

Southall, Margo. (2009). *Differentiated Small Group Reading Lessons*. New York: Scholastic.

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For teachers at the primary level, most of the instructional time is spent on reading. However, due to the wide variety of skill levels in the classroom, it is hard to reach every student. For this reason, small group reading instruction is a major part of the literacy block. But it can be quite a challenge putting together effective groups every day that can reach the multitude of needs in the classroom in a limited amount of time. Margo Southall's book *Differentiated Small-Group Reading Lessons* helps make this task a little more manageable. Southall has worked in education for over 25 years in various positions that have allowed her to devise a small group strategy that works in the classroom. This is a book that would be helpful for teachers new to the classroom, as well as teachers looking to improve their small group reading lessons.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapters 1-3 cover the basics and mechanics of a small group reading environment. Southall gives tips on grouping students, structuring lessons, using assessment to guide instruction, scheduling, and other management type of issues. Chapters 4-6 provide actual lessons for teachers on word study, fluency, and comprehension. The layout of this book is helpful because teachers will benefit from reading the first three chapters and then looking at lessons. This will give them a successful foundation for establishing small groups. Once this is organized, they can go right to chapters 4, 5, and 6 for easy to use lessons. Bookmarks that can be photocopied and used by students are available throughout the chapters. These are kid friendly ways of discussing ideas like fluency and comprehension. The bookmarks include pictures and very simple descriptions of what things like fluency actually mean. These will be sure to help students understand their own areas of strength and weakness.

The lessons provided by Southall are simple, effective ways to reach the individual needs of students. They do not take a lot of planning or study, which is helpful for any teacher. They follow a simple format of tell me, show me, guide me, and coach me. This is where the teacher tells the objective, shows an example of it, guides the student as they perform the task, and finally coaches as the student performs it with more independence. One lesson that I liked was "Train Your Reading Brain". In this lesson, the student is learning how to tackle high frequency words. The teacher guides them by having them find the easy parts of the words and breaking apart in this way. After some practice, they then work with a partner on sorting high frequency words. Finally they attempt this independently as the teacher watches. With this child friendly approach it is easy to see that children will walk away from their reading groups with the knowledge and skills intended.

Southall points out several things about small group instruction that I found to be key in understanding how lessons will be successful. She goes into detail about how this must be true differentiation, not just ability grouping. Meaning, students should be placed in groups that will be working on the same skill, such as inference. These students may have varying degrees of reading ability, but they all have a need to work on inference. This means there are no high or low groups. With this in mind, it is also important to recognize that small groups are not just for low students. High students may need help on specific topics. Also, it could be an advanced skill that several students are working on.

Overall, Southall's book is helpful in two specific ways. One way is that it helps teachers to really understand what a small group reading lesson should look like, both in planning and in action. Another benefit is the easy to use lesson plans that can be taken right from the book. They are detailed enough to give teachers a great lesson to use. But they are also flexible enough to be used in multiple grade levels and with multiple abilities. This will save the teacher time and provide valuable information in working in those key areas of reading.

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