1. SHOW AND TELL

How many of us say that we learn best by seeing something rather than hearing about it? Modeling for students is a cornerstone of scaffolding, in my experience. Have you ever interrupted someone with “Just show me!” while they were in the middle of explaining how to do something? Every chance you have, show or demonstrate to students exactly what they are expected to do.

- Try the fishbowl activity, where a small group in the center is circled by the rest of the class; the group in the middle, or fishbowl, engages in an activity, modeling how it’s done for the larger group.
- Always show students the outcome or product before they do it. If a teacher assigns a persuasive essay or inquiry-based science project, a model should be presented side-by-side with a criteria chart or rubric. You can guide students through each step of the process with the model of the finished product in hand.
- Use think alouds, which will allow you to model your thought process as you read a text, solve a problem, or design a project. Remember that children’s cognitive abilities are still in development, so opportunities for them to see developed, critical thinking are essential.

2. TAP INTO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Ask students to share their own experiences, hunches, and ideas about the content or concept of study and have them relate and connect it to their own lives. Sometimes you may have to offer hints and suggestions, leading them to the connections a bit, but once they get there, they will grasp the content as their own.

Launching the learning in your classroom from the prior knowledge of your students and using this as a framework for future lessons is not only a scaffolding technique—many would agree it’s just plain good teaching.

3. GIVE TIME TO TALK

All learners need time to process new ideas and information. They also need time to verbally make sense of and articulate their learning with the community of learners who are engaged in the same experience and journey. As we all know, structured discussions really work best with children regardless of their level of maturation. If you aren't weaving in think-pair-share, turn-and-talk, triad teams, or some other structured talking time throughout the lesson, you should begin including this crucial strategy on a regular basis.

4. PRE-TEACH VOCABULARY

Sometimes referred to as front-loading vocabulary, this is a strategy that we teachers don't use enough. Many of us, myself included, are guilty of sending students all alone down the bumpy, muddy path known as Challenging Text—a road booby-trapped with difficult vocabulary. We send them ill-prepared and then are often shocked when they: a) lose interest, b) create a ruckus, or c) fall asleep.

Pre-teaching vocabulary doesn't mean pulling a dozen words from the chapter and having kids look up definitions and write them out—we all know how that will go. Instead, introduce the words to kids in photos or in context with things they know and are interested in. Use analogies and metaphors, and invite students to create a symbol or drawing for each word. Give time for discussion of the words (small groups and whole class). Not until they've done all this should the dictionaries come out. And the dictionaries will be used only to compare with those definitions they've already discovered on their own.

With the dozen or so words front-loaded, students are ready, with you as their guide, to tackle that challenging text.

5. USE VISUAL AIDS

Graphic organizers, pictures, and charts can all serve as scaffolding tools. Graphic organizers are very specific in that they help kids visually represent their ideas, organize information, and grasp concepts such as sequencing and cause and effect.

A graphic organizer shouldn’t be The Product but rather a scaffolding tool that helps guide and shape the students’ thinking. Some students can dive right into a discussion, or writing an essay, or synthesizing several different hypotheses, without using a graphic organizer of some sort, but many of our students benefit from using one with a difficult reading or challenging new information. Think of graphic organizers as training wheels—they are temporary and meant to be removed.

6. PAUSE, ASK QUESTIONS, PAUSE, REVIEW

This is a wonderful way to check for understanding while students read a chunk of difficult text or learn a new concept or content. Here's how this strategy works: a new idea from discussion or the reading is shared, then you pause (providing think time), and then ask a strategic question, pausing again. You need to design the questions ahead of time, making sure they are specific, guiding, and open-ended. (Even great questions fail if we don't give think time for responses, so hold out during that Uncomfortable Silence.) Keep kids engaged as active listeners by calling on someone to give the gist of what was just discussed/discovered/questioned. If the class seems stuck on the questions, provide an opportunity for students to discuss in pairs.