Helping Elementary Students Read for Information

By Douglas Fisher, Ph.D.

> **"G**uiding readers through informational texts, modeling how to read them, and ensuring students become successful with them are key responsibilities of elementary school teachers today."
>
> *— Douglas Fisher, Ph.D.*

Elementary reading instruction is changing. Perhaps the most significant change is the emphasis on reading for information. Now more than ever, teachers are seeking well-written and engaging informational texts to use with their students (Moss and Newton, 2002; Yopp and Yopp, 2004).

Reading for information, or reading expository text, must begin in the primary grades. Students need to understand that reading expository text is not the same as reading narrative text. In fact, the strategies necessary for reading for information are different from those used for reading stories. Research suggests that:

- Children's attitudes toward, and motivation for, academic reading are generally positive in Grade 1 and steadily decline to negative attitudes by Grade 6 (McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth, 1995).
- Instructional practices for textbook reading used in Grade 4 classrooms commonly focus on round-robin reading, and virtually no independent reading takes place (Armbruster, Anderson, Armstrong, Wise, Janisch, and Meyer, 1991).
- Grade 5 students' ability to locate information in a textbook is virtually nonexistent (Dreher and Sammons, 1994).
- Students who experienced a "Grade 4 slump" on measures of achievement continued to decline and scored in the 25th percentile by Grade 11. Notably, these same students were achieving similarly to their peers in Grades 2–3, suggesting that the shift to reading for information that begins in Grade 2 and continues throughout the remaining elementary years creates a new task demand for which students are not prepared (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1996).

Nell K. Duke, associate professor of teacher education and educational psychology at Michigan State University, suggests that "we should not wait to address this problem until students reach late elementary, middle, and high school" (Duke, 2004). She identifies four ways to address the situation:

1. Increase students' **access** to informational text
2. Increase the **time** students spend working with informational text during instructional activities
3. Explicitly **teach** comprehension strategies
4. Create opportunities for students **to use** informational text for authentic purposes

Why Do Students Struggle When Reading for Information?

The struggle students face may be due to the lack of exposure to informational texts in elementary school. A study of basal readers revealed that approximately 20 percent of the selections were informational texts. This means that students had few opportunities to read informational texts and become familiar with their structures and features (Moss and Newton, 2002).

Another study found little use of informational texts in Grade 1 classrooms — as little as 3.6 minutes each day (Duke, 2000). This lack of instruction may explain why even on-grade-level readers in middle school score a full-year-level lower on comprehension of informational texts when compared with their narrative reading levels (Langer, 1985).

How Do We Help Students Read for Information?

A key part of helping students read for information is to **explicitly teach them the structures and features commonly used in these texts.** Examples of these structures and features are listed below.

Structures
- Description
- Compare/Contrast
- Cause/Effect
- Problem/Solution
- Sequence

Features
- Table of Contents
- Bold Type
- Maps, Charts, and Graphs
- Headings and Subheadings
- Glossary and Index

Another important focus of instruction should be vocabulary development. The volume of words encountered during informational reading can be overwhelming. When vocabulary is taught and word knowledge is fostered, students gain much more from informational texts. While it's impossible to isolate and define every single word, teachers can use a variety of approaches:

- Multiple exposures to vocabulary words
- Explicit instruction in word-learning strategies, such as word-part analysis and using context to determine a word's meaning, to boost comprehension
- Focus on multiple-meaning words, prefixes, suffixes, roots, and academic words students will encounter throughout their education

Teaching Comprehension Strategies

Students use comprehension strategies as tools to support their understanding of the text (e.g., Harvey and Goudvis, 2000; Keene and Zimmermann, 1997). The National Reading Panel has identified comprehension instruction as an essential teaching practice (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Like tools in a toolbox, the key to the usefulness of these strategies is the proper application of each to suit a purpose. Students must learn to actively employ a variety of comprehension strategies when they read for information.

Comprehension strategies include:

- **Questioning strategies** allow students to predict and anticipate what might occur next in the text, to solve problems, and to clarify their understanding
- **Summarizing strategies** enable students to identify important information and provide an accurate recount
- **Inferencing strategies** help students "read between the lines" to identify clues within the text
- **Monitoring and clarifying strategies** help determine when readers understand what they have read and when they do not
- **Connection strategies** integrate what a reader has experienced and learned with the information being read
- **Predicting strategies** use prior knowledge to make an educated guess about what might happen next
- **Visualizing strategies** help create physical or mental images of the main ideas

Instructional Strategies to Support Reading for Information

There are several instructional strategies teachers can use to help improve their students' ability to read for information:

Before reading
- Connecting to prior knowledge
- Read-alouds and shared readings

During reading
- Questioning and other comprehension strategies
- Graphic organizers
- Teaching note-taking skills

After reading
- Writing to learn
- Assessing student learning

Connecting to Prior Knowledge

These activities enhance the learning and retention of students in content-area classrooms. They also motivate and stimulate curiosity about the topics being studied. Examples include demonstrations, surprising or startling events, visual displays, and thought-provoking questions.

Read-Alouds/Shared Reading

A read-aloud is a text or passage selected by the teacher to read in front of a small or large group of students, with the primary purpose being to focus

on the text content. Shared reading is when teacher and student jointly share the reading of a text or a passage to draw attention to a particular feature or comprehension strategy.

Questioning Strategies

When teachers maintain a balance between asking and answering questions, they return responsibility for critical thinking to the students. Effective questioning also invites students to make connections to both personal experience and prior knowledge.

Graphic Organizers

Regardless of when they are used during the learning process, graphic organizers aid in comprehension. In addition, they can be used as an assessment tool to provide teachers with an authentic glimpse into a student's current thinking.

Note-Taking

Since note-taking is crucial in middle and high school, elementary school teachers should provide students with systematic instruction in note-taking and note-making to guide them to independence in this important study skill.

Writing to Learn

To learn how to read for information, students must write to learn. Writing to learn differs from other types of writing because it is not a process-writing piece that will go through multiple refinements toward an intended final product. Instead, it is meant to be a catalyst for further learning — an opportunity for students to recall, clarify, and question what they know and what they still wonder about.

Assessing Student Learning

Informal assessment should be ongoing and include observations, portfolios, inventories, rubrics, conferences, self-assessments, and surveys. Learning goals should drive the choice of instruments and be linked to classroom instruction. Formal assessments like standardized tests will be much less nerve-wracking for students if they are taught to be strategic readers of information; therefore, "test-format practice" can be helpful for those not familiar with the standardized test genre.

Choosing a Quality Content-Area Reading Program

The keys to selecting a quality content-area reading program are fairly straightforward. First, students need access to engaging, interesting texts they want to read. Second, the texts should provide specific instruction in areas that lead to understanding. These areas include the vocabulary, text features, text structures, and genres found in informational texts.

Reading for Information Works!

Reading for Information, a content-area reading program for Grades 2–6 from SRA/McGraw-Hill, works because it provides students with purposeful instruction in understanding informational text in the context of Science and Social Studies. A number of important instructional elements, based on a review of research, were intentionally integrated into *Reading for Information,* including:

- **Vocabulary.** Informational texts are filled with content-specific vocabulary as well as academic vocabulary used in specific contexts. *Reading for Information* builds students' vocabulary knowledge through interactions with the text and a number of vocabulary learning strategies.
- **Text Features.** Writers use a number of text features to aid comprehension and understanding, ranging from headings to captions to diagrams. To understand the importance and use of text features, students need multiple opportunities to interact with them and to learn from them.
- **Text Structures.** *Reading for Information* uses text structures commonly found in academic writing. Writers of informational text regularly use compare and contrast, description, cause and effect, sequence, and problem/solution structures. *Reading for Information* also uses these text structures and provides instruction in identifying and understanding them.
- **Genres.** This program contains a number of genres of informational texts, such as newspaper and magazine articles, travelogues, and speeches. The interactions students have with these diverse genres helps them develop an understanding of the ways in which information can be presented.

In addition to these features, *Reading for Information* provides teachers with information about teaching informational texts. The program provides them with multiple ways to incorporate informational texts into their classrooms, from guided reading to readers' workshops to independent reading. Over time, and with quality instruction, students will learn to read for information and to understand the valuable information found in texts.

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