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Reading Strategies for Informational Texts

A complex society is dependent every hour of every day upon the capacity of its people at every level to read and write, to make difficult judgments, and to act in the light of extensive information.

—John W. Gardner (1995, p. 53)

OVERVIEW

Several key advances are identified by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for instruction in Grades 6–12, one of which is for students to read more complex texts. Apart from learning required subject-area content, the CCSS outline a set of skills for all students to be able to think more deeply about what they read, critically analyze information from different media, evaluate the evidence and reasoning behind the work of various authors, and present detailed arguments as well as support their opinions concerning diverse issues. To foster these skills, there must be a shift from direct teaching about content to students’ discovering and analyzing content through various reading and learning tasks. For this reason, students will need to spend more time engaged in close reading of texts with increasing complexity as well as answering text-dependent questions and less time listening to the teacher lecture, copying notes, and completing worksheets.

WHY TEACHING DIVERSE ADOLESCENT LEARNERS READING STRATEGIES PROMOTES COMPREHENSION OF INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

Reading and understanding grade-level informational texts is not surprisingly a challenge for many academically and linguistically diverse learners. However, not only will diverse learners find these literacy tasks challenging, but all students will be confronted with reading more complex texts that are at times above their individual reading or comprehension ability. For this reason, explicit strategy instruction will support the learning of most students to develop skills for citing textual evidence, determining central ideas, understanding subject-specific vocabulary, identifying the organization of text structure, and evaluating as well as supporting specific claims about the text.

Some frameworks for teaching diverse students focus on making lessons accessible and comprehensible (Crawford & Krashen, 2007), but they rarely emphasize direct reading instruction at the secondary level. Additionally, instruction geared for diverse learners often does not expose them to grade-level texts, let alone above-grade-level reading material. However, the CCSS require a shift in thinking for the instruction of all students, which includes academically and linguistically different youngsters. Therefore, to enhance the ability of those who are struggling to read grade-level texts, targeted literacy and explicit strategy instruction should be part of the overall instruction in content-area classes.

Competent readers apply various comprehension strategies routinely and automatically; however, the same strategies must be explicitly taught—through modeling, guided practice, and collaborative peer work—to those who are reading below grade level in standard American English. For this reason, *all* teachers must develop and embed general reading strategies into content lessons and apply techniques to scaffold learning in order to enhance the reading ability of diverse learners. Some reading strategies include carefully selecting and presenting a reduced amount of rigorous text for students to closely read, while teaching academic vocabulary explicitly and consistently (Feldman & Kinsella, 2005), and guiding students understanding through the shared reading of text. By developing improved reading skills, diverse students will be better able reach the goals identified by the CCSS, such as to fully analyze and interpret text meaning, to learn from multiple text sources, and to determine the author’s point of view. Furthermore, explicit strategy instruction can help many struggling learners become independent,

confident readers as well as enhance their overall understanding and use of academic language.

CORE INFORMATIONAL READING STRATEGIES

The strategies contained in this chapter follow the expectations of the ten College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCRAS) for Reading with particular attention to the reading strand for informational texts and the Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. They are framed by the CCRAS strand-specific sets of *Key Ideas and Details*, *Craft and Structure*, *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*, and *Range of Reading and Text Complexity*. From each of the ten CCRAS, we derived and aligned a series of related *Anchor Performances*—skill sets that all students need to develop—and suggest strategies to help diverse students build these skills in order to meet the standards. Some strategies may be more appropriate than others depending on the grade-level or language facility of the students. To that end, we make suggestions on how to adapt strategies to meet the needs of diverse individual learners.

Box 4.1 College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

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5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

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Key Ideas and Details

Anchor Performance 1: Citing Textual Evidence and Making Logical Inferences

Citing textual evidence is an essential skill for students to develop so that they are best able to support their understandings with specific information directly from the text. Furthermore, the ability to make inferences and to draw conclusions from various pieces of information is an additional expectation for secondary students; they must be able to aptly go beyond the literal meaning of the printed words and reveal suggested meanings or make judgments.

Considering the grade-level Reading Standards for Informational Texts, Grade 6 students are generally expected to cite textual evidence to support text analysis as well as inferences; however, Grade 7 students are asked to identify several pieces of evidence from the text to defend a particular conclusion. By Grade 8, students must be able to discern between strong and weak textual evidence, and by Grades 9–10, students should

able to cite both strong and thorough evidence. Finally, in conjunction with the skills specified in the previous grade levels, students in Grades 11–12 must be able to determine what matters the text leaves uncertain.

With regard to the Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies for this standard, students in Grades 6–8 are expected to cite both primary and secondary sources, whereas students in Grades 9–10 must also focus on the date and origin of information. Those students in Grades 11–12 must additionally link their understandings of text details as they relate to the text as a whole.

Considering the Reading Standards for Literacy in Science and Technical Subjects, the focus in Grades 6–8 is on citing evidence in science and technical texts. Grade 9–10 students are expected to focus on the scientific and technical details of explanations and descriptions, and students in Grades 11–12 must additionally attend to pertinent scientific and technical distinctions made by the author as well as any inconsistencies in the text.

Essential Strategies to Support Anchor Performance 1: Organize Textual Evidence and Activate Inferential Thinking

The ability to make inferences is a powerful skill that supports students' overall understanding of text—it is “the bedrock of reading” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 23). According to Keene and Zimmermann (2007), “Proficient readers use their prior knowledge (schema) and textual information to draw conclusions, make critical judgments, and form unique interpretations from text” (p. 23). Teachers not only need to provide students with opportunities to tap into their prior knowledge to connect what they already know with the new information, but they must also explicitly teach students how to engage in inferential thinking. In some cases, students who are linguistically or culturally diverse may not have prior knowledge of a particular subject and benefit from frontloaded information to build their background knowledge on the topic (Marzano, 2004).

To meet this anchor performance, students also must be able to organize pertinent text information—both key ideas and details—from which inferences may be drawn. Not only do students need to distinguish between main ideas and supporting details, they must also determine where the evidence lies and critically interpret, evaluate, and draw conclusions from the information in the text. Here, we identify some approaches to support students' inferential thinking and strategies to assist students with organizing text information.

Paired Reading. With this strategy, students work in pairs to analyze text. They not only discover and differentiate key ideas and details, but they are able to support each other’s overall understanding of the text. The steps for paired reading are as follows:

1. Each student reads silently a selected, short piece of text. It may be a sentence, a paragraph, or a page depending on the level of text complexity and the readiness of the students.
2. One student identifies the main idea by summarizing the reading in his or her own words. The other student must agree or disagree and state why.
3. Both students must come to a consensus about the main idea of the text.
4. Next, each student takes a turn to identify text details that support the main idea.
5. Students read the next selection silently. They switch their previous roles and repeat the above steps.
6. Students can keep track of main ideas and details using *Two-Column Notes*.

Text Coding. Harvey and Daniels (2009) suggested active reading strategies including text coding or text monitoring (see Box 4.2). As students read short selections appropriately assigned to them for independent reading, they use the following notations on the margins or sticky notes. Introduce text coding through modeled reading and text monitoring one or two codes at a time, gradually building up to all eight codes.

Box 4.2 Text Codes

- ✓ = I know this
- X = This is not what I expected
- * = This is important
- ? = I have a question about this
- ?? = I am really confused
- ! = This surprises me
- L = I have learned something new here
- RR = I have to reread this section

Two-Column Notes. The purpose of this strategy is for students to identify and record main ideas and corresponding details of a selected text. Students use *Two-Column Notes* while reading or listening to a text being read. After introducing, modeling, and practicing the use of this tool, provide ongoing opportunities for students to complete two-column notes in order to strengthen their ability to organize text information that can be the basis for further text analysis such as identifying pieces of data to support a conclusion or evaluating if evidence is substantial enough to support an author’s claims. Figure 4.1 is an example of a two-column note organizer based on the Lincoln’s historical *Gettysburg Address*.

Two-Column Notes may be differentiated by placing partial information in one or both columns to help linguistically and academically diverse learners better understand and organize the main ideas and details of challenging texts.

Figure 4.1 Two-Column Notes

Two-Column Notes	
Title: <i>The Gettysburg Address</i>	
Main Ideas	Details
Our founding fathers created the United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceived in liberty • Dedicated to all men being created equal
Now the United States is in a civil war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing whether the nation as it was conceived can remain together (can endure)
We have come to dedicate the battlefield at Gettysburg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The field is dedicated to those who have died in the war • It is a final resting place • It is fitting and proper to do so

Where’s the Evidence? Students work alone, in pairs, or in teams to discern the best reason(s) why an event has taken place. The topics and main points of the event are either uncovered through the reading of the text or—to differentiate for some learners—are stated before the text is read. Students then must read or reread the text to gather additional evidence and draw their own conclusions. An example of this strategy is in Figure 4.2.