FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month

TEXT FEATURES
August/September 2007

(Developed by Smith, L. & Zygouris-Coe, V., 2007)

Rationale:

Fresh pencils, new faces, and smiling teachers. The first weeks of a new school year can be full of wonderment and hard work for both teachers and students. Those weeks are often spent with teachers getting to know students, students getting to know one another, and everyone getting to know the roles they will assume in the classroom.

An important goal of those early weeks is often geared on creating a classroom community. Games, surveys, and inventories are utilized as a way for students to get to know each other on more personal levels in order for them to be comfortable in their surroundings. As students learn things about each other, and even possibly about themselves, the teacher should also provide students a way to get acquainted with something they will hopefully be spending a bit of time with over the school year: the class textbook.

Teachers often find that they are given a textbook for their course that they may not have been their first, second, or even twenty-fifth choice. Exemplary teachers consider the resources and materials they use with their students and identify text that could be described as "inconsiderate text". Inconsiderate text "makes unwarranted assumptions about the reader's background knowledge, often has an overload of unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts, and contains ideas that are not fully explained" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 234). The organization and features of text may be problematic for some students to understand.

Teachers should consider the following when using a textbook in their classroom, along with the needs of the students, in order to anticipate and troubleshoot any major issues (Harvey & Goodvis, 2007, p. 234):

- Quality and accuracy of information
- Clarity of writing and explanations
- Amount of accessibility of the information
- Logical organization on the page and chapters
- Reasonable use of features, fonts, and call-outs
- Heading, subheadings, and other signposts

Text features and elements support students' abilities to navigate through the textbook and increases their understanding of how the concepts presented are related to the structure of the text. This is especially important in content areas as informational text is often exclusively used. By offering students time and opportunity to discover and use the features their textbooks, they will ultimately increase their ability to become active readers.

How to Use the Strategy:

Text and textbooks seem to be everywhere during those first weeks of school. As books are assigned, some students briefly take a look at the cover and flip through the pages. Some students may never open the book at all. It is astonishing that an unknown textbook could offer both excitement and anxiety depending on the student opening the book. Helping all students get the most out of their textbook often relies on the teacher making the features of the text and textbook evident and explicit.

Below is a detailed description of how to use specific text or textbook features, along with the objectives of those features. For the purpose of this strategy description, text features for non-fiction or informational text will include:

- table of contents
- headings and subheadings

- captions
- photos and illustrations
- diagrams
- charts and graphs
- bold and italicized text
- glossary
- index
- information boxes

Table of Contents

Consider the table of contents as a large outline that will enable your students to not only know where they are within the text, but also offer them a roadmap to where they are headed. Often in a table of contents, the publisher has included headings and subheadings that will further develop the outline into a ready-made study guide.

Review this area in detail with your students, making a copy of the contents that can be adapted for note taking or used as a study guide. Have students take notes on the pages numbers, titles and parts of chapters, and any other details or summaries included.

Headings and Subheadings

Headings and subheadings are extremely useful for identifying the main topic for a section of text. Often read and bypassed for the text underneath, headings offer students a glimpse about what they are going to be reading about and how they should prepare their own schema to be active thinkers as they read the text.

Publishers often use headings as a way to break down big ideas into smaller, more intricate details. The following graphic has been adapted from Robb, Klemp, and Schwartz's inverted triangle (2002):

Unit Heading

Chapter Heading

Topic Heading

Topic Subheadings

Park heading
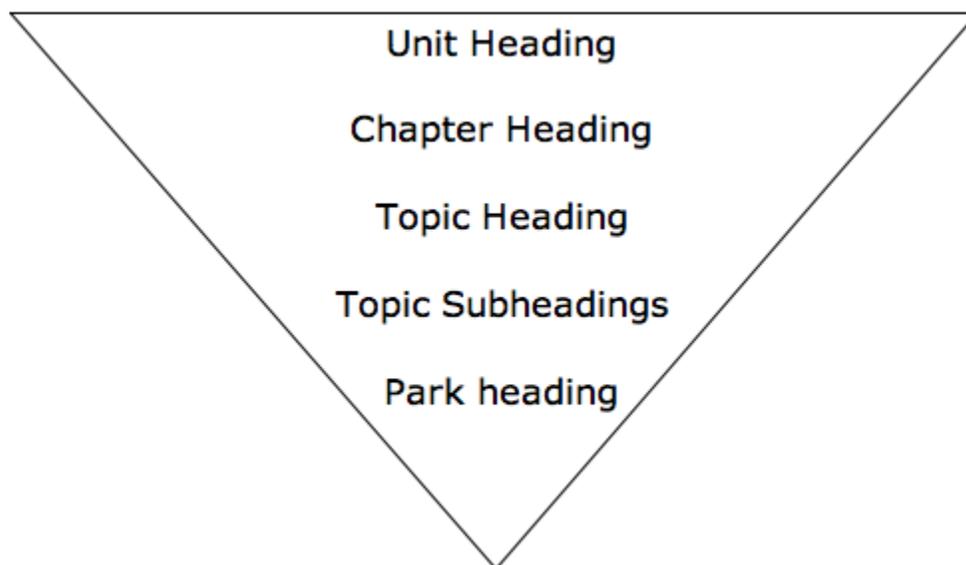
One way to use headings is to turn them into questions that need to be answered. By doing this, the teacher is modeling a technique that provides students a purpose for reading the selection.

Example Heading: The Rights, Duties, and Responsibilities of a Citizen

Example Question (made from heading): What are the rights, duties, and responsibilities of a citizen?

Photos and Illustrations

As the old saying goes, "a picture IS worth a thousand words". As a teacher it is important to help students use the visuals supplied in their text as a way to assist them with learning and understanding the content. Photos and illustrations often are supplied as more than just a break in the text. These features are specifically placed in textbooks to help emphasize an important point. Reviewing just the pictures in a chapter can give a good impression about what the content will contain (Robb, Klemp, and Schwartz, 2002). In fact, using visuals to assist your students will enhance their **visual literacy** skills and enable them to use and understand visual forms of information.

Teachers can assist their students with gaining insight from the photos and illustrations in text by allowing them time to preview the chapters in advance, and while looking only at the visuals, write a summary about what they think the chapter will be about. The teacher may want to use a slide show of the photos and illustrations, so students do not have access to the text during this activity.

Diagrams, Charts, and Graphs

Along with illustrations and photos, publishers often use diagrams, charts, and graphs to assist us with understanding the content of the material. As with other visuals, helping students to take the time to evaluate these features' meanings will only enhance their understanding of the text.

Graphs and charts often depict things that are easier to understand in symbolic format. These are often best used as a resource instead of trying to memorize every fact within them. When teaching how to use this type of visual, remember to note that many charts offer not only information, but also comparisons and processes between and among important concepts (Robb, Klemp, and Schwartz, 2002) .

Captions

The word(s) located underneath or beside a visual is called a caption. These are very useful for helping students get the gist of the nature of the photo and the significance it has for the material being covered.

One activity that can enhance students' understanding of the importance of captions is to give students a few options and have them select the best caption for a photo. Then, afterward, they can compare their choice to the actual caption used in the text. Another activity would be to have students write captions for the pictures and explain why they wrote what they did.

Bold and Italicized Text

Bolded or italicized words are a signal that the word is important and that we should pay special attention to it. Publishers use bold texts to highlight specific terms, names, or events that should be remembered. Gone are the days for when writing a sentence or definition from the glossary would be considered a good choice for developing an understanding of bolded and highlighted words. Teachers best assist students with learning new words when helping them make personal connections and allowing them to note the value of a word's importance to them before a reading. You might want to try the following vocabulary activity as a preview of the words found in bold text.

> **Vocab Alert! is a vocabulary strategy designed to prepare students for important terms prior to reading a selection. Vocab Alert! serves as a form of self-assessment for students and helps them set purposes for their reading.**
>
> **Procedure:**
>
> **The teacher selects the most important terms from the reading, being careful to limit them to a manageable number (5-9), and prepares a Vocab Alert! form.**
>
> **The teacher writes Vocab Alert! on the board and the students assess their**

familiarity with each term using the form.Then the teacher introduces the significance of the terms on the form within the context of the current topic and prepares the students for the reading selection.

As the students read the selection, they pay special attention to the Vocab Alert! terms and record information about them on the form.

Afterwards, using their Vocab Alert! the teacher engages the class in discussion to further clarify and develop their understanding of the terms.

Here is an example of Vocab Alert!

1_____2_____3_____4_____5

1: I know

3: I think I have seen or heard before

5: Don't Know

Vocab Alert! was adapted from *A Handbook of Content Literacy Strategies: 75 Practical Reading and Writing Ideas* (2000) by Elaine Stephens & Jean Brown.

Glossary and Index

These two areas are often the most used by students. They are helpful in giving students a basic understanding of a specialist concept or vocabulary word (glossary) or assisting them with finding important information in the form of a term, person, idea, or place (index).

Making sure students are familiar with these two areas will benefit your students as they read and prepare for projects and assessments.

The Textbook Inventory

No matter what grade level or subject, one way to help your students get to know their texts is to provide them time to complete a textbook inventory. Created by you, a textbook inventory can focus on the areas of the text you specifically want to make sure your students have a good grasp on. This can be used as a classroom activity or assessment.

Sample Textbook Inventory

Textbook Inventory

Assessment:

As listed above, the textbook inventory can be used as either a classroom activity, or a classroom assessment. For those struggling, you may want to use them as monitoring devices.

As with other strategies, assessment regarding the use of text features can often be seen and gauged over time. Students should not be given a textbook inventory and then never hear of the features of the text until the following year when they get a new text. Following-up and using text features during modeling, think alouds, and as reminders of where to help students find information is an activity that should be continued throughout the school year.

Resources:

Reading Instructional Handbook: Features of Text
http://smasd.k12.pa.us/pssa/html/Reading/rihand8.htm
Discussion on the types of text features with examples are provided.

Text Features Unit: Comprehending Interdisciplinary Text
http://www.ncuscr.org/Fulbright/Reff.pdf
The purpose of this extensive PDF document is to promote adolescent literacy through comprehension, vocabulary and fluency.

5 Keys to Reading Nonfiction
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0STR/is_5_113/ai_112088678
Five key strategies can be emphasized during classroom instruction: text features, text structure, background knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension.

How To Read A Textbook
http://www.dvc.edu/english/Learning_Resources/how_to_read_textbook.htm
People say there is one way to read a textbook to really understand it...reading it through four or five times. Is there a better way? Look here to find some useful ideas.

6th Grade English Text Features Unit: Comprehending Interdisciplinary Text
http://www.ncuscr.org/Fulbright/Reff.pdf
This lesson plan was designed to help students understand text features in order to promote adolescent literacy.

References:

Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2000). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension to enhance understanding*. 2nd Ed. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Robb, L., Klemp, R., & Schwartz, W. (2002). *Reader's handbook: A student guide for reading and learning.* Wilmington, MA: Great Source.

Stephens, E. & Brown, J. (2000). *A handbook of content literacy strategies: 75 practical reading and writing ideas*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.

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