



# Planning Lessons for Students With Significant Disabilities in High School English Classes

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*Ms. Packard, a special education teacher, and Ms. Heu, an English language arts teacher, are working together for the first time. When the class lists were distributed, Ms. Packard and Ms. Heu took a deep breath: Their ninth-grade class of 25 students includes 11 students with individualized education programs (IEPs), several students who are reading at the college level, and several more students who are at risk for school failure. Maria, a student with intellectual disability, physical disabilities, and hearing loss, is also enrolled in the course. There is no paraeducator to assist. Ms. Heu has been teaching this class for several years and has developed a challenging curriculum that focuses on critical thinking, community, empowerment, social justice, responsibility, appreciation of literature, and fostering a love of reading. The curriculum is built around a series of texts, including short stories, historical fiction, Shakespeare, graphic novels, and classic literature. The two teachers are not sure how they can help this diverse group of students master such a challenging curriculum.*

Students with significant disabilities have intellectual disability and require individualized modifications, adaptations, and supports to access grade-level content (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2013). This group of students presents a unique challenge for literacy instruction, particularly at the high school level. Teachers must determine the most important literacy skills to teach, the ones which will allow students to communicate across all areas of their lives. At the same time, federal laws charge teachers with the task of providing *all* students access to the general curriculum. Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, and Baker (2006) explained that *access to the general curriculum* includes grade-appropriate instruction that matches the grade-level content but targets achievement that is simplified in relationship to breadth and depth of knowledge. Providing students with appropriate support to access the general curriculum in general education contexts is important because students with significant disabilities have better

access to the general curriculum, and literacy in particular, when they are educated alongside students without disabilities (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007; Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003).

Many special education teachers like Ms. Packard find themselves faced with the task of adapting grade-level texts to

arise when adapting high school grade-level literature. High school grade-level literature is usually quite advanced with complex themes. When students with significant disabilities enter middle or high school, teachers might not have the time to adapt literacy materials in addition to focusing on skills that promote transition to adulthood (Kliewer

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## The summary provides the framework from which the adapted text is built.

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meet the needs of individual students who, like Maria, need a simpler and more accessible version in order to support their membership in the literate community of the classroom (Kliewer et al., 2004). Shared reading or structured read-alouds using adapted books has a growing evidence base of improving text comprehension of students with significant disabilities (Hudson & Test, 2011). Brief passages, key words paired with images, repeated lines to emphasize main ideas, and multiple media formats are characteristics of adapted text as identified by Hudson, Browder, and Wakeman (2013). Text adaptations have also been utilized in studies focused on increasing the literacy skills of students with significant disabilities, including those with multiple disabilities (Browder, Lee, & Mims, 2011; Browder, Mims, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Dezell, & Lee, 2008; Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee, & Spooner, 2009) and moderate and severe developmental disabilities (Mims, Hudson, & Browder, 2012). When students with significant disabilities use adapted texts in general education classes, they have the opportunity to experience the full range of academic content that is presented to students without disabilities as well as instruction by content-area experts and peer models (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007).

To date, research has focused only on the use of adapted texts at the elementary and middle school levels. The same basic principles for adapting text in the early grades should apply at the high school level, but particular challenges might

& Biklen, 2001). How can teachers and educational teams help students with significant disabilities engage with grade-level literature in high school English Language Arts (ELA) classes in ways that promote positive long-term outcomes? In this article, we present a simple, flexible set of steps developed through a yearlong research project (see Rupp, Afacan, Yang, & Pickett, in press) for preparing adapted literature so that students with significant disabilities can participate and benefit from high school general education ELA curriculum.

### Step 1: Outline the Story

The first step to adapting literature for a student with a significant disability is to summarize the text. This summary is often best represented as an outline. This is not the text that the student will read! A summarized novel is inconsistent with the genre of a narrative text (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwick, & Martin, 2012). Instead, the summary provides the framework from which the adapted text is built. One way to begin summarizing the text is to read the entire book. However, this is rarely feasible for most teachers' schedules. Online materials such as SparkNotes ([www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com)) or CliffsNotes ([www.cliffsnotes.com](http://www.cliffsnotes.com)) can be helpful to outline the text. This process helps special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, or other support personnel become familiar with the text within a time period that is reasonable given their many other commitments to students in classes throughout the school.

**Table 1. Useful Adaptations**

Student need	Digital book	Physical book
Stabilizing/viewing book	Tablet stand Tablet mounted on or in table Desktop computer	Cookbook holder Hold-and-read book holder
Turning pages	Mouse click Single switch Automatic advancement of slides	Page turner
Seeing text or pictures	High contrast Large font Screen zoom	High contrast Large font Page magnifier Light table Incorporation of objects and textures
Decoding text	Recorded narration	Reading by peer partner or teacher Audio book read-along
Hearing text	Headphones to block out environmental noise Increase in visual information Consultation with audiologist	Increase in visual information Consultation with audiologist
Comprehension	Reduction of complexity Limiting vocabulary Use of pictures Added sound effects Embedded videos Embedded links to web resources Graphic organizers Character charts	Reduction of complexity Limiting vocabulary Use of pictures Graphic organizers Character charts
Retention and skill maintenance	Repeated readings Increase in instances of target vocabulary Practice of skills in different settings	
Generalization	Training loosely (e.g., asking a variety of comprehension questions, teaching in a variety of contexts) Varying presentation style (e.g., changing font, changing format) Targeting skills in multiple settings, with multiple individuals, and with multiple material forms	
Attention	Added sound effects Embedded videos Embedded high-interest content (e.g., photos of student in the story) Shorter, more frequent teaching sessions Headphones to block out environmental noise Highlighted text along with narration	Embedded high-interest content (e.g., photos of student in the story) Shorter, more frequent teaching sessions

## Step 2: Identify the Key Themes of the Book

Preplanning with the ELA teacher helps the special education teacher to identify the key themes of the text. The ELA

teacher, who knows the text well, plays a central role in helping the student learn the themes and developing activities that support all learners to understand the text. For example, key themes in *Romeo and Juliet* might be family, love, conflict,

and communication. Throughout the unit, team members and parents can provide opportunities across contexts and materials to emphasize these themes. Using the outline from Step 1, identify plot points at which each theme

should be emphasized. This step is essential because it ensures all team members are clear about the most essential ideas that can be targeted for instruction.

### Step 3: Choose Key Vocabulary to Target for Instruction

There are two key considerations in choosing vocabulary to teach. First, choose vocabulary that the students do not already know. Second, choose vocabulary that will be useful in everyday contexts. Although the Montagues and the Capulets are important within the context of the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, knowledge of those names is not an immediately useful skill in everyday contexts. Instead, personally relevant (Trela & Jimenez, 2013) or core vocabulary (Dennis, Erickson, & Hatch, 2013) should be individually chosen based on the needs of the student. Often, the best vocabulary relates to the themes of the book. For example, the words *home*, *family*, *communicate*, *love*, and *fight* relate to the themes of *Romeo and Juliet* and are useful beyond the scope of the play. The number of words to target is an individual decision. Words can be expanded into word families. For example, the word *love* can relate to other words, such as *boyfriend*, *girlfriend*, *family*, *husband*, and *wife*. A word wall can help illustrate the relationships among key vocabulary. If the student uses augmentative or alternative communication (AAC), take this opportunity to program the vocabulary into the student's AAC device or arrange other AAC supports (e.g., communication boards or pictures).

All the team members and the student's family should be aware of the target vocabulary and provide as many opportunities as possible for the student to use the vocabulary throughout the day (Snell, Chen, & Hoover, 2006). Teachers, support staff, and peers should model the vocabulary verbally or in writing. If students use AAC, language should be modeled using the device (Light, 1997). Look for many natural opportunities to use the vocabulary, and create additional opportunities for instruction as well.

Students with significant disabilities are likely to need more opportunities to experience a new word in context before using it expressively than students without disabilities. By cuing the student to use the vocabulary repeatedly in natural contexts, the student will be more likely to generalize the skill to multiple environments and maintain the skill over time (Snell et al., 2006).

### Step 4: Identify Key Events in the Story

Returning to the outline, identify the most important events in the story. For some students, the final adapted version might include only the main plot points. Other students might benefit from a more complex story line. The amount of detail that is included about each event can also be differentiated based on the needs of the student using the materials. Many texts from Western genres use a story arc that includes an exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Stories from other cultures might follow a different format. The plot points should match the format of the original story. The final adapted book will be anchored to the key events, but the amount of detail or number of key events included might vary from student to student. It is important to ensure that the key plot points for each individual student are identified so that team members understand how the story line will flow for each student.

### Step 5: Write the Adapted Text

There are many different ways to format an adapted book. Text formats are important to consider, because they help define the purposes for reading the text (Mooney, 2001). Widely available, and often free, presentation software such as Google Slides or PowerPoint provides a flexible format that allows for one or more full-color pictures; landscape or portrait orientation; a variety of text fonts and sizes; and embedded sounds, videos, or animation. Presentation software

allows teachers to print the book out, laminate it, and bind it; lamination allows students to write directly on the pages using a dry-erase marker. Page fluffers (i.e., bits of sponge, foam, or popsicle sticks attached to pages; Downing, 2005) can be added to make turning pages easier for students with fine-motor challenges. Alternatively, students can access a digital version of the book, turning pages with a mouse click, switch press, or swipe. Slides can also be set to automatically advance. Narration can be recorded, allowing the student to access the text independently. See Table 1 for more ideas about how to adapt books for accessibility.

When modifying the text, maintain the author's original words as much as possible in order to stay consistent with the genre of the text. Certain lines or phrases might have cultural importance and are essential to fully experience the text. For example, it is almost unimaginable to think of reading *Romeo and Juliet* without learning about the importance of lines such as "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" and "What's in a name?" In many cases, it is possible to adapt the text simply by reducing the amount of text, keeping only the most important aspects of the story. A small amount of rephrasing, however, will probably be necessary in order to incorporate the target vocabulary into the text.

Similarly, modified texts should not simply be summaries of longer or more complex stories. They should stand on their own and maintain the original genre. Thus, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Raisin in the Sun* should be adapted in the dramatic genre, with characters' names or pictures preceding their spoken lines. Age appropriateness is also important to consider. Adapted versions of grade-level texts should not resemble picture books for younger children (Copeland, 2007). The use of real photos and an easy-to-read font, such as Arial or Helvetica, is preferred over the use of line drawings and childlike fonts, such as Comic Sans.



## Step 6: Choose Pictures

Pictures can add important information to supplement the text, but they can also be distracting if used inappropriately. Be sure to use only the minimum number of pictures necessary so that they enhance, rather than detract from, the comprehensibility of the story. Pictures placed above individual words can be distracting and might make the words more difficult to learn (Didden, de Graaff, Nelemans, Vooren, & Lancioni, 2006; Didden, Prinsen, & Sigafos, 2000; Dittlinger & Lerman, 2011; Wu & Solman, 1993) unless the picture is systematically faded (Fossett & Mirenda, 2006). Often, just one large picture per page is necessary to illustrate the scene or capture the main idea. The same picture can be repeated across several pages to represent the setting; for example, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, many scenes take place in the family's living room. Repeating the photo of the living room throughout the adapted version of the play shows where the action on the page takes place. Google Images is a helpful resource for finding photos; many classic books have been adapted into film. Still images as well as YouTube videos of film clips can be embedded into the text.

*When the scope and sequence of the course is planned, Ms. Packard begins adapting the literature so that it will be accessible for Maria. Ms. Packard quickly realizes that it will not be possible for her to read every book in order to adapt them for Maria and future students. Luckily she knows where to start, because Ms. Heu explained the overarching themes during their planning meetings.*

*When the class begins its first novel, Of Mice and Men, Ms. Packard and Ms. Heu are ready. Using online summaries as a guide, Ms. Packard reduces the complexity of the text and divides it into chapters that follow the original version. She uses Google Slides, which allows her to easily share the book with Ms. Heu as well as Maria's family. Searching the Internet, she finds images from a movie version to incorporate into the book and embeds sound effects and*

*video clips from YouTube. She records narration, which can be turned on or off; Maria can access the book independently when she plugs her FM device into her iPad and hears the story being read aloud. Because Maria primarily uses single signs to communicate, the whole class learns the signs for dream, home, and friends and uses them when reading and talking to Maria. As an unexpected added benefit, students reading along with Maria—including those who are at risk and otherwise reluctant to read an adapted text—seem to understand the story better as a result.*

## How to Teach Using Adapted Text

Once the text is adapted, a systematic plan for teaching and collecting data on student progress is needed. Systematic instructional procedures, such as prompting strategies and time delay, are well supported by research for teaching literacy engagement, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (Browder et al., 2009, 2011; Mims et al., 2009, 2012.) The story-based lesson format developed by Browder et al. (2007) includes a simple task analysis for students and teachers to follow so that key skills are targeted throughout the reading process. Teachers can customize the task analysis in any

Structured peer interactions are key to successful inclusion. Peers can read the book aloud while the student with disabilities follows along to increase opportunities for the student to engage with the book. Better yet, recent research has shown that peers can also provide instruction using prompting and reinforcement (Hudson & Browder, 2014; Hudson, Browder, & Jimenez, 2014) and that peer-delivered instruction can be just as effective as instruction delivered by a teacher or paraeducator. Peers will need targeted instruction to learn to implement the intervention with fidelity (Hudson et al., 2014; Hudson & Browder, 2014). Nevertheless, the practice of including peers in the instructional process using adapted books is promising.

Finally, students must be taught to generalize the skills targeted in the adapted text lesson. This begins with choosing skills that are useful in a variety of contexts, not just the reading activity (Snell et al., 2006). For example, answering comprehension questions about books might not be a skill needed in a student's everyday life; consider how frequently a friend or family member asks you specific information about events in a book you have read. A more useful way to demonstrate comprehension might be to ask and answer questions in the

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way they choose. Common components include text awareness activities (e.g., pointing to the title, orienting the book), word reading, answering comprehension questions, and making predictions. The steps can be embedded in the book (e.g., a comprehension question can be written at the bottom of a page), so reading partners are reminded to prompt a response from the student for each step. Data should be collected daily and progress should be carefully evaluated so that necessary changes in programming can be made as soon as they become necessary. Ideas for skills to target are provided in Table 2.

context of a conversation, which embeds the skill in the context of use and is consistent with recommended practices to promote generalization (Browder, Wood, Thompson, & Ribuffo, 2014). Similarly, literacy engagement skills should likewise relate to everyday literacy activities, such as turning on an iPad or using a bookmark, and vocabulary should be relevant to the student's everyday life and not be limited to characters or settings in the text (Keefe, 2007). Students must also be systematically taught to generalize skills to other contexts—not just other books but other language experiences throughout the day (Browder et al., 2014).

**Table 2. Example Skills to Target During Adapted Book Reading**

Skill area	Target skills
Engagement	Follow book reading routine or visual schedule Get out book Orient book Find location with bookmark Save location with bookmark Plug in headphones Log into computer Turn pages (with finger, switch, mouse, swipe, etc.) Ask a question Invite a friend to read Put book away or log out of computer Record number of minutes read
Comprehension	Self-monitor for comprehension Answer comprehension questions Complete cloze statements Engage in on-topic conversation about book State main idea Complete graphic organizer Sequence events
Vocabulary	Point to word in an array Use word in a sentence Identify word in print Match word to picture Write the word in a cloze statement

*Ms. Packard develops a 12-step task analysis for teachers and peers to follow when reading with Maria. She decides to build on Maria's strength in the area of social engagement to have her choose a peer with whom to read. Maria asks why and how questions to her peers about various parts of the book. Ms. Packard creates a simple data sheet, which allows her to track and share Maria's progress on a daily basis. This process is easily replicated for each book in the curriculum throughout the year.*

## Conclusion

Adapting grade-level literature might be time-consuming at first, but the process gets easier with practice and can help provide equitable access to general education content for high school students with significant disabilities. Using the key themes in the book as a starting point helps to focus instruction and provides a jumping-off point for expanding language skills. Integrating peer interactions, opportunities to use

key vocabulary, and routines for reading promote membership in the literate community of the class as well as positive, long-term literacy outcomes.

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