



DETERMINE IMPORTANT IDEAS AND THEMES

Strategic readers focus on introductory material, topic sentences, and/or concluding material in order to identify important parts of text and to distinguish among subplots, examples, big ideas, and underlying themes.

Strategy-at-a-Glance

Notes

What's Involved? What's the Strategy Really About?

Instead of telling students the main point of a reading, we want to teach them to find it independently, a complicated skill that requires lots of guided practice.

- Many students have difficulty differentiating between essential and non-essential information. They also have difficulty coming up with "main idea" generalizations and determining the relationship between the main point and evidence that supports it.
- A key part of this strategy is figuring out the author's purpose or purposes.
- This strategy links with other closely related strategies, including: **Analyze Text Structure**, and **Evaluate**, **Summarize**, **Synthesize**.

What's Essential to Teaching and Supporting this Strategy?

- Applying the strategy to a variety of readings, including textbooks, magazine articles, instructions and directions, and comparing the way to find the main idea in each;
- Realizing that in many situations disagreement about the most important point made in a text is okay—getting students to read carefully, arrive at well-reasoned conclusions, and argue their points from text is of greater value than imposing consensus;
- Working with nonfiction before plunging into fiction—fiction usually requires more inference;
- Using tools such as KWL (or KEL) to help students set purposes for themselves that will remind them to watch for the author's purpose;
- Using pre-existing knowledge about topic sentences, introductory paragraphs, etc. to scaffold student learning;
- Teaching students to use cues such as bold-print headings to support their understanding, but not as a substitute for careful reading;
- Requiring students to state important ideas and themes in their own words, not merely to copy directly from the reading;
- Taking advantage of electronic resources such as www.nytimes.com/learning and "Inspiration."

Notes

Resources Included:

Finding the Main Point – This tool helps students distinguish between central and supporting information.

Structured Notetaking – This graphic organizer helps students represent the relationships between information and concepts in text.

I – An Overview of the Strategy

Simply stated, students who don't distinguish essential information from supplemental information cannot really comprehend what they read.

One teacher explains that learning to determine important ideas and themes helps students "keep their eyes on the prize."

With the best of intentions, we sometimes prevent students from learning to use this strategy.

Take the way textbooks are usually structured. Bold-print subheadings, end-of-chapter questions, and marginal annotations are designed to help students tell the essential from the less essential.

Unfortunately, some students use these tools to avoid reading for meaning.

Using these cues as reading shortcuts, many students never learn to discriminate between a main idea and supporting evidence. All they learn is what the textbook authors want them to pay attention to.

Telling students what to look for as they read can also interfere with learning to Determine Important Ideas and Themes.

Instead of reading carefully, some students may skim for what they were told was important. As a result, they may be able to answer the teacher's questions, but they haven't learned to distinguish between important ideas and supporting evidence.

It's a Learned Skill

When they are asked to read a magazine article lacking the organizational clues found in most textbooks, many students cannot distinguish between central concepts and supporting evidence.

Without guidance from the text or the teacher, these students confront what seems a mishmash of unrelated, disorganized facts.

• A U.S. history teacher discovered his students' weaknesses in teaching them to underline and annotate as they read. They worked with a photocopied selection of the sort they had been reading and discussing for several months. He modeled annotating the main point and supporting evidence, then asked them to read and annotate a selection. **Nearly every student underlined almost every line.**

Upon reflection, he realized he had assumed that his instruction about the Main Ideas and Themes had accomplished more than it had. He realized he was merely teaching his students what to pay attention to so they could succeed on his quizzes and tests. **They were not learning how to read well, only how to determine what he'd talk about and test for.**

- One middle school science teacher discovered an even more basic problem. After asking her students to read and take notes on a newspaper article about genetic research, she said, "I found that they didn't know the difference between a fact and a concept." She, too, had thought that she was teaching such distinctions; she realized that the students were learning only specific facts and concepts, not how to differentiate between the two, and to see that facts usually explain concepts.

Purposes Differ

When readers have a clear purpose for reading, they are more likely to comprehend what they read than when their purpose is hazy.

Determining the Important Ideas and Themes of a reading provides just such a purpose.

Different disciplines can have entirely different kinds of Main Idea.

- In Math, for example, the Main Idea may be learning to prove that two triangles are congruent – the authors want readers to learn a **skill** as a result of reading the chapter.
- In History, a subchapter may imply that sectional rivalry, not slavery, caused the American Civil War – in this case, the Main Idea is **information** the authors want the reader to understand.

So it's not just that we need to remind students that different authors emphasize different main ideas: the concept of Main Idea may differ, reading to reading, subject to subject. Where a math text's Main Ideas may be intended to help readers develop concepts and skills, a history text's Main Ideas may simply be intended to impart information.

Further, each main idea results in a different presentation of information.

- In the math text, the authors may lay out the steps to prove the congruence of two triangles – any two triangles, anywhere. Or it may come in the form of an investigation that helps students determine the proof on their own.
- In the history text, the information may come in standard essay format: an introductory paragraph stating the thesis, followed by several supporting paragraphs. Or it may come in narrative form, with the main idea not stated until the end of the selection.

There's also the question of how much to insist that everyone agree on the Main Idea of the selection.

Sometimes there's no doubt about what the author is trying to do. In a chemistry chapter on how acids react with various substances it's pretty clear the authors want students to understand the nature and outcome of the reactions – little room for debate there! But in a history reading, time spent discussing parts of a text that support different authorial points of view can be time well spent – students searching text to support their arguments are more likely to understand and remember what they've read than students dutifully recording the teacher's list from the board.

Notes

Shifting from nonfiction to fiction, the picture gets murkier.

Few novelists – from young adult writers to authors of the classics – come right out and say, “This is the important idea I’m trying to make!” In fiction, drama and poetry, the ideas and themes may need to be inferred, which adds yet another dimension of complexity. Please see “Explore Inferences” for details.

II – Helping Students with the Strategy

It takes sustained instruction and reflection for students to become adept at Determining Important Ideas and Themes.

Circumstances can complicate the effort.

Some readings lend themselves more readily to main-idea activities than others.

- **A middle school social studies teacher who planned to ask her students to look for the main idea in the U. S. History subchapter quickly realized that the text did not have an explicitly stated thesis.** So she asked her students to read the first sentences, which turned out to be the topic sentences, of each paragraph. Then they turned these into a paragraph. Finally, by creating a topic sentence for this new paragraph, they were able to determine the main idea of the reading.
- **A high school math teacher recognized that her text-heavy, standards-based math text posed a basic dilemma – her students didn’t understand what the authors wanted them to do.** So, after reviewing the definitions of “verb” and “object,” she asked her students to find and write the verb and object in each step of the directions, e.g., “label dimensions.” Finally, students checked off each direction as they completed it. Breaking the material into its grammatical components, they determined the Main Idea of the exercise, and became clear about what was asked of them.
- **Realizing his students got lost in most nonfiction reading, a middle school reading teacher started at the most basic level.** He gave them paragraphs from a variety of disciplines, and asked that they determine the subject or topic (e.g., monkeys) and the main idea (e. g., monkeys are mischievous) of each. After much practice, discussion, and further practice, he had them transfer the practice to their “regular” reading.
- **One high school English teacher makes explicit connections between this reading strategy and his writing instruction: “One [tool] I’m just beginning to approach I am calling ‘Deconstructing the Essay.’**As a group and/or individually we look intently at individual paragraphs in an essay for the topic sentence and the main idea, asking whether the paragraph stays focused on the main idea, or if it adds information that does not fit with the main idea. My students are learning to find the main idea in their writing at the same time they’re learning to find it in their reading.”

Teacher read-alouds are effective in fostering student understanding of the main idea, but once they have a sense of the main idea, some students do not pay as much attention to the read-alouds as they should.

Asking questions that require students to attend not only to the gist of the story, but to the author’s language and the graphics challenges students to pay closer attention than ever!

Something as simple as, “What is the author trying to tell us here?” followed by, “And what did she say that led you to believe that?” can emphasize the importance of attending closely to text – the most essential element in determining important ideas and themes. This provides an excellent framework for the students to apply to their own reading. And to their writing!

Teachers wanting students to find main and supporting points in the text may photocopy a few pages for students to work with, or ask them to write their comments on sticky notes.

III – Tools for Strategy Instruction

Dana Cummings, Essex Middle School math/science teacher, realizing his students relied on him to distinguish the essential from the supplemental in their reading, developed a tool called “Finding the Main Idea.”

He gave his students photocopied pages from the science text, and told them to put a “1” by the important idea or ideas and a “2” by the information that supported the idea(s). His students pointed out that there was material that didn’t merit either a 1 or a 2. So they added a 3 for information that clarified the supporting information.

The students became adept at using this tool, and even went on to use it in their text-heavy math series.

They found that the categories had different meanings in the math book, but were useful for understanding what the authors wanted. For example, unlike the science reading, the math text provided samples of the problem being solved. Most students agreed that these were category 3, since they gave more information about 2, the instructions about how to solve the problem. But the math text lacked the kind of paragraphs so central to the science text, in which, for example, the characteristics of a mineral were listed and discussed: the students agreed these were 2s.

The teacher learned two important lessons from this activity.

He often forgot to ask students to cite and read aloud specific parts of the text, with others following along. He began to see that the “general discussion” format, in which students generally talked about the information, was far less effective than discussing the author’s actual words. He also realized the importance of asking students, at the end of class, to reflect on their learning: to take a minute or two to review the reading, the mental steps they had gone through, and how the experience had influenced their understanding, both of the information and of themselves as readers.

Finding the Main Point

Goal: To help students discover what's most important in their reading. To do this, they must understand how different parts of the text interrelate.

The Activity:

I – Working with a photocopied page or two of fairly straightforward text (or with sticky notes in the reading itself), students should put a **1** beside the main idea, a **2** beside supporting information, and a **3** beside clarifying material:

1-THE MAIN IDEA OF THE READING

It's why the author wrote the selection. Often the topic sentence of the first paragraph, or, in a longer reading, the entire first paragraph; sometimes the concluding paragraph.

2-INFORMATION THAT SUPPORTS THE IDEA

A list of examples; facts that prove the main idea; details that show how the conclusion was reached, etc. These are here so the reader can understand the main idea.

3-MATERIAL THAT HELPS CLARIFY THE INFORMATION

Quotations to illustrate examples, details or facts; sources confirming information; hypothetical examples; graphics showing what the text describes, etc. The author included these to give the reader more detail about the topic.

Sometimes finding 1s, 2s, and 3s is easy, sometimes not.

For example, if the main idea is not the first thing students read, they have to read a bit to get it – this can be confusing. Or the main idea may be stated several times, and students may not understand why it is restated (they should put a 1 beside each restatement). Telling the difference between 2s and 3s can be tricky. For example, a picture of a cell dividing may illustrate a fact that supports a main idea statement in the text, so the information in the text merits a 2, and the picture a 3. For some students, however, the picture may be so crucial that it's a 2 – this is fine.

II – Discuss students' choices. This can be done through small groups reporting out or through full-class discussion. Write students' ideas for all to see; also make sure everybody is looking at the text itself during the discussion – ask a student to read the sentences or paragraphs under discussion out loud while others follow along. As you discuss items, highlight disagreements among students. Don't rush!

The goal of this activity is to use investigation of how the material is presented as a vehicle for studying the material itself.

Rather than the teacher's "going over" what the students read, or generating a general discussion of the information, students "study" the material using active discussion of how they think the author has organized the text.

III – Provide time for students to review the connections between the textual presentation and the information they've learned, including discussion of how this relationship differs from other readings.

The long-term goal is to help students look for this connection in everything they read; to do this they need regular opportunities to reflect on their own thinking about how ideas and information are presented.

Note: The exercise will differ from reading to reading and from subject to subject. In math, the main idea may be to learn a specific skill, such as dividing fractions (1). There will be definitions they need to know (2s). There will be examples (3s). In history, the main idea may be the reason for the failure of the League of Nations (1). There will be a list of causes (2s). There will be quotations or statistics (3s). In science, the main idea may be the understanding of a definition such as osmosis (1). There will be concepts such as "cell wall" that need to be understood (2s). There will be illustrations (3s).

Structured Notetaking

Goal: To help students retain information and understand textual organization by providing them with a visual framework for their notes.

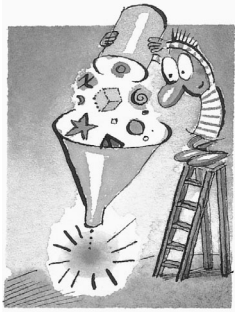
Structured Notetaking (Smith and Tompkins, 1988) helps students organize and recall information they have read. Initially, the teacher provides the graphic organizer and fills in the initial material. Eventually, the students develop and complete the graphic organizers themselves.

1. Give students a short passage for which you have already constructed a graphic organizer like the one below, and show them how you would use it for note-taking. The following applies to the information contained on this page.

| |
|-------------------------------------|
| Topic: Structured Notetaking |
|-------------------------------------|

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Goal: To help kids retain and understand information | Source: Strategic Reading Guide, page _____ | How to do it: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Create a graphic organizer that lists the topic, and has boxes underneath to record information about important subtopics.2. Give an example for kids to work on, and share ideas.3. Try with others on their own. |
|--|--|--|

2. Assign a passage from a text from which students should take notes. Provide each student with a graphic organizer that has main concepts outlined such as those above. Have students read the selection and complete notes under each section. Have them compare their results with others'.
3. Repeat this activity, gradually turning over more responsibility to students for developing overall categories and filling in the details.



EVALUATE SUMMARIZE SYNTHESIZE

Strategic readers pause during or after reading to consider the main points, construct new ideas from two or more pieces of text, and reflect on the quality and relevance of the text.

Strategy-at-a-Glance

Notes

What’s Involved? What’s the Strategy Really About?

This strategy—along with Determine Important Ideas and Themes – is central to reading comprehension. If students can’t summarize what they have read, they haven’t really understood the reading.

- Summarizing is a cognitively sophisticated process: the reader must first be able to distinguish between essential and inessential information and concepts, then put that information into his or her own words. This takes time and practice.
- can take place only after summarizing the text.
- Effective evaluation requires developing specific criteria for judgment; it takes practice for students to evaluate using criteria beyond “It’s interesting.”
- Closely related strategies: **Explore Inferences**, and **Determine Important Ideas and Themes**.

What’s Essential to Teaching and Supporting this Strategy?

- Use summarizing activities to introduce or support instruction in other reading strategies. Suggesting, for example, that students **Ask Questions** such as “What is the author trying to say here?” or that they **Analyze Text Structure** to find the thesis statement of a subchapter will help them acquire the information that goes into a summary.
- Initial instruction can begin with short, clear selections that are easily summarized. A few clearly delineated paragraphs in a math, science or history book (or succinct newspaper article!) will be much more effective than an entire chapter. In fiction, a short chapter or several focused pages will work better than a longer selection.
- “Who, what, when, where” exercises, then writing a succinct summary paragraph, help students grasp the basics of summarizing.

Notes

- Sharing and discussing different written summaries of the same reading are crucial for helping students improve their skills. Comparing students' summaries is often a good vehicle for teaching content, since disagreement and text-based debate can promote engagement in the text.
- Students must summarize competently before synthesizing or evaluating.

Resources Included:

Magnet Summaries – This tool helps students take notes regarding “magnet” or big ideas and key details, then write short summaries.

Inquiry Charts – This graphic organizer enables students to compare and contrast information from several sources prior to synthesizing.

Reading Like Writers – By helping students see text through the author's eyes, this tool enables them to better understand and also evaluate the effectiveness of the author's use of tools and devices..

I-An Overview of the Strategy

Summarizing is Central to Reading Comprehension

To read is to make meaning from print; to summarize is to give evidence that the reader is clear about that meaning – and using the strategy is a good way to acquire such clarity. Once readers can clearly state what the reading's about, they can expand their understanding by **synthesizing** this new knowledge with other knowledge about the subject. From that step, readers can make judgments about, or **evaluate**, the knowledge – its accuracy, its bearing on the topic being studied, the gaps that need to be filled for fuller understanding, etc.

Students Need Help

Some teachers feel that spending several months on a particular strategy is overkill, and that the mix between summary and synthesis can be gradually shifted until the emphasis is on just enough summarizing that the synthesis has context. A middle school teaching team agreed to work on students' skills evaluating text. Four teachers agreed to start by reviewing summarizing, then to zip through synthesizing until reaching their real goal, evaluation.

They quickly discovered that their students could not summarize even the most basic reading material, whether in science, history, math or language arts. Many students could not even identify the selection's main idea. When they were clear about this, they could not determine what information might comprise an effective summary. In response to this discovery, the teachers slowed the process, setting out to improve their students' summarizing skills before moving toward evaluation.

The teachers had miscalculated because they considered summarizing an easily acquired skill, requiring low-level thinking. They assumed that the ability to summarize was acquired by osmosis through a variety of academic activities in all subject areas over the years. They came to realize that the act of summarizing actually requires high order thinking skills. Using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide,

summarizing demands the skills of Level 4, Analysis. This includes categorizing and classifying, which are crucial for summarizing. **Reflecting on their teaching, the teachers realized that they usually summarized for the students, rather than teaching them how to do it on their own. Effective summarizing is difficult, but is clearly worth teaching since it is so essential for comprehension.**

Summarizing: What’s Involved?

Think about what a good summary asks of the reader.

- First, readers have to understand the separate parts of what they’re reading. Word by word, sentence by sentence, readers must be operating at that 94 per cent level of comprehension that’s necessary for independent reading (see **Recognize Words and Understand Sentences**).
- Second, readers must understand the relationship between one bit of text and the next: **now that I’ve read that mosses don’t have vascular tissue, I need to understand its bearing on the fact that they also don’t have true roots. If I can’t do this, I cannot comprehend what the selection has to tell me, even if I understand the literal meaning of each sentence. To complete my understanding, I may need to visualize the cushion moss that grows on rocks at the edge of the schoolyard.**

So readers might call upon several reading strategies merely to understand the basic information.

But does this mean the reader can summarize the information? Not necessarily.

Some of our brightest students can engage in what looks like a summary, but is in fact a retelling, in which they simply start at the beginning and tell everything they know.

Does this mean they understand it? Not necessarily.

Only readers who can intentionally and explicitly summarize a reading selection truly understand what they’ve read.

A real summary is different from “putting it in your own words,” which often results in students’ dropping sentences from the material, exchanging one verb for another, adding or subtracting adjectives and adverbs, and creating a paragraph that, while meeting the established criteria, has not actually required – or helped – the student to “get it.”

Readers only “get it” when the summarizing task requires them to mentally manipulate the new information.

The students in the hypothetical example above merely manipulated the words used in the text to present the information. Putting it “in your own words” isn’t enough – we have to help them put it in their own thoughts to engage them in an activity that will enhance their comprehension and thereby their retention.

Notes

Synthesizing's Next

While synthesizing and evaluating appear at first glance to call upon more complex mental activity than summarizing, once students can summarize, these next two come relatively easily.

Synthesizing entails enmeshing new information with previously held information, and in this respect it resembles the **Make Connections** strategy. Readers **Make Connections** with prior knowledge to help them understand – in the example about mosses above, making the connection with mosses one has already seen helps the reader understand the sentences themselves. Synthesizing the new information with familiar information, however, is more complicated, because it usually involves creating new information. Harvey and Goudvis explain the process in **Strategies that Work** (2000) as akin to putting together a jigsaw puzzle:

When we synthesize information, we take the individual pieces of information and combine them with our prior knowledge. We begin to see a pattern emerge, and we form a new picture or idea from the pieces of information....In the same way that a jigsaw puzzle moves toward completion piece by piece, our thoughts become more complete as we add more information (143).

History teachers recognize the gradual synthesizing process as the school year progresses. Only when American history students study the Salem Witch Trials can they understand certain aspects of the Puritanism that they had studied in the early days of settlement; only when European history students study the Russian Revolution of 1917 can they reflect deeply on some of the causes and characteristics of the French Revolution of 1789.

Once such synthesis takes place, real learning begins. The student who notices a pattern to Roald Dahl's humor, or sees connections between migrations of Canada geese and monarch butterflies, has connected internalized information with newly encountered information. This kind of learning can last well beyond the chapter test!

Finally, Evaluating

Evaluating entails making informed judgments. Summarizing helps students connect the new information's big picture with its component parts.

Synthesizing enables them to connect one big picture with another.

Now they're ready to evaluate. Not to judge – they've been doing that all along with comments like "I hate this stuff, it's boring."

Evaluating as a reading comprehension strategy – and as a critical thinking strategy – entails judging the quality of information, the validity of ideas and/or the overall quality of a work based on a series of clearly established criteria.

So instead of "Do you like Beverly Cleary's Ramona series?" the questions become, "How and in what way are the characters developed in the Ramona series?" and "How are the incidents in the series made believable?" Teaching students to evaluate effectively requires providing them with frameworks that call on explicit standards for evaluation, or that let them convincingly articulate idiosyncratic, personal judgments.

II – Helping Students With the Strategy

Notes

Imagine that you are asked to summarize what you just read about summarizing, synthesizing and evaluating. You may already have skimmed the material before reading it, noticing the subtitles, dipping here and there into the text. Perhaps you've read the selection, making marginal notes as you went along. Then you may have gone back over the material looking for thesis statements. Finally, you've pulled out four or five supporting points that seem central to understanding the point of the reading, and have written them up as notes. In other words, you've automatically employed four or five strategies before summarizing.

Many students think of reading as running their eyes over the text carefully enough to pick out the highlighted words and phrases so they'll have some glimmer of what the teacher's talking about the next day, and can show they "did the reading." In some cases, this is because they don't care to do more than this bare minimum, but often it's because the reading strategies good readers naturally use to summarize aren't available to them – or if they are available, using them isn't second nature because they haven't practiced them enough.

Teachers emphasize the direct connection between reading comprehension and writing instruction that the "Summarize, Synthesize and Evaluate" strategy offers. An effective summary almost always comes in the form of a succinct paragraph that begins with a topic sentence and includes several sentences providing evidence that supports the paragraph's thesis. The skill is directly related to effective report writing. The act of writing a good summary actually helps clarify a reader's understanding of the material.

III – Tools for Strategy Instruction

Goal: To provide students with manageable first steps toward summarizing

Magnet summaries (Buehl, 2000) help students learn to summarize in all subject areas.

They ask students to focus on small blocks of text, and they force students to decide what's important, then put the information in their own words.

Two variations of "Magnet Summaries" follow:

1. the first is a summary of the approach as it comes from Buehl's **Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning**.
2. The second is Sue Biggam's variation – which provides a more introductory-level way to teach this approach.

Notes

Original Magnet Summaries (Buehl, 2000)

These are called “magnet summaries” because students locate words central to what they’re reading, and those “central ideas” act as magnets to other words.

- To begin, students read a manageable short selection – a few pages of text that have a single or only a few main points.
- Depending on the length of the selection, they find one or more “magnet” words, each of which they will write on a note card. Around each word they write words and/or phrases (no more than three words each) that tell something important about the main word.
- Finally, they turn each card over and use the words they’ve written to write one or several sentences that summarize what they’ve found. Once they’ve had practice with the technique, they can use their individual summaries to write a summary of the entire selection.

For example, a paragraph might read:

Pyramids were huge tombs built over 5,000 years ago. Egyptians built pyramids because they believed that the pharaoh needed a place to start his journey to the afterlife. Only if he had what he needed after he died could he join the gods and help them continue to protect Egypt. The pharaoh’s job in the afterlife, as in his life on earth, was especially to control the flooding of the Nile River. So the pyramid contained wall paintings of food and servants that they believed would come alive in the afterlife, as well as jewels and clothes for the pharaoh to wear.

The “magnet” word here is “pyramid.” Words and phrases students might write around it would be: pharaoh, big tomb, protect Egypt, control floods, paintings of servants & food, jewels, clothes, god in afterlife, 5,000 years old. Working from these notes (and not looking at the text itself), the student might write:

5,000 years ago pyramids were pharaohs’ tombs so each could become a god in the afterlife and control the Nile’s flood. Food and servants were painted on the walls and jewels were put there for the afterlife.

Writing Magnet Summaries

1. Read the text selection carefully, asking yourself: What is this part telling me? What is this part about?
2. Write a magnet word in the center of the card.
3. Jot important related terms around the magnet word.
4. Do the same for the next section – a paragraph or series of paragraphs.
5. Write a clear one-to-three sentence summary of the information on the back of the index card.
6. Read over the cards, revising them if needed.
7. Write a short summary of the main points of all the magnet cards.

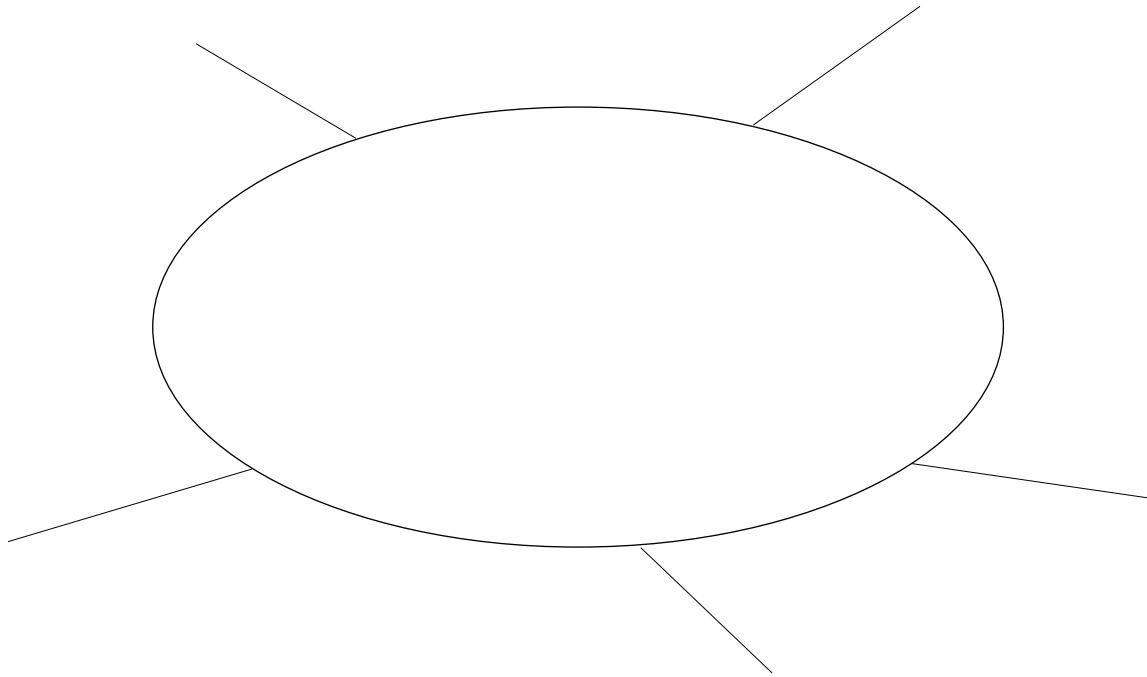
Introductory Version

Magnet Summaries for Informational Text: Five Steps!

1. **Read the text once.** Think: **what is this all about?** (what's the magnet or big/controlling idea?)
2. **Read it again, noting the key details** that are drawn to the big idea. Jot down the magnet/big or controlling idea (a sentence) and key details on the Magnet Summary Map.
3. **Number the details** in the order that makes most sense.
4. **Write your summary** including the title and author, controlling idea sentence, key details, (using transition words to help it flow smoothly) and a comment or reflection.
5. **Read the summary over** to see if it makes sense; revise as needed. Use the checklist to check your summary and make further changes if needed.

| Could be a magnet/big idea (controlling idea) | Probably NOT |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tears can actually make us feel better, for a number of reasons.• The war on terrorism has had a major impact on several aspects of our society.• One-celled organisms may be small but they are not simple.••• | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When we cry, endorphins are absorbed into the nasal cavity.• The war against terrorism has had an influence on airports, as many airline travelers can tell because of long waits in line.• The size of one celled organisms might range from ___ to ____.••• |

Magnet Summary Map



| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Transition words (sample) several kinds types in addition still another similarly but however | to begin with initially following first soon next eventually finally yet | however besides in conclusion therefore resulted for example moreover on the whole for instance |
|--|--|---|

Inquiry Charts

Goal: To help students synthesize information from a variety of sources with a graphic organizer.

Students can use Inquiry Charts to collect information from a variety of sources with the goal of synthesizing the information. The chart enables students to break a broad Focus Question into a series of subquestions, each of which can be researched from several sources. Students can compare and contrast the findings and arrive at a statement that synthesizes (including contradictions) statements from the sources.

The following example shows how the Focus Question has been subdivided, with space being allocated for information from each source, and then for the synthesizing statement.

Sample Focus/Essential Question: What is the influence of voodoo in Haiti?

| "Sub" Questions | Source #1: _____ Page(s) _____ | Source #2: _____ Page(s) _____ | Source #3: _____ Page(s) _____ | Synthesizing Statement |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| What is voodoo? | | | | |
| What are the positive influences of voodoo on the Haitian people? | | | | |
| What are some possible negative influences of voodoo on the Haitian people? | | | | |
| Other questions or information? | | | | |

Adapted from Buehl, *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*. ASCD.

Reading Like Writers

Goal: To provide students with a technique for evaluating the relationship between an author’s craft and intentions.

Ray (1999) suggests that students can better evaluate author’s craft by learning to read like writers.

Reading like a reader, she points out, we wonder what the author said and meant. To read like a writer, however, we wonder why the author wrote it as he or she did—what techniques and craft he or she used to convey the information or feelings.

To read like a writer, students begin by:

- Looking closely at how the text is written (like turning it inside out)
- Noticing the **structure of the text** (how the pieces fit together)
- Noticing the **author’s ways with words** (how language is used)

To accomplish this, students need to:

- **Notice something** about the craft of the text: something specific about **how** it is written, structure or ways with words, not just general describing. For example:
 - a. Are the sentences generally long or short?
 - b. Does the author use a lot of big words, or short, familiar ones?
 - c. Is there a lot of imagery? Technical language?
 - d. Does the author use dialog? Description?
- **Talk about it:** Make a theory about why the author did what he or she did.
 - e. Does the author want to make the reader think, see, wonder, etc?
 - f. Does the author want the reader to feel happy, sad, or does the author not care about feelings?
 - g. How does the craft accomplish what the author wanted to do?
- **Give the craft a name** such as “Honest Descriptiveness” or “Folksy Conversation” (sometimes it’s helpful to think of other texts where the author’s craft resembles this one).

Students may need help with this, since “craft” can be subtle and hard to articulate.

To teach the process:

1. Choose two brief pieces of text that are dramatically different in style. Ask students to use the “Noticing Author’s Craft” chart to organize their thinking.
2. Further extensions of this approach involve having students think about other places (text sources) where they have seen the same kind of author’s craft used, and also having them “envision” how – and where – they might use the same kind of crafting technique in their own writing.

Noticing Author's Craft

Text: _____

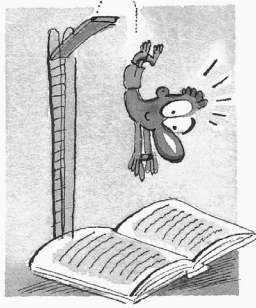
Author _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

| What is the author doing? (quote actual example from text, and page numbers) | Why is the author doing it? | What can I call this crafting technique? |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| | | |
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Adapted by Sue Biggam, Vermont Reads Institute.



REREAD AND ADJUST

In response to the differing demands of text, strategic readers modify the pace and rhythm with which they read, and take notes to clarify their understanding. As necessary, they also re-read, read aloud, and/or underline the text, etc.

Strategy-at-a-Glance

Notes

What's Involved? What's the Strategy Really About?

This is a simple strategy that's often underused because students rush to "do the reading," even if they don't understand. Supporting this strategy entails emphasizing **comprehension over coverage**.

- Sometimes all it takes is a second look, but often slowing down or rereading is merely the first step, with the second step being the intentional application of another strategy such as **Ask Questions** or **Determine Important Ideas**, etc.
- Metacognition is essential here. Readers first have to notice they aren't understanding; then, they have to start over, perhaps more slowly; then they have to determine what else they need to do to understand – they have to pay attention to their thinking at every step of adjusting their approach.
- Closely related strategies: **Ask Questions**, and **Analyze Text Structure**.

What's Essential to Teaching and Supporting this Strategy?

- Teaching it with short selections to exemplify the impact of rereading, rather than asking students to slog through a lot of text;
- Regularly modeling the impact of rereading, reading aloud, and reading more slowly as comprehension tools;
- Comparing easy reading selections that do not require rereading with difficult selections;
- When asking students to reread or slow down the pace of their reading, give them a question or focus area on which to concentrate;
- Emphasizing this strategy may require some redefinition of what you're doing, and of what the students expect you and themselves to do. Asking students to reread or read more slowly goes against the impetus to cover the material and move on through the curriculum.

Notes

Resources Included:

Pruning and Chunking: Identifying the Essential Elements of Sentences – This activity helps students find the literal meaning of confusing text.

Reciprocal Teaching – This provides scaffolding for students (from peers and/or the teacher) and helps students clarify as they read text. (Note: It also provides scaffolding for predicting, summarizing and asking questions .)

SCAN & RUN – This mnemonic device gives students a way to think about all the things they might do as they read complicated text.

I – An Overview of the Strategy

This strategy might be considered among the most straightforward of the nine. No higher order thinking or sophisticated understanding of the nature of text is required. The reader simply takes note of his or her lack of comprehension, stops reading, and goes back a bit, probably reading at a slower pace than the first time. It can be an almost automatic response to confusing text.

Surveys conducted among Vermont students indicate that rereading is the most widely used comprehension strategy in a wide variety of schools at the full range of grade levels. But using the “adjusting” part of the strategy effectively is another story. Many teachers echo the sentiments of Chris Tovani, who writes in **I Read It, But I Don’t Get It** (2000):

Everyone in my classes seems to know how to re-read. However, several admit they seldom do it, because they are slow readers and it would take too long. Others say they are lucky to get through an assignment once, let alone read something again (50).

So what’s going on here? It’s a simple but powerful strategy that anybody can use. But many students just don’t get around to using it, or use it in a perfunctory manner. Is there a relationship between this reluctance and the second-grade teacher who suggests that she read **Owl Moon** – which the students have loved – again, and hears a chorus of “We already did that book!”?

Getting Them To Reread

• A high school math teacher decided to help her students learn from the text itself, rather than rely on her to explain what the text had already explained. In other words, she decided to use her text as something more than an expensive collection of homework problems. To accomplish this, she laid all the appropriate foundations: She systematically studied the way her text presented information; she taught her students how the text worked; she modeled and practiced using the text as the first source of information by integrating discussions of the text presentation into math lessons.

Then she assigned a subchapter for her students to read on their own. The uproar was deafening. “We can’t do this! It’s too hard! How do you do this problem, anyway!”

She was tempted to give up, and just answer the students’ questions, leading them through the problems, explaining the tricky parts, doing all the things the

textbook had already done quite well. Instead, she asked the students to find the place in the text that they didn't understand. Then she asked them to reread it. Slowly. Then she told them to ask specific questions about specific parts they didn't understand. Most of the time, they had no questions.

The effective use of this strategy has less to do with providing students with tools and tactics than it does with using text in such a way that they feel accountable for understanding what they've read – that they know "I read it, but I don't get it" is not an acceptable response to a reading assignment.

Sometimes simply rereading or reading more slowly is enough. When the reader has dozed off for a paragraph or two, there's nothing to do but start over, paying attention this time. When the text gets dense, just slowing down – and perhaps even saying the complicated parts out loud – may suffice.

Rereading – It's just the First Step

When a comprehension problem stems from skipping or misreading a word, taking another look can work wonders. But comprehension difficulties are often more complicated than this.

In fact, it may be that confused students don't reread because they don't understand that rereading entails more than simply running one's eyes over the words a second time.

Sometimes rereading and adjusting one's approach to the text are merely the first steps in the implementation of other strategies. The decision to reread may come from the recognition, for example, that:

- the reader has missed the Main Idea of the selection,
- or that he or she needs to Ask Questions about the material to better understand it,
- or that this information is going to be comprehensible only with the help of a graphic organizer.

But the decision to apply these other reading strategies usually comes only after the reader has recognized a comprehension problem, decided what might help alleviate it, then decided to give the reading – a sentence, a paragraph, or a full chapter – another go while implementing the strategy. This is why some discussions of reading strategies refer to "Reread and Adjust" as "Fix-up Strategies," since what the reader does is apply a specific strategy to solve a specific problem while rereading the material he or she did not fully understand.

II – Helping Students with the Strategy

An upper elementary teacher comments, "Rereading is one of the simplest strategies that is often left out while teaching reading. It increases fluency and comprehension. It's what we, as adults, use all the time. Yet we do not teach students to use it."

Notes

What appears to be a reluctance to reread or slow down may be related to other comprehension problems.

Carefully reading the material through the students' eyes may reveal prior knowledge that the text assumes students will bring to the reading, but which your students don't have. If this is the case, simply rereading or reading more slowly will not improve comprehension – it has merely identified the reading strategy that will help with comprehension. Rereading and altering the pace of the reading, thus, are not magic bullets. To use them effectively students must be familiar with and practiced in a variety of other strategies.

Asking students to reread short pieces of confusing text – fiction or nonfiction, picture books or biophysics – triggers metacognition (thinking about their own thinking), which is critical to improving comprehension. As students reread confusing text slowly, they can explicitly raise a number of questions for themselves:

- At what point do I become confused in the reading?
- Did I not understand simply because I didn't notice or read correctly some key words?
- Is the author expecting me to understand some words or facts that I'm not familiar with?
- Does it make a difference if I read out loud, code the text, or take notes on the material as I read?

In this way, "Reread and Adjust" leads to the "Ask Questions" strategy.

But the questions are less about the reading itself than they are about what's getting in the way of comprehension. Once readers determine the nature of their reading comprehension problems, they are ready to decide what other strategies they need to apply.

For example:

- If the problem is one of vocabulary or prior knowledge, the reader can decide whether to try to fill in those gaps or to ask the teacher about them.
- If the problem is missing the main point, readers can try looking for topic sentences.

The more metacognitive readers become about impediments to their comprehension, the better they become at dissecting reading problems and deciding which strategies might help them overcome each problem.

Rereading, of course, not only helps with basic comprehension.

It also helps readers find a deeper understanding, and pick up on points they may have missed the first time around, even if they got the gist of the selection.

- A fourth grade teacher often includes rereading as part of her read-aloud time. She reads a relatively short piece of fiction, then discusses it. When the discussion is finished, she reads the story again, this time asking students to jot what they noticed. Invariably, most students pick out new points, even after what seemed an exhaustive discussion of the first reading.

- A high school world history teacher whose class is arranged thematically rather than chronologically reassigns entire reading selections. Having read about the power of the pharaoh while they were studying the politics of the ancient world, his students read the same section when they study the role of religion in the ancient world.

In each case, the teachers engage students in discussions that compare what they remember from the first reading with what they highlighted in the second, thereby emphasizing the impact that rereading has on their basic understanding.

III – Tools for Strategy Instruction

Goal: To give students ways to find the heart of complicated sentences

Pruning and Chunking: Identifying the Essential Elements of Sentences

The following is adapted from Colchester High School's "How Do You Teach Reading? Three Strategies All Teachers Should Use" (2000).

Sometimes students have difficulty understanding because of the way sentences are formed. Simply rereading the sentence doesn't always help. What's needed is a strategy for determining the structure of the sentence. Enter "Prune and Chunk."

This tool can be used with all levels of text in all subject areas – you only need complex sentences that puzzle your students.

A tricky sentence is like an overgrown bush. To make sense of it, readers must "prune" by separating distracting modifying clauses and/or phrases from the main clause; then they must "chunk" together the leftover parts to determine what the modifying parts are doing.

An example: "Wearing a stupid shirt and smoking a stinky cigar, the man went fishing."

Many students get thrown off by sentences that begin this way.

Before they get to the main clause ("...the man went fishing"), they're worried that they're already confused. **These readers need to be taught to recognize that sometimes the main clause is at the end of the sentence, and the beginning of the sentence describes (modifies) the man.** The sentence might also begin, "The man, wearing a stupid shirt..." in which case the modifying clause is between the information about the man and what he did ("...went fishing.")

It gets more complicated: "After over 100 years of relative peace with their German compatriots and positions of favor in the eyes of the elite, Jews found themselves threatened by anti-semitic attacks beginning in the 1920s."

- If we “prune” this sentence, we find that the main clause, “Jews were threatened by anti-semitic attacks beginning in the 1920s,” comes at the end.
- If we chunk it to see what the rest of the sentence does, we find a subordinate clause that tells about their previous history, “After over 100 years of relative peace with their German compatriots and positions of favor in the eyes of the elite.” After making it through the subordinate clause many students get too confused to understand the main clause.

Give your students a few paragraphs that include several complicated sentences. Ask them to read the paragraphs, then ask them to reread the paragraphs, underlining sentences that are confusing.

1. Have them “prune” each confusing sentence down to its basics by writing who or what the sentence is about, and what is happening to that person or thing, or what that person or thing is doing.
2. Now have them “chunk” the rest of each sentence – what does the rest of the information tell them: When or where the event is taking place? More information about the subject of the sentence, or what happened to it? Et cetera.
3. Talk about how “pruning” and “chunking” helped them understand the reading.
4. Repeat regularly.

Reciprocal Teaching

Goal: Students use prompting questions to clarify/problem-solve parts they do not understand as they read complex text. They also use strategies of predicting, summarizing and asking questions.

This approach, developed by Anne Marie Palinscar, provides a vehicle for students to apply strategies during reading, while taking turns as the "teacher," leading the discussion after reading a segment of text. One of the chief reasons Reciprocal Teaching is effective is because it involves a good deal of scaffolding and support from peers. It may be used across subject areas.

Reciprocal Teaching steps:

1. Teacher reads or has group read a brief section of text.
2. Teacher selects "starter phrases" below to discuss what was read (usually just one phrase from each section). The teacher completes each starter phrase, and participants add their own responses and discuss further if warranted.
3. Teacher selects a student to act as "teacher."
4. That individual decides how far the group should read (silently).
5. That individual selects from the "starter phrases," just as the teacher did, adds his/her own response, and invites the group to respond and discuss.
6. That individual then selects another student to act as "teacher" for the next section of text.

Reciprocal Teaching "starter phrases" (useful as a bookmark!)

| |
|---|
| <p>1. Clarify (or monitor)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The part that is a little tricky for me is...• I'm not sure I got the part where...• I didn't understand...• The author lost me in the part where... |
| <p>2. Summarize</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This part was mostly about...• The important parts in what I just read are...• I think the two most important things in what we just read are... |
| <p>3. Ask A Question</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why...• How does this connect with...• In what ways...• What did the author mean by...• A question I have is.... |
| <p>4. Predict (with support from the text)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I expect that in the next part...• I suppose...• I imagine...• I predict... |

Bookmark by Sue Biggam. Reciprocal Teaching approach developed by Anne Marie Palinscar.

SCAN and RUN

Goal: This mnemonic device provides students with a way to remember many of the things they might do when they have trouble comprehending.

Salembier (1999) developed SCAN and RUN in collaboration with a team of middle-school teachers. It consists of seven cues that assist students in actively planning their comprehension before, during and after reading. As such, it is an excellent vehicle for helping readers choose how to "adjust" their approach to reading difficult text.

What does SCAN and RUN stand for?

- **S=Survey** the title, headings, and subheadings of each reading
- **C=Capture** the captions and visual cues of the reading
- **A=Attack** boldface words means taking note of words highlighted by the author/editor
- **N=Note** and read the chapter questions
- **R=Read** and adjust speed depending on the level of difficulty
- **U=Use** word identification skills such as sounding words out, looking for context cues, etc.
- **N=Notice** and check parts you don't understand.

Using this tool enables students to adjust their approach to the text as they go along.

The tool draws from a wide array of strategies, and relies on constant self-monitoring to determine steps to improve comprehension of specific text.

The tool is best taught by:

1. Introducing and modeling the strategy, and having students memorize the meanings;
2. Previewing reading using SCAN cues;
3. Reading the text selection using the RUN cues;
4. Answering questions and discussing text materials after the reading.