

Purposeful Reading at the Middle Level

Students often ask why they must read a particular assignment. After much protest, a teacher may reply: “You need to read it because it’s part of the curriculum. You’ll be tested on it next Friday, so I suggest you get started.” This common exchange illustrates the way content-area reading assignments are often introduced to middle-level students. All too often, these students have no more understanding of why they’ve been asked to read a text than that they will eventually be tested on the material. This lack of focus disadvantages readers because they are essentially being asked to decide what information in the text is important without knowing the answer to the question: “Important for what?”

When readers don’t know their purpose for reading, they lack the fundamental information needed in order to make decisions about how to approach the text and how to interpret information. This makes the already challenging task of navigating content-area texts more difficult, particularly for middle school readers who are relatively new to “reading to learn” from informational texts (Chall, 1996).

Specifying a Purpose

Countless experts advocate the systematic practice of teaching middle school students reading strategies that will help them achieve the following reading goals:

- Distinguishing important information from less important information;
- Approaching texts strategically; and
- Monitoring efforts to comprehend (Irvin, Buehl, & Radcliffe, 2007; Brozo & Simpson, 2003).

It is important to teach these and other reading comprehension strategies; but students will not be able to use them effectively if they do not know why they are being asked to read a text assignment in the first place. One of the most notable differences between reading texts that readers choose



“There is no such thing as inherently important information in a text.”

themselves (which usually happens outside of school) and those that others ask them to read (which usually happens in the classroom) is the reader’s clarity regarding the purpose for reading.

When readers make a decision on their own about what text to read—whether that text is an informational text, a story, a map, or a cereal box label—they know why they’ve chosen to read it and allow that purpose to guide how and how much of the text to read. However, when a teacher decides for a reader what to read, the ultimate purpose or goal for the reading is not always clear to the student; he or she cannot decide what to focus on and what should be gained from reading the text.

Reading Texts for Different Purposes

One reader might approach a text about frontier life in the late 19th century with a focus on comparing and contrasting his or her life with the lives of the people described in the text. Or the reader may be reading to learn more about why America’s frontier moved steadily westward, while another reader may be interested in the author’s style of writing instead of the content of the text. If a student has chosen to read this text on his or her own, the student would know for which of these (or many other) reasons he or she was reading the text. However, if a teacher assigns this text to students, it is up to the

teacher to inform them of the purpose for reading. This is often as simple as making an announcement to students or going over the details of an assignment, explaining to them how they will use information from the text.

Purpose Influences Strategy

Teaching middle school readers strategies that support the three reading goals listed earlier is vital for effective reading. Consider how knowing the purpose for reading an assigned text affects how successful a reader might be with each of those goals:

Distinguishing important information from less important information. There is

no such thing as inherently important information in a text. What determines whether information is important is the extent to which it helps the reader achieve the purpose for reading.

Approaching texts more strategically. There are many ways to read a text. For example, a reader can skim or scan a text, rely primarily on the text's charts and graphs, or read the text straight through, word for word. To a large extent, the reason for reading the text determines how a reader approaches a text.

Monitoring comprehension. More proficient readers monitor the extent to which they are experiencing success with a text. But without knowing the goal for the reading assignment, it is difficult to determine what success looks like.

Middle school teachers who recognize the importance of supporting their students with content-area reading instruction are already ahead of the game. Teaching students explicit skills and strategies designed to support various reading behaviors and habits of mind is essential. But recognizing the importance of helping students understand the role that purpose plays in using those skills and strategies, and providing a purpose for reading when assigning readings to their students, is just as important. 

Jennifer M. Conner is an adjunct professor in the Indiana University Department of Education. Her e-mail address is connerjm@gmail.com.

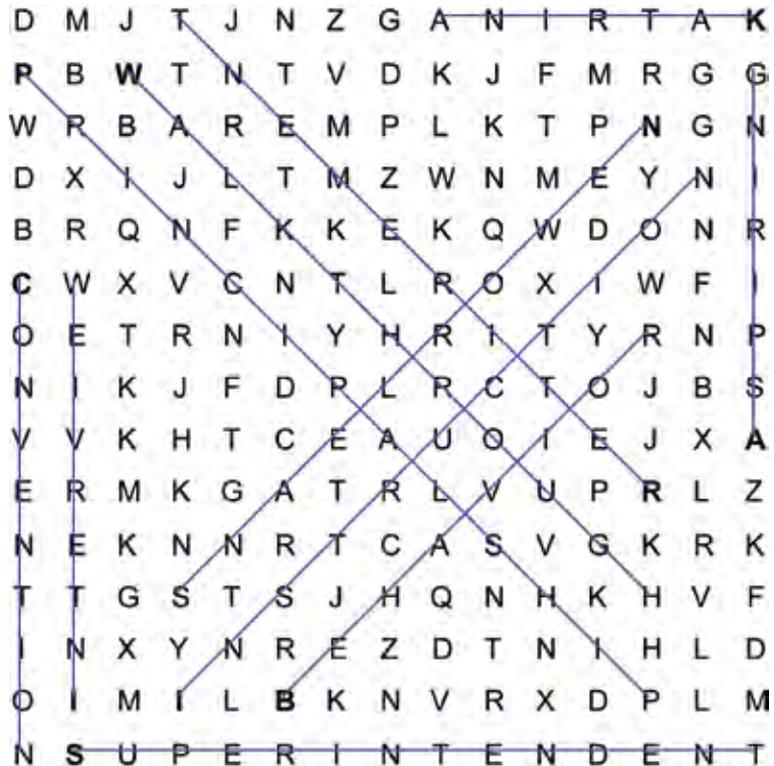
Roger Farr is a chancellor's professor emeritus of education at Indiana University. His e-mail address is farr@indiana.edu.

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