4. Have students work with partners as they grapple with their deletion choices.
5. After students have completed this task, have them reflect on the changes. Ask, “Is the revised writing better? How so? What strategies did you use to make the writing more concise?”

### Make It Better

Like with all revision strategies, students need time to reflect after trying 10% Off. As students share their experiences, create an anchor chart of strategies for deleting and/or create a list of items to consider for deletion. Building an anchor chart from students’ learning creates a guide they can return to in the future.



### Make It Happen at Any Level

Emerging Readers and Writers (K–2)	Experienced Readers and Writers (6–12)
<p>Young writers have some favorite words they like to use—specifically <i>I</i> to start a sentence and <i>and</i> to add more and more details.</p> <p>Consider asking students to circle the times they use these favorite words and practice revising some of them to make them better.</p> <p>For example: <i>I went to the park, and I ate ice cream and I played on the swings and I went on the slide.</i></p> <p>Students could circle all the <i>ands</i> used in the example to see if they can try to say the same thing another way.</p>	<p>I have used a similar strategy to remove passive voice or “to be” verbs. Many sentences containing <i>a, is, was, were, be, being, and been</i> can be improved through revision.</p> <p>Example: <i>Many sentences can be improved through revision.</i></p> <p>Revision: <i>Improve writing with revision.</i></p> <p>I ask students to total the “to be” verbs in their pieces and reduce the total by 50 percent. It can be a challenge, but it often pushes students toward better word choice and syntax.</p>