Strategies to improve nonfiction reading

BY KATIE COPPENS

The Common Core State Standards recommend that 55% of eighth graders’ reading and 70% of 12th graders’ reading be nonfiction (NGAC and CCSSO 2010). To help achieve this goal, science is taking on a greater role in helping students learn strategies for reading nonfiction text. In the process, students are becoming more skilled in their ability to understand the text and the scientific content within it. Teaching nonfiction reading strategies helps students get more information out of a text and supports them in gaining skills that they will benefit from throughout the school year and beyond.

To aid in the reading of nonfiction, I start the year by teaching my students how to observe various science-themed books’ text structure, such as description, cause and effect, compare and contrast, problem and solution, and sequence (Coppens 2019). The next step is to teach students strategies to take in, understand, and remember the information they are reading. According to Nonie Lesaux, a professor of education, the guiding questions when reading nonfiction text should be, “Do I know why I’m reading this? Do I know what information I’m looking for?” (Robertson 2008, p. 1).

In my sixth-grade science classroom, my students learn the importance of being a prepared, active reader. A prepared reader first surveys the text, looks at headings and various text features, and creates questions in his or her mind about what he or she will be reading. Much like stretching before an athletic event or warming up before playing an instrument, this process gets your mind ready for taking in new information. Previewing a textbook chapter can take anywhere from one to three minutes. This time is well spent because it is gained back when students better comprehend what they are reading. Each time students use this approach, it also gets easier for them.

All students, particularly Eng-
lish language learners (ELLs), benefit from previewing key vocabulary before reading the text. Hansen explains the importance of images for both ELLs and visual learners (2003). She recommends having posters of essential vocabulary on display in the classroom. The most beneficial strategy I have found in previewing essential vocabulary is through videos. When we preview the text, it often has photographs of key vocabulary, but I find previewing it with video clips resonates with students and improves their comprehension. For example, when reading a chapter of our textbook on intrusive and extrusive igneous rocks, after surveying the text and seeing those terms, I show the first 20 seconds of a clip on YouTube called “Exploring Magma: Curiosity: Volcano Time Bomb” (The Discovery Channel 2012). The clip shows a digitally created model of magma and a magma chamber (Figure 1). This video gives my students a visual reference of magma, which helps in their reading of the chapter.

**FIGURE 2**: Strategies for reading nonfiction text

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<th><strong>High 5!</strong></th>
<th><strong>THIEVES</strong></th>
<th><strong>SQ3R</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Activating background knowledge:</strong> Teachers help students connect to the material before they begin reading to help prepare them for taking in new information.</td>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> After reading the title, students make predictions about the text and reflect on what they already know about this topic. <strong>Headings:</strong> Students scan the headings to determine what information will be gathered. Headings should be turned into questions to guide the reading. <strong>Introduction:</strong> Often nonfiction text will have an opening paragraph that introduces the reader to the topic or gives an overview of a section. <strong>Every first sentence in a paragraph:</strong> A method of reading the first sentence of each paragraph to give a preview and overview of the chapter. <strong>Visuals and vocabulary:</strong> Previewing any of the photographs, maps, charts, graphs, or diagrams before reading and familiarizing oneself with any key vocabulary and definitions. <strong>End-of-chapter questions:</strong> If there are questions at the end of a chapter, students should read them first to help prepare them for what the essential information is in the chapter. <strong>Summary:</strong> Prioritizing information and thinking about what is understood and retained from the text.</td>
<td><strong>Survey:</strong> Before reading, students do a quick scan of the text structure for meaning to gather information that will help them read. <strong>Question:</strong> Taking headings and turning them into questions. <strong>Read:</strong> While reading, students answer the questions that they created; in the process of reading, questions created are revised or added to. Answering questions helps students become aware of their understanding. <strong>Recite:</strong> After reading a section, students recite the essential information in their own words. <strong>Review:</strong> After reading an entire chapter, students review their answers to see whether they understand the answers to all of the questions that they created.</td>
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After previewing the text, I model aloud what I’m thinking as we read, including how learning new information can lead to more questions and how connections are often made in my mind to previous learning or life experiences. This is modeling how to be an active, engaged reader. We then discuss the information and the answers to our original questions that we came up with when we surveyed the text, as well as other questions or connections that came up as we read.

There are many step-by-step strategies that involve a similar approach to reading and analyzing nonfiction text (see Figure 2):

- **SQ3R:** One of the most widely used methods to help students understand nonfiction writing is SQ3R, which stands for survey, question, read, recite, and review (Robinson 1961).

- **High 5!:** The High 5! method focuses on the following five comprehension strategies: activating background knowledge, questioning, analyzing text structure, creating mental images, and summarizing (Dymock and Nicholson 2010).

- **THIEVES:** The acronym THIEVES stands for title, headings, introduction, every first sentence in a paragraph, visuals and vocabulary, end-of-chapter questions, and summary (Manz 2002).

There is much overlap in these strategies, such as surveying the text structure and features, previewing vocabulary, asking questions and visualizing while reading, and summarizing what was learned. The most important thing that they all have in common, however, is modeling for students the importance of approaching their text with a purposeful method (Figure 2).

By modeling and practicing these skills, you can help your students build habits in how they approach nonfiction reading. Early in the year, my class and I go through the nonfiction reading strategies together, with an emphasis on being flexible because every text is set up differently. Then, to help students’ independence, I provide a handout of the steps for being a prepared and active reader (Figure 3). Students go through this checklist with their neighbor and discuss the answers. I pair ELL students with someone who is confident in the steps and works well with others. By the end of the year, the use of the checklist and working with a partner become optional. Students quickly understand how to survey the text and turn headings into questions. However, the role I continue to have throughout the year in the pre-reading process is preteaching essential vocabulary. I find this helps students’ comprehension and cuts down on any potential misunderstandings they may have.

Teaching nonfiction reading strategies helps students get more information out of the text and supports them in gaining skills that will benefit them throughout the school year and beyond. Learning how to read nonfiction
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is a journey that is best taken in steps. The first step is observing and understanding an author’s approach to text structure, then gathering information using one of the methods above or a combination of those methods, followed by learning how to take notes. In my classroom, note-taking strategies come later in the year, after my students have demonstrated both confidence and consistency in strategies for reading various types of nonfiction text.

REFERENCES


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