

Supporting Students When Reading Informational Text

Comprehension is thinking while you read, listen, or view. Teachers can help students think more and better about what they are reading, listening to, or viewing by scaffolding their comprehension. They can build background knowledge so that students have more information to call up and connect to new information they will encounter when they attempt to comprehend.

Text Structure—Structure is an essential aspect of text used by effective writers. Effective readers discern text structure automatically. Elementary and secondary students who are taught to identify structure of expository and narrative text have been found to have better comprehension than students who have not received such instruction.

Expository text structure

- Time/order
- Assembly instructions
- Chronology of historical events
- Listing
- Series of ideas that elaborate on generalization (clarification)
- Compare/contrast
- Cause/effect
- Problem/solution
- Main idea/supporting details

RAN Charts (Reading and Analyzing Nonfiction)—The RAN Chart is a modified KWL chart (Stead, 2006). Unlike the KWL Chart, the RAN Chart has five categories. They are:

What I Think I Know
Confirmed
Misconceptions
New Information
Wonderings

If the items suggested by students for the “What I Think I Know” column are recorded and placed onto the chart using sticky notes, they can easily be transferred to either the “Confirmed” column or the “Misconceptions” column as the students read to discover if what they think they know is correct or not.

Strategies for Reading Tables, Charts, and Graphs—This anchor chart can be co-created with the students and might contain strategies such as the following:

1. Read the title
2. Ask yourself, “What kind of data is in the graph/table/chart?”
3. Read the headings (These may be across the top or they may be down the side.)
4. Read across the rows.
5. Answer the questions.

A table is a way of showing facts. It makes facts or data easy and fun to read. Make up your own by gathering facts to compare things.

GIST—In GIST, the group task is to write a summary in 20 words or less. The students read a short section—no more than three paragraphs—then work with the teacher to record the gist of what they have read. The discussion challenges students to distill what is really important. The teacher explains that the *gist* of something is the main idea and that sometimes we do not need to remember all the details but read just to get the gist of the material. The teacher draws 20 word size blanks on the chalkboard and explains to the students that, after reading, they will try to write a sentence or two of no more than 20 words that captures the gist of what they have read.

Scavenger Hunts—For a scavenger hunt that helps your students build word meanings, begin by collecting real things and pictures, follow these steps:

1. Make a list of the items for which you want students to scavenge. Include anything for which students might be able to find a real object, model, or picture, but make sure to include items represented by those words for which you need to build meaning. Be sure to add some well-known, easy-to-collect items so that some of the finds will be easy and immediately satisfying. Here is a list used for a scavenger hunt before beginning a unit on the desert: sand, skunk, woodpecker, dune, cactus, fox, vulture, kangaroo rat, mesquite, roadrunner, coyote, yucca.
2. Divide your class into teams of three or four. If necessary, explain how scavenger hunts work. Be sure students understand that they must bring in objects and pictures by a certain date and that each team should keep secret which items were collected and from where the items came.
3. Let the team have an initial planning meeting. Tell the team they get two points for each object or model and one point for each picture. Only one object or picture for each word. Choose a leader. The leader is to read the list and lead the group in a discussion of who thinks they can find what and where. Set a date . . . one week is reasonable . . . no displays before due date.
4. Allow the teams to meet briefly once or twice more. Teams should check things off their lists and see what is still needed. Promote an atmosphere of “secrecy and suspense”. The goal is to collect as much as you can. Encourage—if the object is not available—to seek a picture of the object.
5. On the appointed day, have teams bring their finds. Let teams meet to go over their findings and tally up their points. Double-check the teams’ figures. The winner is the team with the most points.
6. Reward the winning team by allowing them to display their findings. Label and display the findings. Guard valuable objects. Be sure to include the names of all the winners next to the display.

Anticipation Guides—An anticipation guide is a list of statements or key words, some of which are true and some of which are false. The students are presented with the statements or key words and they guess which are true and which are false. Then they read to check their predictions. You will see the power of prediction as a motivating device. Students who have made some guesses want to read to see if they were right.

Example: Babe Ruth

1. Orphan
2. Good kid
3. Only child
4. Irish
5. German
6. Over six feet tall
7. Right-handed
8. Pitcher
9. Catcher
10. New York Yankee
11. Still living

An alternative version of the anticipation guide is as follows:

Materials:

2 card stock sheets of paper per group of 3-4 students

1 set of 8-10 content statements (one statement on a slip of paper)

1 envelope

One set of 3-4 "demo" statement cards for modeling

1. Fold the cardstock paper in half so that each creates a "tent" to set on a tabletop.
2. On one tent, write "agree" on both sides. For the other tent, write "disagree" on both sides.
3. Use large enough font to print out your content statements on regular paper so that each can be cut into strips. Place all strips in an envelope.
4. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. Give each group a set of tent cards and one set of statements in an envelope.
5. Set the tents on opposite sides of the desks.
6. Once the students are in their groups, model for the students how to agree and disagree properly with the "demo" statements. The procedures are:
 - a. Take out a slip of paper and read aloud the statement placing it in the middle of the two tents.
 - b. Privately decide if you agree with the statement or disagree.
 - c. Allow for each student to share his or her opinion, providing a reason for why you think that way.
 - d. Place the statement under the appropriate tent.
 - e. Continue until all slips are read and decided on.
7. Have the students keep the tents and slips together by placing the slips inside the folded tent and setting aside.
8. Proceed with the content lesson.
9. Backload the lesson by having the students revisit the Agree and Disagree tents and the slips they separated during front loading. As a group they will validate and confirm if the statements

are still in the correct tent. If any statements are moved, an explanation for the move should be given.

10. Close the lesson by presenting the correct categories for the statements to the class. Have the groups discuss what was new information, what was challenged information (an opinion changed), and what was validated information.

Haas, L., Durham, P., & Williams, J. (2015). *Becoming fluent in the language of content: Developing strategic readers as critical consumers of information*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

RIVET—RIVIT is a prereading activity designed to activate the students' prior knowledge and to get them to make predictions. To prepare for a RIVET text introduction, read the selection and pick six to eight important words—with a particular emphasis on polysyllabic words and important names. Begin the activity by writing numbers and drawing lines on the board to indicate how many letters each word has. Have the students draw the same number of lines on a piece of scratch paper. Fill in the letters to the first word one at a time. Have the students write them as you do and encourage them to guess as soon as they think they know the word. Use RIVET as a post reading activity in math and science to reinforce vocabulary critical to comprehending the lesson.

Analogies—Analogies help students develop a concept for a word that you cannot represent with firsthand or visual experience. You think of something students know that is like the unknown thing you wish to teach them. The idea that cricket is a lot like baseball is an analogy. (Analogy is sometimes used narrowly to denote statements such as “summer is to hot as winter is to cold”. This activity uses the word in a broader sense.)

To create an analogy, think of something your students are apt to know that is like the thing they do not know. Once you decide which analogy to make, consider the differences between the familiar and unfamiliar concepts. To present the analogy to the students, first ask them what they know about the familiar concept. Highlight the relevant traits, adding necessary information. Next, tell them that this familiar concept is a lot like another, unfamiliar concept and point out the similarities and differences.

Context Power—Often the surrounding words, or context, help us access known meaning and put in with a new word. Select some words for which students have the meaning but not the word. It is best to present the words to students using actual context from the book when that context makes the meaning clear. Steps of the lesson are as follows:

1. Display the words without the context clues and have students guess the meaning.
2. Display the word in its context and have students guess a second time.
3. As students guess what words mean based on context, have them explain how the context clues helped.
4. As each word is guessed from context and the reasoning behind the guess is explained, have a volunteer look up the word in the dictionary and read the appropriate definition to the class.
5. Have students apply the context strategy by finding some unfamiliar words in their books and deriving meanings from the book context.

Capsule Vocabulary—Capsule vocabulary is a strategy in which students listen to, speak, write, and read words related to a particular topic. You present these topically related words (using approximately six words works best) one at a time. Write each word on the board, briefly tell the students of an experience with the word, and let students share their own experiences. In addition to words for which students have meaning but not the word, include some words already well-known to students and perhaps some for which you have already built meaning in previous lessons. After all the words have been introduced and all the experiences shared by you and the students, have each student copy the words from the board onto a sheet of paper. Pair the students and give each pair a limited time (3-5 minutes) to try to use the words in a conversation about the topic. Students should check off the words as they are able to sneak them into the conversation. Finally, have students write a paragraph about the topic in which they use as many of the capsule words as possible. Form students into groups of four or five and let them share their paragraphs. Then collect the paragraphs and select several to read to the entire class.

Vocabulary Self-Assessment—Helping students self-assess is one of the major ways of helping them develop responsibility for their own learning. Letting students select the words to be learned is one type of self-assessment because in selecting they are deciding that these are relatively unknown words to them and that these words are likely to be important to the unit under study. You might also help students self-assess by presenting them with a scale such as the following and have them put various unit words on that scale at the beginning and end of the unit. Students could then add up the number of points they have moved and have tangible proof of their vocabulary growth in your content area.

1. I never heard of that word in my entire life.
2. I heard it but I have no idea what it means.
3. I couldn't tell you what it means but I might be able to pick the right meaning from four choices.
4. I can tell you a little about that word.
5. I could put that word in a good sentence that would show its meaning.
6. I could use that word correctly in discussion and writing.

Writing

Quick Writes

1. We are about to begin learning about desert habitats. Take thirty seconds and write down all the words you think of when you think of deserts. The clock starts now!
2. Before we begin our exploration of matter, write down everything you know about matter. You have one minute.

These are examples of quick writes used in content area classrooms. Quick writes are the least formal kind of writing and in some ways the easiest ones to fit into a crowded content curriculum.

Writing Forms—Form is the medium of writing. How are students going to write about the topic? Are they going to write a poem, a story, an essay, or a newspaper article? Writers use a variety of forms:

Ads, allegories, announcements, autobiographies, biographies, book jackets, book reviews, brochures, campaign speeches, character sketches, comic strips, commercials, contracts, debates, diaries, direction, editorials, encyclopedia entries, epitaphs, essays, fables, grocery lists, interviews, journals, lab reports, letters, lists, magazine articles, memoirs, memos, mysteries, myths, newspaper articles, newspaper columns, obituaries, observational notes, plays, poems, position papers, questionnaires, recipes, reports, reviews, scenarios, scripts, song lyrics, stories, summaries.

Writing Frames

Science Example

The important thing about the wind is _____.

It can _____ and _____.

But the most important thing about the wind is _____.