National Association
NASET
of Special Education Teachers

Developing Effective Reading Strategies for Special Education Students

Purpose & Overview

This guide supports teachers in delivering structured, accessible, and engaging reading instruction for students with disabilities across instructional settings. It focuses on practical instructional strategies, targeted accommodations, and classroom routines that improve comprehension, increase confidence, and promote independence.

The goal is to help teachers move beyond simply providing accommodations and instead teach students how to successfully access and interact with text at grade level.

Objectives

By using this guide, teachers will be able to increase access to reading content for diverse learners, apply evidence-based instructional strategies, and integrate accommodations naturally into daily instruction. The guide also supports the development of student confidence, comprehension, and independence while strengthening alignment between classroom practice, IEP goals, and progress-monitoring expectations.

Key Principles for Teaching Reading to Students with Disabilities

Effective reading instruction for special education students is:

- **Explicit** – Teachers clearly model thinking, strategies, and expectations.

- **Systematic** – Skills are taught in a structured, sequential way.

- **Multi-sensory** – Instruction includes visual, verbal, and interactive supports.

- **Guided before independent** – Students practice with support prior to working alone.

- **Focused on comprehension and confidence** – Understanding the text is prioritized alongside skill development.

These principles ensure instruction remains rigorous, supportive, and accessible.

Common Barriers in Reading

Students with disabilities may experience difficulty with decoding, vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension. They may also struggle to maintain attention, connect ideas across a passage, or explain their thinking about what they read. Some students develop frustration or low confidence due to repeated reading challenges.

Recognizing these barriers allows teachers to plan targeted supports that reduce frustration and increase meaningful access to text.

High-Impact Instructional Strategies and Classroom Examples

Strategy	What It Means	Classroom Example
Explicit Strategy Modeling	Teacher demonstrates thinking while reading	"I'm asking myself what this paragraph is mostly about."
Vocabulary Pre-Teaching	Key words taught before reading	Picture cards and simple definitions before the lesson
Graphic Organizers	Visual structure for comprehension	Main-idea web, story map, or sequence chart
Guided Reading Support	Teacher-led small-group reading	Students reread a passage with prompting and discussion
Audio and Visual Supports	Alternative ways to access text	Audiobook paired with printed text tracking
Repeated Reading	Multiple opportunities to practice	Short passage reread to build fluency and confidence

These strategies help students understand, engage with, and respond to text more independently.

Accommodations That Support Reading Access

Common reading accommodations may include:

- Extended time for reading and written responses
- Text-to-speech or audiobooks for grade-level materials
- Visual supports such as highlighted text or guided notes
- Chunked reading passages with comprehension checks
- Small-group or teacher-supported reading instruction

These accommodations provide access without reducing rigor, allowing students to focus on meaning and comprehension.

Teacher Implementation Check

During reading instruction, teachers should ensure they have:

☐ Reviewed student accommodations prior to the lesson
☐ Modeled a clear comprehension or decoding strategy
☐ Pre-taught essential vocabulary or background knowledge
☐ Provided visual or organizational supports for understanding
☐ Included guided reading or supported practice
☐ Checked for comprehension before independent work
☐ Reinforced student effort, progress, and confidence

This quick check supports consistent, high-quality instruction.

Student Reflection (Optional but Recommended)

Providing structured reflection helps students build self-awareness and independence.

Students may respond to prompts such as:

- One strategy that helped me understand today's reading was: _____
- One word or idea I learned today was: _____
- I felt confident reading today: **Yes / A little / Not yet**

Reflection strengthens metacognition, motivation, and self-advocacy.

IEP Alignment and Progress Monitoring

This guide supports IEP goals related to:

- **Reading comprehension** – Identifying main ideas, details, and meaning
- **Vocabulary development** – Understanding and applying new words
- **Fluency and decoding** – Improving accuracy and pacing
- **Executive functioning** – Using organizers and strategies independently
- **Self-advocacy** – Requesting reading supports when needed

Teachers can use strategy implementation and student reflection as informal progress-monitoring evidence to guide instruction and document growth.