

**Literacy Centres for the Junior
Classroom**

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Rosina Thompson, HCDSB

Literacy Centres for the Junior Classroom

Centres free you up to work with small groups in more concentrated teacher guided lessons. Centres are initially a lot of work to put together, but once you have the basics you may only need to change up the texts you are using and you can use them year after year. Centres are a learning process; you have to try different things to see what works for you and your students. Do not give up. They will work it just may take a few tries.

There are a few guidelines I follow when putting together centres for the classroom. Please use the ones that work for you.

- Centres are for PRACTICE only. The beauty of centres is it gives students a chance to practice skills that have already been taught. Do not put work in a centre that the students have not been exposed to, this will lead to disaster and take away from your time with the small group.
- Centres do NOT have to be marked, as centres are for practice only. I do, however, sometimes have work in a centre that I check to ensure understanding of a specific concept taught. If applicable you can include an answer key so students can check their own work. You CAN keep track of group cooperation, independent work, etc.
- Centres cannot happen without strict guidelines and expectations. You must lay out your expectations for the students when they are working in centres, I have a chart with my centre expectations posted in the class and I review it each time we do centres. My expectations include work quietly, whisper voices, take turns and be respectful, leave the centre as you found it. Keep the expectations simple and as few as you can live with.
- Centres are not for you if you like a quiet classroom. There will be noise; however, you should have a signal if the noise level gets too loud. If you can't hear the small group you are working with it is obviously too loud.

- Centres should have no more than 4 students at one time. Ideally only 2 per centre is the best but that would only work if you have the room for that many centres. I tend to do 4 per centre as that is what works best for me.
- Each centre should be set up to keep students busy for 15 to 20 minutes. If students do finish before the time is up make sure they know what to do. Have a 2 minute warning signal so students have time to finish up what they are doing and can clean up the centre.
- Review centres with the students before beginning. Take your time introducing the centres especially if they have never done centres before. You want to answer all of their questions before you start work with the small group. I have a strict rule that unless there is blood they do not disturb me when I am at the guided table with a group. I also put out a mat that says "GO AWAY".
- At the end of centre time leave 10 minutes or so for the students to come back together as a class to share with you and each other what they learned or liked best about centres. This is very important as it may give you insight into what went right or wrong during that time.

Ways to Track Centres

Just because centres are not being marked (a fact which students do not need to be aware of) does not mean that you shouldn't be tracking who has been at what centre.

There are several ways to track centres, you can use one of the methods I have tried or come up with your own.

- Each student has a "passport" and each centre has a different stamp. When the student is at the centre they stamp to show they have been there. Self inking stamps can be purchased at the dollar store.
- Have students make a list of each centre or provide them with one and each centre has a different sticker. As they go to each centre they take one sticker and put it next to the centre name. Or they can simply check off that centre on the list.
- Each centre has a class list. When the student gets to that centre they check off their name.
- Each centre is a different coloured card (cut up construction paper). Each student has a plastic hockey card holder (can be purchased at the dollar store, 10 per pack I think). As they go through each centre they take the corresponding coloured card and put it in the slot.

Whatever tracking method you chose keep it simple so at a glance you can see who has been at what centre. Students do not have to complete all of the activity before they move on to the next centre but the majority of students should be able to complete the activity in the allotted time. If you are finding that most of them are not you may want to adjust the amount of work in an activity.

Categories of Centres

I have divided my centres into several main categories. By no means is this the definitive list, these are just the ones I tend to use. Some I have thought up myself, some I have got from other teachers and others are from some of the resources I have used.

Word Wall Centres

Word walls are no longer just a primary thing. Word walls provide lots of opportunity for centre activities.

- Guess the Mystery Word
- Spelling Bees
- Making Words
- Guess the Covered Word
- Word Searches
- Prefix/Suffix Making Words (using the Nifty Fifty Thrifty Words)

Overhead Centres

Overhead centres are an easy centre to set up as most classrooms have their own overhead. Students love working at this centre as it is a novelty to them. If you can project it onto a white board it will make it easier to manage as students can write their answers directly on the white board rather than on the overhead sheet. This makes clean up easier.

- Editing paragraphs
- Parts of Speech
- Prefix/Suffix Word Study
- Using Quotation Marks

Anything you can put on an overhead you can use at this centre.

Reading Strategies Centre

I use these centres to reinforce whatever Reading Strategy I am focusing on in my full class lessons. I tend to use poetry in this centre but you can use any reading you think will work best for your students. I would keep it short as there is only 15 to 20 minutes to read the piece and do the activity.

- Connections
- Inferencing
- Visualization
- Predictions
- Summarizing (short stories work best or non-fiction)
- Retell (short stories work best)

Listening Centre

If you are lucky your school has various books on tape or on CD. If you are not so lucky you can always buy some blank tapes and make your own or go to the public library and try your luck there. This centre is an easy set up and the students enjoy it as all they have to do is listen to the story on tape. You may have one or two questions for discussion between the group members after the story is over but that is up to you. Be sure the story length is appropriate to the length of time you have at the centre.

Computer Centre

This is a centre the students enjoy. I limit student choice and give them one or two programs to choose from. I do like Word Way and Write Way as each has several appropriate choices built in. If nothing else I suggest limiting them to the Language Folder. You can also use this centre as a chance for students to do good copies of their writing as well.

Venn Diagram Centre

This centre is great for non-fiction choices. I enlarged and laminated several Venn diagrams. I provide wipe off markers and choice for them to compare and sort. You can use resort/vacation magazines, car ads, MLS listings. You can provide the labels for the sort or have the students come up with their own labels and then sort. You could also provide them with some Venn diagrams already filled in and they have to figure out the labels for that sort. You can use the current Science or Social Studies Unit in this centre as well.

Non-Fiction Centre

This centre is a perfect opportunity for cross curricular activities. I chose some books from the current Science or Social Studies Unit and have the students do some research. You can provide them with generic questions to answer and discuss or you can make it specific to that topic. It is also a great way to introduce a new Science or Social Studies Unit.

At the beginning of the year I always have them do a "Features of Informational Text" activity that I found in the [Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction](#) Vol. 5 page 128, 130. I have them use their Science or Social Studies Text as it is a great way to familiarize themselves with the text.

Reading Fluency Centre

This centre is easy and quick to put together. Students enjoy it as they don't see it as work. Put some familiar picture books in a bin. Have students read "silently out loud" focusing on fluency. Be sure to include stories at various levels so students can choose a book that they are comfortable reading.

- Reading Independently
- Buddy Reading
- Reader's Theatre
- Poetry Reading

Making Sentences / Paragraphs Centres

For Making Sentences I give students nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs and they have to make up interesting sentences. I have the magnetic words that they can use but you could just give them lists of the parts of speech you want them to use. Students chose their best sentence and put it on sentence strips to share with the class (you could then have them use it later as a topic sentence in a writing activity).

For Making Paragraphs I took several short paragraphs from various books, both fiction and non-fiction. I wrote them out on chart paper, one sentence per line. I laminated them and cut them out. Students have to put the sentences back together again. I also include 1 or 2 questions per paragraph for them to discuss with each other.

Newspaper Centre

Provide students with copies of the day's newspaper or a particular article or let students chose their own from several articles. Students can do a "who, what, when, where, why and how" search. Or you could have students chose an article from a particular section of the newspaper and summarize a current event; this can be done within the group or individually. These can then be posted for sharing.

Story Planning Centre

Provide students with blank story planners and have students plan out a story they want to write. A good story plan should take at least 15 to 20 minutes. This can then be used when you do your Writer's Workshop and students can write their story. You could also provide students with pictures and have them create a story plan around the picture.

These are just some ideas to get you started. Try a few and see how it works. Again this is not a definitive list. Use what you think will work for you. If you have any questions or comments please feel free to contact me (thompsonr@hcdsb.org). I would welcome feedback and any ideas you want to share.

Resource List

Month by Month Phonics for the Upper Grades
Cunningham and Hall

Month by Month Phonics and Vocabulary Grade 4,5,6
Arens, Loman and Cunningham

Keep the Rest of the Class Reading and Writing While You Teach Small
Groups
Susan Finney

Practice With Purpose
Debbie Diller

Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Grades 4 to 6 Volume 5

Where the Sidewalk Ends
Shel Silverstein

Alligator Pie
Dennis Lee

I'm Still Here in the Bathtub: Brand New Silly Dilly Songs
Alan Katz