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From A to Z: Using Alphabet Books as an Instructional Tool with Older Readers

**Gerry A. Coffman
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Alphabet books provide a literature source for teachers to use in the classroom that focuses on a common sequence of textual organization which upper elementary and middle school students have known since they were young children. These students most likely had in their repertoire of beginning to read activities, alphabet books using common symbols to match the letters such as "A is for apple, B is for bear, C is for cat." The objects were selected to match the true sound of the letter with a single or small number of illustrations to demonstrate the concept. The alphabet book addresses the 26 letters in picture book format with typically 24 to 48 pages, illustrations on double pages, and brief text (Kormanski and Stevens, 1993).

Many alphabet books reach a level of sophistication which exceeds the understanding of beginning and primary-age readers. These books provide a rich source of literature to be used in numerous ways with upper elementary and middle school readers. Alphabet books written to be used with older students cover a variety of topics and themes appropriate to use in several different curricular areas. For example,

Gerald Hausman's *Turtle Island: A Gathering of Native American Symbols* (1994) depicts our early civilization through the descriptions of the sacred land expressed from the viewpoint of the people who inhabited North America, and the soft pastel illustrations by Cara and Barry Moser. For example, "d is for drum," a musical instrument that represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

Vidor (1994) identified four types of alphabet books appropriate to use with older readers. For theme applications, alphabet books provide a structure for presenting information about a topic through the illustrations and descriptive text. For language focused activities, alphabet books provide a vast resource of writing styles for teachers to use in their classrooms to demonstrate techniques such as humor, rhyming, and word choice. For teaching narrative structure, the authors may incorporate the letter of the alphabet in a narrative storyline. For teaching artistic mediums, the illustrations used in alphabet books cover a variety of approaches to line, color, shape, texture, and design. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how alphabet books for older readers may be incorporated in instruction. We will share the titles of alphabet books for older readers and activities for applying these books in the areas of reading comprehension, vocabulary, self-interest, research, and poetry.

Reading comprehension

Alphabet books can be used as a source to model reading comprehension strategies. The book can be read in a few minutes providing time for the actual modeling and application of the strategy. The intent of this modeling is that the understanding of the strategy will be transferred by the student to more complex materials.

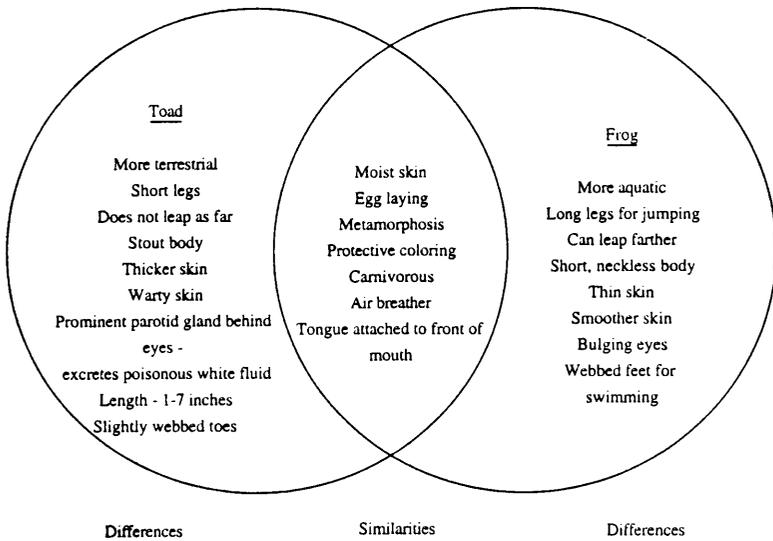
Our first activity suggests the venn diagram be used as a graphic organizer to structure information gained from the text both during and after reading. Jerry Pallotta's alphabet books provide animal topics that can be used to create venn diagrams. For example, *The Extinct Alphabet Book* appeals to older students because of their natural interest in creatures of the past. The books are designed so that students can choose two, three, or four letters of the alphabet, read the corresponding information about the animals, and then compare and contrast the chosen animals using a graphic organizer. The students may need to research other sources to provide additional information. The venn diagram is an appropriate type of graphic organizer for this activity giving students the opportunity to see the comparisons in visual form. Students may work individually, with partners, or in cooperative groups to note both common and unique characteristics of the animals in a visual representation.

To create a venn diagram, the student should select two, three, or four animals for comparison. Using key words students can note physical characteristics, natural habitats, or reasons for extinction. These findings can be discussed in small groups or with the entire class, and students can then make additions or corrections to their diagram. After the students have worked with two animals, the additional animals may be added and compared. The venn diagrams may be displayed in the hallway or on a bulletin board. Also, students could use the diagram as an organizer to prepare a written or oral report. An example venn diagram comparing a frog and toad is shown in Figure 1.

For a second comprehension activity, Jerry Pallota's *The Spice Alphabet Book* (1994) is recommended for modeling context clues in before reading, during reading, and after reading situations. *The Spice Alphabet Book* is full of interesting

facts and information about the foods children eat every day. Students will discover the source of some of their favorite treats such as chocolates, jelly bean flavors, and sodas. The book is designed so that the teacher could provide information about a spice without disclosing the spice's name.

FIGURE 1
Venn diagram for toad and frog comparison



Source: *Encarta*. [CD-ROM]. (1994). Microsoft Corp. Definitions from: Funk & Wagnalls (1994).

In the before reading stage, the teacher should have on display products that contain each of the spices listed in *The Spice Alphabet Book*. Some possibilities include: lavender soap, chocolate drink mix, vanilla extract, and spearmint gum. To activate prior knowledge, the teacher should pose a riddle such as, "I'm thinking of a spice that you find on pretzels. It makes the pretzels taste better, but may make you thirsty." The teacher may continue with further clues until the students guess salt.

For a before reading context clue activity, the teacher provides an alphabet letter and a written description being careful to omit the name of the spice. The students guess a word to go in the blank based on the given letter and context. The book is then read aloud by the teacher and the students check their word choices. The teacher may reread sections and provide an opportunity for students to discuss the words selected for the blanks. Working in small groups or individually, the students can create context activities using other commonly known spices such as cinnamon, garlic, mustard, maple, nutmeg, oregano, and pepper.

For after reading, the teacher may have the students identify and study the more difficult spices mentioned in the book. These may include anise, basil, dill, eucalyptus, ginger, Irish sea moss, java, kola, quinine, and wasabi. The students could work individually, in pairs, or groups to study these spices through the textual information, illustrations, "Artist's Notes," and outside sources. To check understanding, the students could find the spices on the cover and other pages in the book by completing the challenge suggested by the illustrator, Leslie Evans, in the "Artist's Notes." After students have completed the study of spices, a tasting party "adds spice" to the activity as a culminating event.

Other alphabet book suggestions for context clues or prediction activities: *Let's Fly From A to Z* by Doug Magee and Robert Newman; *Cowboy Alphabet* by James Rice; *My Name is Alice* by Jane Bayer; *O is for Orca* by Andrea Helman; *Q is for Duck* by Mary Elting and Michael Folsom; *What's Inside? The Alphabet Book* by Satoshi Kitamura and *The Z Was Zapped* by Chris Van Allsburg.

Vocabulary/word study

Many possibilities are available for using alphabet books to enhance students' word knowledge. In the first strategy, word knowledge comes through understanding individual word meanings and determining words within larger words. In the second strategy, a student's understanding of words is enhanced through alphabet books involving alliteration. To study word meanings, Cathi Hepworth's (1992) *Antics* provides a rich array of vocabulary words all containing the word **ant** accompanied by intriguing illustrations. Whether seeing a brilliant ant scientist who resembles Einstein or reading the wanted poster of an outlaw ant, students will find this book both entertaining and humorous. The book lends itself to a variety of enriching vocabulary and language arts activities. As the teacher reads *Antics*, the meaning of each vocabulary word and illustration should be discussed. The teacher should then provide students with a list of the following words from the book:

Antique
Brilliant
Chant
Deviant
Enchanter
Flamboyant
Gallant
Hesitant
Immigrants
Jubilant
Kant
Lieutenant
Mutant

Nonchalant
Observant
Pantaloons
Quarantine
Rembrandt
Santa Clause
Tantrum
Unpleasant
Vigilantes
Wanted
Xanthophyll
Your Ant Yetta
Antzzzzz

After choosing one new vocabulary word from the list to illustrate, students will compile their individual illustrations into a class ABC vocabulary book. Illustrations may reflect the ant creatures from the book, followed by a comparison to the book illustrations, or by using the word representing

something other than an "ant illustration." Working with partners or individually, students could attempt to find new, shorter words within each *Antics* word. For example, students may find **tie**, **ant**, or **nut** within the word antique. **Liar**, **bran**, **an**, and **rain** can be found in brilliant, **can**, **an**, **ant**, and **tan** are found in chant.

Other alphabet book suggestions for word study activities: *Animalia* by Graeme Base; *Eye Spy: A book of Alphabet Puzzles* by Linda Bourke; and *The Story of Z* by Jeanne Modesitt and Lonni Sue Johnson. To study vocabulary through alliteration, *Animalia* (Base, 1986) provides word choices and colorful illustrations of animals, beasts, and birds appropriate for the study of alliterative language. Each brilliantly illustrated page is described by a group of words in which the author has carefully chosen alliterative language to describe the animals and their actions. Some of the words will be familiar, while other vocabulary may require students to investigate meanings. As students read the alliterative descriptions and study the beautiful illustrations, they will be continually challenged to spot the obvious as well as the hidden creatures throughout the book.

After reading each alliterative description, a growing list of unknown vocabulary words should be written on the chalkboard or chart paper. Students should investigate the meanings of these words and add them to the class word wall or vocabulary word box. A word wall is created by laminating posterboard or paper and posting it on a wall of the classroom. Unfamiliar vocabulary of seasonal words are written on it with non-permanent marker so the words can be changed weekly. The teacher can refer to the word wall or draw a word from the vocabulary box and then discuss the meaning of each word. Students could use a thesaurus to find synonyms

or antonyms of the words on the word wall or in the vocabulary word box.

The illustrations contribute to the information conveyed in *Animalia* and can be used by the students to write their own alliterations. After rereading *Animalia*, the students could select an item included in the illustrations, identify words to describe the item, and write an alliterative description. The students will have many illustrations to select from as the pages are filled with items to represent each letter. Before concluding the activities with this book, the students should search for drawings of Graeme Base as a young boy hidden throughout the illustrations. Other alphabet book suggestions for alliteration activities: *Alligator Arrived with Apples* by Crescent Dragonwagon; *Animal Parade* by Jakki Wood; *Aster Arrdvark's Alphabet Adventures* by Steven Kellogg; and *Away from Home* by Anita Lobel.

Self-interest language activities

Alphabet books can provide an avenue for upper elementary and middle school students to share a special interest. Several alphabet books are available to model how a self-interest alphabet book might be structured.

Annie's abc (Owen, 1987) is a refreshingly different alphabet book that provides words and pictures of unrelated objects beginning with each letter of the alphabet. Students will be reminded of a variety of objects such as astronauts, flamingos, ostriches, and lighthouses. While the book itself and readability level appear to be designed for younger elementary students, older elementary students could develop a self-interest alphabet book patterned after *Annie's abc* titled, *My Favorite Things*.

After reading *Annie's abc*, students would design their My Favorite Things Book with their favorite things listed and illustrated (e.g., B is for the Bulls, C is for chocolate chip cookies, W is for Wichita). Book titles could range from Getting to Know Me to My Favorite Things. The teacher should set aside a time for students to share their books either in a small group or with the entire class. This activity would help students get to know each other and would therefore provide an excellent activity for the beginning of the school year.

Students may write a Getting to Know Me ABC book using one particular theme or subject. After reading such ABC books as *An Alphabet of Angels* by Nancy Willard (1994), *The A to Z Book of Cars* by Angela Roysong and Terry Pastor (1991), or *An Alphabet Book of Dinosaurs* by Peter Dodson (1995), students could create a book to share their favorite hobby, sport, or music. Other alphabet books suggested for self-interest activities: *A Jewish Holiday ABC* by Malka Drucker and Rita Pocock and *Elfabet: An ABC of Elves* by Jane Yolen.

Research activities

From amoebas to zick-zacks, young readers and adults will be fascinated by the host of unusual creatures on the pages of *Tails, Claws, Fangs and Paws* (Small, 1990). Students will read about a jackal and a jackdaw that cackle; about a jabiru, jewelfish, joey and jay; and will watch as a jellyfish joyfully jets away! Colorful artwork includes not only the animals, but also additional objects beginning with each letter.

After reading *Tails, Claws, Fangs and Paws*, students can be asked to choose one animal that they find interesting or unusual. Students will then use this animal as the center of a research project. The school library or classroom resources can be used to find information and facts about the chosen

animal. Research reports or describing paragraphs could be written, depending on student ability.

For an additional research activity, *My First Book of Animals From A to Z: More than 150 Animals Every Child Should Know* by Christopher Egan, Lorraine Hopping Egan, Thomas Campbell Jackson, and Diane Molleson (1994) should be available in the classroom. The students could select an animal to research using this book and other sources of information. A world map should be posted on a bulletin board or wall of the classroom. After locating the animal's natural habitat, students should write the name of the animal on an index card. Using colored pencils, markers, or crayons, students should illustrate their chosen or assigned animal, write a few summary sentences about the animal, and mount their report on construction paper. After attaching yarn to the back of the construction paper, students can fasten the report to the bulletin board and pin the other end of the yarn to the location of the natural habitat on the world map.

Other alphabet book suggestions for research activities: *A is for Africa* by Ifeoma Onyefulu; *Alaska ABC Book* by Charlene Kreeger and Shannon Cartwright; *Book of Black Heroes A to Z* by Wade Hudson and Valerie Wilson Wesley; *Cowboy Alphabet* by James Rice; *The Desert Alphabet Book* by Jerry Pallotta; *The Folks in the Valley: A Pennsylvania Dutch ABC* by Jim Aylesworth; *The Icky Bug Alphabet Book* by Jerry Pallotta; and *The Yucky Reptile Alphabet Book* by Jerry Pallotta.

Poetry activity

To study the use of rhyming words, students can read the rhymed couplets accompanied by a beautiful photograph of a butterfly in Kjell B. Sandved's *The Butterfly Alphabet* (1996). On the opposite page, the students will see an enlarged

magnification of the butterfly that reveals the featured letter in the wing. The photographs were selected from his collection taken in 30 countries over a 25 year period. From this experience, students can find examples of alphabet letters in nature and write rhymed verse to describe their findings.

The Sweet and Sour Animal Book, published in 1994, contains twenty-seven cleverly written poems from a lost manuscript of Langston Hughes. The short, humorous poems about the animal world are accompanied by beautiful artwork from the children of the Harlem School of the Arts. As an integral part of a poetry unit, students will enjoy reading about the animals in this abc book. Students should then compose their own short poems about animals or objects related to a social studies or science unit of study, for example planets or the Civil War. Students should then be encouraged to use a variety of art materials to create artwork that represents their individual poems.

Alphabet book suggestions for poetry activities: *A Caribou Alphabet* by Mary Beth Owens; *Alphabestiary: Animal Poems from A to Z* by Jane Yolen; *Halloween ABC* by Eve Merriam; and *The Birthday ABC* by Eric Metaxas and Tim Raglin.

Conclusion

Alphabet books can be used by the resourceful teacher of upper elementary and middle school students to enhance instruction. In each book, the 26 letters of the alphabet will be addressed in a manner created by the author and illustrator. Alphabet books can be easily-decoded to meet the needs of those with varying reading and writing abilities. Even with easy decodability, the concepts and ideas presented in the book will challenge a reader at any level. Therefore, the alphabet book can become an integral part of instruction as models for

demonstrating strategies. Our recommendation is for teachers to select an alphabet book with an appropriate level of sophistication for the readers and use this book to introduce a classroom strategy. The brevity of text, creative illustrations, and conceptual complexity of alphabet books can provide the foundation for teaching in various curricular areas. The alphabet book may emerge as an instructional tool with numerous applications in the upper elementary and middle school classroom.

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