

Using Alphabet Books Across Grade Levels: More Than 26 Opportunities

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Abstract

In recent years, the popularity of alphabet books has spread into older grades, as they address a variety of themes and can be used across disciplines. Their complexity can stimulate thinking and offer a world of possibilities in the area of research. Students of all ages are motivated to create an alphabet book on a self-selected topic. The purpose of this article is to highlight a selection of alphabet books to highlight the literacy opportunities these books provide across grade levels. Russell (2012) emphasizes the value of alphabet books in abstract concept development, in their artistic creativity with information to stimulate learning, and in their pure aesthetic charm. Alphabet books can provide a model for narrative or expository structure. They can provide a structure for presenting information on a topic and they can facilitate language development. This article will include suggested titles and activities for using these books during instruction.

Alphabet books are currently enjoying a renaissance in children's literature. Some alphabet books function as works of art unified by a subject. Still others are designed with the older child as the intended audience, filled with artistic creativity and information to guide or stimulate learning (Russell, 2012).

The varied application of alphabet books in today's classrooms makes them an ever-changing phenomenon as an entry point into a unit of study, a structure for research, or a mentor for author's craft and poetry. Anderson (2013) emphasizes the value of alphabet books in developing vocabulary, as well. Twenty-six letters provide an opportunity to explore topics and ideas with twenty-six or more facets. This article highlights additional curricular opportunities from a selection of alphabet books, dividing them into three categories:

Themed books, sequential books, and potpourri books.

Themed Books

During the past two decades, the popularity of alphabet books has expanded into older grades, as they address a variety of themes, and can be used across disciplines. Their complexity can stimulate thinking and offer a world of possibilities in the area of research or inquiry, reading comprehension, language development activities, and narrative structure. Themed books present a unique writing style with visuals of the subject in various artistic styles.

An Opportunity for Research

Alphabet books serve as great stimulators for the research process. Students from elementary through high school can create alphabet books, which require them to investigate 26 aspects of a topic. This

allows students to research in a creative, yet structured manner.

In *M is for Majestic*, (Domeniconi, 2003), the theme depicted is the national parks across the United States. The “M” pages feature Mesa Verde National Park, Mammoth Cave National Park, and Mount Rainier National Park. To structure one research activity with fourth and fifth graders, the teachers:

- read aloud portions of the text and explained the process of using this text as a mentor to support a structure for the research of individual national parks.
- guided pairs of students to select a national park to research.
- guided the brainstorming of 26 concepts related to that park.
- assisted student pairs as they considered multiple concepts related to the identified pages.
- modeled the activity using the “Q” pages as stimulus for Carlsbad Caverns National Park. For Example: The “Queen’s Chamber” is one of the underground chambers found on the way to the “King’s Chamber.”
- guided students in brainstorming a list of ideas linked to two pages consisting of visuals and text relating to the concept, “Q is for Queen’s Chamber.”. At this point, students were encouraged to add words from their background knowledge. The teacher showed a tourist pamphlet on the caverns, which prompted “tourism.”

During the brainstorming, students were encouraged to look at multiple sources as they completed their activity (internet, textbook, tourist material, magazines, etc.):

Archeologists look for what people did in caves.

Bats, Big Room is largest

Cave, Chamber formation

Damp

Elevator

Limestone

Natural occurring

Open to hikers

Stalactites, Stalagmites

As a class, the students and teachers brainstormed the following research questions:

- How did these caves develop?
- Were they already there?
- What are geologists and archeologists looking for in studying the caves?
- Is the limestone chamber expected to change over time? Why or why not?
- What kinds of tourist activities are available at the National Park?

During the process, the teachers emphasized that their questions could be different. As students worked in groups, teachers circulated to ensure their questions were open-ended. As students started researching they found new questions that interested them. The simple alphabet book served as a focus to begin researching by providing structure. It was exciting to observe the enthusiasm that filled the room during brainstorming and research structured by the ABC activity. Additional lessons included how to locate references (online, texts, periodicals, atlases, webpages), record data to see relationships (convert charts, diagrams, etc. into notes), identify author, title, and page number of the source, develop a topic sentence and summarize findings.

Themed books open the door to a variety of research activities in both social studies and

science. During the last decade, ABC books have been published on just about every state in the country. These books relate information about significant people, places and events that reflect the diversity of America.

Sharon Asta and Jeanne Donovan's *ABC's of Hawaii* describes Hawaii's treasures on each page. However, each page also encourages students to think and discover more about that subject. The "F" page says, "F is for flowers." The final sentence says, "How do you think the Bird of Paradise got its name?" The "D" page says, "D is for Diamond Head." "Diamond Head is a dead volcano. Will Mariko see any flowers growing high on the slope? Why or why not?"

Carol Crane's "*L is for Lone Star*" has a poem to represent the lettered concept in addition to expository information. The "W" page says, "W is for windmills spinning on a tower, Some are pumping water, Others making power." Allyn (2013) states "Let us offer alternate ways for some of our diverse learners to record their ideas: through an acceptance of their writing skills, through sketches, diagrams, and drawings instead of sentences" (pp. 119-120). The key is student interest and involvement. Appendix A lists a selection of additional state themed alphabet books with a short descriptor of additional teaching opportunities.

An Opportunity for Multicultural Studies

Alphabet books can be an entry point to multicultural studies and awareness. Multicultural studies can also contribute to building self-esteem for all students regardless of their specific culture or ethnic group. It encourages students to have pride in their heritage and inspires them to share their experiences as well as encourages

children to be sensitive to the similarities and differences among people. An interesting activity is to have students create a class alphabet book about their names, what their names means, and why their parents gave them that name. *Alphabet Soup* (2002) by Abbie Zabar, presents food from all over the world, briefly describing its origin and how it is prepared. Students are introduced to dim sum from China, x-ray fish from South Africa, and ugly fruit from Jamaica.

Norton (2011) emphasizes the value of alphabet books that help depict the lives and cultures of diverse people. *Jambo Means Hello: Swahili Alphabet Book*, by Muriel Feelings introduces African Swahili words and customs. The "I" page says I – ibada means worship and explains that the Muslim religion is one of the most widespread in eastern Africa.

An Opportunity for Cross-discipline Studies

A large variety of themed books are also available for introducing a science theme. *V for Vanishing: An Alphabet of Endangered Animals*, by Patricia Mullins (1993), introduces the concept of extinction. Other recent examples which might catch the interest of elementary students include: *The Underwater Alphabet*, by Jerry Pallotta (1991), *Z is for Zamboni: A Hockey Alphabet*, by Matt Napier (2002), *Z is for Moose* by Kelly Bingham (2012), and *Anteaters to Zebras*, by Alan Fletcher (2012).

Zoo Flakes ABC by Will Howell (2002) presents familiar animals within beautifully cut snowflakes. The white snowflakes stand out against the black background. *NBA Action A to Z*, by James Preller (1997), can stir interest in the unmotivated student. This

alphabet book captures the excitement and energy of NBA basketball.

An Opportunity to Support Narrative Text Studies

Themed alphabet books support narrative text analysis, too. Students can effectively analyze characters in a novel using creative writing formats like the “alpha-biography, where students describe significant events, people, possessions, or emotions of a character associated with each letter of the alphabet” (Lukens, Smith, Coffel, 2013, p. 126). When discussing characters, students often think of the external characteristics because they are more obvious. However, the character’s core qualities, motivations, and relationships are deeper and make students think. For example, in the story, *The Three Little Javelinas*, by Susan Lowell (2009), the wolf is sneaky and clever, but more importantly, he is a loner and motivated by hunger. Creating an alphabet book that analyzes characters will require making inferences and deep thinking.

Sequential Books

Sequential ABC books are the rarest type of ABC book and follow a narrative story line, therefore providing additional opportunities for the study of literary elements. *K is for Kitten* (2002), by Niki Leopold and Susan Jeffers relates the story of a little girl’s discovery of a kitten in an alley and their adventures. *An Alphabet Adventure* (2000), by Mick Inkpen, forms a narrative by having Kipper and Arnold search for objects that begin with each letter. *Dog’s ABC: A silly story about the alphabet* (2000), by Emily Dodd, follows a dog as he patrols the neighborhood. It is an amusing story as the dog seems to always be in trouble.

Many narrative ABC books are written in the first person. Patricia Polacco’s, *G is for Goat* (2003), is another example of a narrative. The text is written in the first

person about the author’s experiences growing up raising goats on a Michigan farm. *The Path of the Quiet Elk: A Native American Alphabet* (1996), by Virginia Stroud, uses a narrative to introduce philosophies of Native America influenced by the author’s Cherokee and Kiowa ancestry. A small girl is led by a wise elder to understand the relationship of nature to her people as she comes to crossroads (clever use of the letter X) in life. One way students can effectively analyze characters in a novel is by using creative writing formats like the “alpha-biography, where they describe significant events, people, possessions, or emotions of a character associated with each letter of the alphabet” (Lukens, Smith, Coffel, 2013, p. 126).

Opportunities for Differentiated Narrative Text Studies

The simple story lines and clever inclusion of alphabet sequence provide support for the struggler and challenge for fluent learners, thus offering great opportunities for differentiation. In the following activity, students are asked to think of places a character might travel as they move sequentially through the alphabet, developing an effective plot. Examples include:

Sally had a busy day. She planned to go to the airport to pick up her friends.

But she got on the wrong bus and got lost.

She ended up in the country.

Allyn (2013) states, “Let us offer alternate ways for some of our diverse learners to record their ideas: through an acceptance of their writing skills, through sketches, diagrams, and drawings, instead of sentences” (pp. 119-120). The key is student interest and involvement. Zany sentences or poetry can be a beginning for some students, while drawing is for others. *There’s a Zoo in Room 22* (2000), written by

Judy Sierra, presents the alphabet in twenty-seven hilarious poems which are structured around a narrative involving classroom pets. It begins, “We asked Miss Darling, ‘May we get a truly awesome classroom pet?’ She answered, ‘Yes, or better yet, Let’s choose a whole pet alphabet.’”

An Alphabet in Five Acts, by Karen Born Anderson (1993), is an interesting variation on the alphabet using sequences of letters with corresponding vivid pictures. For example: The last act, or the last sequence of letters in the alphabet, makes up the last five pages of the book. The text on the pages reads, “Vernon washes Xavier’s Yak. Zowie!” (pp. 26-30). Using this book as an example, students can write and illustrate their own zany sentences.



From AN ALPHABET IN FIVE ACTS by Karen Born Anderson. Text copyright © 1993 by Karen Born Anderson. Illustrations copyright © 1993 by Flint Born. Used by permission of Dial Books for Young Readers, a division of Penguin Group (USA) LLC

Alphaboat, by Michael Chesworth (2002), is definitely a different alphabet book. Filled with both visual and verbal puns, this book includes concepts like the apostrophe and silent letters. It is intended for students who already know the alphabet as it uses a form somewhat like textisms. It begins, “The Alphaboat must have a crew! i, m, coming u, r, too.” Toward the end of the book the text shows a map and reads, “Our good ship makes the Great S Cape” (p. 23).



From ALPHABOATS © Michael Chesworth. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. All rights reserved.

Opportunities for Research in a Sequential Structure

Sequential story books can also provide structure in researching. In one activity, students research a self-selected animal, and report on the animal in the first person, with each page sequenced alphabetically. In the activity, the key words are highlighted on each page, as in the following example:

I am an American Alligator

With a Broad face and a somewhat rounded Body.

I am the largest of all members of the Crocodile family.

Using the sequence of the alphabet, sequential ABC books support and reinforce sequential text structures starting with the sequential structure of the alphabet with the potential to support more expository sequential structures.

Potpourri Books

Potpourri alphabet books may be the ones with which readers are most familiar. These have traditionally been the type of books where unrelated items are grouped by alphabet letter. There are no themes and they are not uniform in topic. However, tone or illustrations give them their unity

and distinct style. *The Butterfly Alphabet* (1996), by Kjell Sandved shows an alphabet of butterflies. The alphabet is hidden on the wings of butterflies. On the opposite pages is a couplet with one word highlighted in a different color. For example, on the “A” page, the text says, “On wings aloft across the skies—An alphabet of butterflies.” The “B” page says, “Each butterfly in secret brings a letter hidden in its wings.” The words alphabet and butterfly are highlighted on those pages. Included at the end of the book is a non-fiction section about the different types of butterflies shown in the book.

Opportunities for Creative Expression and Vocabulary Development

Potpourri ABC books offer the greatest degree of latitude to the author (Matulda, 2008). Brad Sneed’s *Picture a Letter* (2002), is a wordless alphabet book, “Every letter has a picture of a funny, whimsical scene of actions and objects that all have something in common; their first letter.” It is challenging and fun for students to name the objects and actions with the words and phrases beginning with each letter.

Alphabeasts (2002), by Wallace Edwards is heralded for merging elements of fantasy with reality in this alphabet book of rhyming couplets.

A is for Alligator
awake from a dream.

B is for Bat
slurping ice cream (pp. 2-3).

Tomorrow’s Alphabet (1996), by George Shannon & Donald Crews requires children to predict what things will become in the future following the alphabetical sequence. For example: “A is for seed, tomorrow’s Apple. B is for eggs, tomorrow’s Birds” (p. 1-2). After being exposed to the structure of *Tomorrow’s Alphabet*, a group of 4th and 5th

grade students collaboratively participated in a project entitled, “Yesterday’s Memories.”

Numerous objects were placed in the center of the room. Students were to select something that sparked a memory. The teacher chose a chocolate covered cherry as an example and told the students that it reminded her of her Grandma who could eat a box of those cherries in a day. To accommodate different ability levels, the students were shown two types of patterned poems, the acrostic and diamante. Students participated in creating examples after teacher modeling.

C is for the candy my Grandma
loved.

Vocabulary development was enhanced as students used a thesaurus to find new words to use in their poems. The diamante formula was designed to be a starting point. However, the students’ poems differed, as you can see in the following fourth grade samples:

Acrostic

Chocolate

Almond Joy

Nutty

Delicious

Yummy

<u>Diamante</u>
candy
sweet, yummy
pleasing, gratifying, satisfying
a symbol of love for me
other things aren't so good
bitter, unpleasant
spinach
Tomorrow's Memory

Yesterday's memories Dis for a baby	Tomorrow's Dad D
Dad	
nice affable	
working attending protecting	
He loves me so much and me him.	
you can't trust them they're scary	
creepy terrifying horrifying	
unknown different	
Stranger	

Opportunities for Word Play, Phonemic Awareness, and Oral Language

The Disappearing Alphabet (1997), by Richard Wilbur, an alphabet book designed for older readers, focuses on word play. For example:

“What if the letter S was missing?

Cobras would have no way of hissing.

And all their kin would have to take

The name of erpent or of nake” (p.21).

Cockran and Shanker (2013) assert that

“phonemic awareness has been shown to be an important factor that distinguishes successful from disabled readers” (p. 3).

They also suggest that older readers should begin with an explanation of the concept of phonemic awareness—that spoken words can be broken into separate sounds. Then, students should be provided with oral examples as is done in the activity above.

Yesterday's memories N is for Nut	Tomorrow's Memory Nutcracker
Nutcracker	
Doll Ballet	
crushing Dancing stimulating	
A story that I'm Dreaming through.	
liking savoring Salty	
Crack Crunch	
Nut	

Potpourri alphabet books are also filled with alliteration. Children use them as models to write their own alliterative ABC books as in the following example:

A is for affectionate, able Alice

B is for bubbly, boastful Brenda

C is for careful, capable Cameron

In this activity, students can use the thesaurus or dictionary to find adjectives they believe describe themselves.

Lukens, Smith, & Coffel (2013) highlight a pop-up alphabet book written by Marion Bataille. *ABC3D* (Bataille, 2008), like a wordless picture book, creates a sense of exploration in a three-dimensional alphabet book, while it promotes oral language development. This book is to be non-fiction, but it could be anything as the young reader supplies the oral text. Teachers can use the fine arts to stimulate oral language development in a variety of ways. The alphabet book gives the teacher and student a tool to promote thinking. A number of suggestions follow:

Use the tune of “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush.” Substitute the names of animals that are characteristic for that movement following the text in an Animal ABC book. Example: A beaver cut down trees with his teeth, trees with his teeth, trees with his teeth. A beaver cuts down trees with his teeth all along the river.

Students create a crazy invention, using a three-letter sequence (abc, def, ghi) in its development. The invention can be realistic or fanciful; either researching its history or creating a history for the imaginary object.

Have students participate in a creative movement exercise following the pattern of an alphabet book. Example: Arthur Singer’s, *Wild Animals* shows an alligator.

The teacher says:	The students actions:
“Jump over a big alligator.”	The students would take a big jump toward her.
“Slide like the seals do on land.” “Swim like the seals do in water.”	The students “slide” like the seals do on land. The students “swim” like the seals do in water.

After showing the front cover of a selected ABC book, the teacher poses twenty- six

questions. Groups of four students develop twenty-six answers to the questions based on the theme of the book before looking at the pages of the book. Then one student serves as a recorder. Children enjoy the game format and love discovering how many pages their group guessed correctly.

Conclusion

Alphabet books have traditionally been an underused resource in the elementary school except at the primary grades. However, they have become a revitalized tool for teaching a variety of concepts across the curriculum at all grade levels with opportunities for students to examine a topic or concept from twenty-six aspects, or challenge themselves with a structure that includes twenty-six sequential letters.

Additionally teachers can use alphabet books as opportunities to support their instruction in reading and language arts and across the curriculum. Kane (2008) recommends using alphabet books to integrate literature in the content area to promote adolescent literacy. She describes the book, *Museum ABC*, developed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2002) as an example of how this can be done. Each page of the alphabet book is divided into four sections. Although the pictures on the page address the same concept, the four renderings are quite different. The “H” page shows a close-up of four famous artists’ paintings of people. The focus is the hair. George Washington’s wig looks quite different from the portrait of a woman and a dog. After studying the pictures on several pages, students look to see where the artwork came from and do follow up research. Vaca, Vaca, and Mraz (2011) attest that “Trade books in content area classrooms can extend and enrich information across the curriculum” (p. 396). They also emphasize the value of trade

books in helping teachers differentiate instruction.

Using alphabet books can enhance instruction from kindergarten through secondary school. However, an alphabet book is not always an educational tool; it may “just be an aesthetic treat for everyone to enjoy” (Russell, 2012, p. 102).

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Appendix A

State Themed Alphabet Books

Book Title	Author	Teaching Opportunities
ABCs of Hawaii	Asta, S.	Higher order thinking
“L” is for Lone Star	Crane, C.	Poetry
South Dakota: An ABC Scrapbook	Latza, J.	Poetic text - photographs
M is for Maple Syrup: A Vermont Alphabet Book	Rylant, C.	Rhyme
The Texas Alphabet	Parker, L.	Culture in dialect
A Cowboy Alphabet	Rice, J.	Culture in dialect/vivid illustrations
Appalachia	Pack, L.	Culture in dialect
P is for Palmetto	Crane, C.	Poems
G is for Grand Canyon	Govan, B.	Poetry – Verse and Acrostic
ABCs of Wisconsin	Butler, D.	Alliteration