

POWERFUL READERS

Thinking Strategies to Guide Literacy Instruction in Secondary Classrooms

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1 Welcome to Powerful Reading

I grew up in a household of readers. Almost every Saturday, my family would head into town and drive straight to the used bookstore. There we would trade in the books that we were finished with for new treasures for the week ahead. Having always been a voracious reader, I never quite understood when people (both students and adults) told me that they didn't enjoy reading. How could you not be carried away into the imaginary world of a good book or story? How could you not connect to the experiences of a great character? Maybe they just hadn't found the right book or story yet. And it caused me physical pain when people read one of my favorite texts and told me that they didn't enjoy it. How could they not love that book? It never occurred to me that the reader contributes to the story, enabling different readers to come to different understandings and appreciation of the text.

Finally, my discovery of Adrienne Gear's Reading Power gave me the language to describe the things that were happening in my head when I was reading. I now had the language to use with students in my classroom. In the beginning of my career, before Reading Power, my classroom discussions were dominated by me and the students who "got it" and were already good readers. The other students stared blankly when asked questions that went beyond the literal meaning of a text. With Reading Power, I found I could model my thinking to all of my students. I could teach them the language to communicate their thinking about what they are reading.

What Makes a Powerful Reader?

Reading Strategies

The Reading Power strategies were developed from the research of a man named David Pearson. While working as a professor at the University of Michigan in the 1970s, Pearson set out to discover what made someone a proficient reader. What skills did a "good" reader have that a "poor" reader lacked? After studying thousands of students identified as good readers, he produced a list of strategies used by these readers for both fiction and nonfiction texts.

Pearson's theory centres on the idea of metacognition, the ability to think about what we are reading. A good reader is aware of and is able to use and articulate the strategies that they use to interact with text and enhance meaning. Being a good reader goes beyond simply mastering the code of letter sounds. To be powerful readers, students must

- **Make Connections:** Strong readers relate what they are reading to personal experiences and background knowledge. This includes making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections.

The focus of this lesson is demonstrating the ability to use connections to enhance comprehension.

Lesson 6 (Independent Practice): Using the Power

In this lesson, students apply what they have learned about connections in a written paragraph.

- Select a grade-level story that provides multiple places for teenagers to connect.
- You could give students sticky notes to use if they want to jot down their connections as they are reading. If they have a photocopy of the story, they can write their connections right on the copy.
- Have students write a paragraph about their top three connections. For each connection, they need to describe the connection, identify the part of the story that made them think of the connection, and state what the connection taught them about the story.
- Collect student writing for summative assessment.

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR CONNECTING

Key

NYM = Not Yet Meeting

M = Meeting

FM = Fully Meeting

EX = Exceeding

Making Connections	NYM	M	FM	EX
Is able to make connections to background knowledge and experiences				
Recognizes the difference between text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections				
Is able to make connections between multiple texts				
Can explain how a connection extends thinking				

Focus Literary Device: Point of View

In middle school, students should understand the difference between first-person and third-person narration. In secondary school, students should be able to differentiate between the three types of third-person narration.

At some point during lessons on connecting, I like to bring up the idea of point of view. By secondary school, students are expected to be able to distinguish between first-person narration and objective, limited-omniscient, and omniscient points of view. I used to find that, at best, students were able to regurgitate the definition of these terms, and were sometimes able to identify which one was used in the narration of a story. While students need to be able to identify the various points of view in texts, it is more important that they understand how the author's choice of narration affects the meaning of the story.

At the beginning of my short-story unit, I introduce students to the different types of narration. I usually supply excerpts from different texts as examples of the three types. I then have a discussion about which type of narration is easier to connect to. It is sometimes more difficult to connect to objective stories because we have to infer all of the characters' feelings. Usually, omniscient is the easiest to connect to because we have a greater understanding of multiple characters to base those connections on.

Sample Lesson: Whose Story Is Missing?

This lesson works best with complex stories with multiple characters.

- Read a short story to students or have them read the story independently.
- Have students create a plot diagram for the story.

6 Inferring

Inferring is the bedrock of comprehension, not only in reading. We infer in many realms. Our life clicks along more smoothly if we can read the world as well as text (Harvey and Goudvis, 2007, page 138)

I like to introduce older students to the idea of denotation and connotation. Denotation is the dictionary definition of the words, or the literal meaning. Connotation is the cultural or emotional meaning of the words, or the figurative meaning. When inferring, you need to understand the denotation of the words, but most of the meaning is found in the connotation of the words.

Inferring, or reading between the lines, can be a difficult concept for some students to understand. A quick dictionary search for the term *infer* produces words such as “evidence,” “deduce,” “conclude,” and “implicit.” The last word, *implicit*, is central to the idea of inferring. The author implies something through words rather than explicitly telling the reader that thing. Post a definition for *inferring* somewhere prominent in the classroom and refer to this definition often as you work through the inferring lessons.

We often ask our students “What did the author mean when he/she wrote this?” When we ask students this question, what we are really asking them to do is to infer what the author meant. Any time we ask students to comment on anything that is not directly written in the text, we are asking them to infer. Any time an author uses figurative language, they are asking the reader to infer. Anytime teachers ask students the dreaded *Why do you think...?* question, they are asking the students to infer. If we are asking our students to infer, which we do quite often, we need to make sure that we are actually teaching them what it is and how to do it.

There is a strong link between inferring and the other Reading Power strategies. If readers cannot make connections between their own experiences and the author’s words, they will not be able to infer. For example, if readers have no experience with how people look and act when they are angry, they will not be able to make inferences about why a character storms out of the room after an argument. When authors use figurative language, they are relying on most readers having the background knowledge to make sense of their implications.

There is also a strong link between inferring and questioning. Students who have been taught to ask deep-thinking questions when they read are, in fact, preparing to infer. When readers attempt to answer a deep-thinking question, using “I think...” or “Maybe...” they are, in fact, inferring. As I teach this strategy, I like to tell students that good writers leave spaces for our thinking. It’s our job, as active readers, to pay attention to those spaces and to add our *maybes* into the text.

Begin the inferring lessons by pointing out that we make inferences every day. Ask students to tell about times when they have had to use inferring in their everyday life. Most of us have had to infer people’s feelings or emotions based on their behaviors. Many teenagers have probably waited until they knew a parent was in a good mood before asking for something. Ask students how they know that a friend, parent, or boy/girlfriend is in a good mood. It might be helpful to look out the window and make an inference about what it is like outside right now; e.g., “I infer that it is muggy outside right now because it was raining and now it is sunny.” This helps solidify the idea that inferences are more than just random guesses; inferences are educated guesses supported by evidence.

thematic statement is connected to the issue and has an explanation about how the author communicates the message.

- Discuss the second example. Again, direct students' attention to the fact that the thematic statement is connected to the issue identified in the second column. As a class, work to explain how the thematic statement is communicated to the reader through the story.
- Discuss the third example. For this one, only the issue has been identified. Work as a class to create a thematic statement and to explain how the author communicates the thematic statement to the reader.
- Divide students into partners. With their partner, students need to add two of their own examples to the chart. Remind them that their thematic statements need to be connected to the identified issue and that they need to explain how the author communicates the thematic statement to the reader.
- After students have had some time to add to their charts, have a few students share out with the class. Make sure that they have connected their thematic statement to the issue and that they have identified how the author communicates the thematic statement to the reader.
- Collect charts as formative assessment.

SAMPLE ISSUE/THEME CHART

Story	Issue	Thematic Statement
<i>The Three Little Pigs</i>	<i>Hard Work</i>	<i>Hard work pays off because the third pig works hard and his house stands up or Hard work doesn't pay off because all the pigs survive because of one pig's effort.</i>
<i>Cinderella</i>	<i>Kindness</i>	<i>Kindness will be rewarded because...</i>
<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i>	<i>Trust</i>	

Lesson 4 (Guided Practice): Interacting With the Power

The focus of this lesson is to practice changing thinking based on reading. This lesson is adapted from a lesson found in *Reading Power* (2015) by Adrienne Gear.

Recommended texts: "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut (diversity) or "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry (selflessness).

In this lesson, students write a letter to themselves from the author about the special message contained in the story.

- Select a grade-level text with a strong theme or message.
- Select one word that describes the theme or meaning of the story. For example, love, trust, loss, and friendship are common themes in young adult literature. The word you choose must be connected to the story that you select.
- Write the word on the board. Tell students that you are going to read them a story connected to the word.
- Ask students to take out a piece of paper, write the word at the top, and record any thoughts or connections that they currently have for that word. Once they have finished, invite students to share their ideas with a partner.
- Tell students that, while you read, they need to try to find out what this book can teach them about that word. Tell them to pretend that the author has written a special message into the story just for them. Many will probably have

9 Zooming In

“Information is found in many places on the page of nonfiction text, and is presented in a variety of ways: on a graph or in a chart, highlighted in a fact box, or featured as a caption under a photograph.” (Gear, 2008)

While I was marking a secondary reading assessment with a colleague, we made a startling discovery in the vocabulary section. Even though the reading passage contained a glossary on each page, many students could not define a word defined on that page. They were skipping over some of the text features and focusing on the main body of the passage.

Content-area teachers have probably had similar experiences with students who could not locate information if it was located outside the main body of the text. Before I explicitly taught text features to my students, many were unable to find the answers to questions when the answer was located in a text feature. Many students see charts, glossaries, and pictures as “extras,” containing less-valuable information than the main body of the text. Some may be familiar with the terms *glossary*, *chart*, and *map*, but being able to identify features is not enough. Students must learn how to locate and access information from them.

The power of Zooming In really means the ability to understand the role of text features in comprehension. Text features, such as maps, pictures, diagrams, and headings, are basically clues and tools the author has provided to help the reader locate and access information. If the author wants to clearly communicate to readers the different parts of a machine, he/she provides an illustration of the machine with labels identifying the parts. While this information could be communicated using only words, the use of a diagram helps some, if not all, readers more readily comprehend the information. Text features help readers navigate through the complexity of the text, often organizing and highlighting key information.

Unlike fiction, where the majority of information is communicated through words in the main body of text, nonfiction uses a variety of forms to help the reader access the information. These text features serve two purposes: to help organize information and to provide information. Headings, tables of contents, and special fonts all help the reader locate information, directing readers’ attention to important ideas. Some text features, such as pictures, diagrams, charts, and graphs, provide a visual representation of information to help the reader access information more easily and comprehend important ideas. They are there to enhance the readers’ experience with the text.

The ability to navigate text features can be connected directly to determining importance, as text features are one of the clues readers use to help them separate important information from unimportant information. Headings give the reader clues about the purpose of a certain section. Special fonts draw the reader’s attention to important words or ideas. Glossaries provide the reader with definitions for important words or concepts. Quite often, the author will repeat important information found in the main body of a text within or alongside a text feature designed to enhance the reader’s understanding of that idea. In short, text features are a reader’s best friend and should not be ignored.

12 Transforming

“The ultimate experience in reading is when our thinking changes or is transformed in some way.” (Gear, 2008)

To transform means to take the information from your brain, mix it with the information you read, and create a change in thought or knowledge. It differs from a summary in that it is not simply a restatement of the important ideas found in a text. It’s a synthesis of the information from the text and the reader’s thinking. This “new” knowledge will be slightly different from the old knowledge. It could result in a completely new way of thinking about something, or in a slight change in thinking. Either way, new information can result in a transformed way of thinking for the reader.

Transforming (or synthesizing) is the most complex of the reading strategies, and it requires readers to apply their knowledge of the other four reading powers at the same time. It includes the ability to take information from a variety of sources and compile that information. In order to synthesize information, readers need to summarize information, paraphrase it, and compare and contrast it with what they already know. It requires readers to notice their connections, questions, and inferences. And most of all, to notice these changes, readers need to reflect on their learning.

Because transforming is such a complex idea, it is often confusing for both teachers and students. I find that it is especially difficult to see a true change in thinking after reading only one article about a topic. It is much easier to see a change in thinking after more in-depth study. For that reason, I like to do the guided practice part of this lesson around a series of articles on the same subject.

Another way to make the idea of transforming more concrete for students is to ground your work around a topic under the umbrella of an *essential question*. For example, if you are studying environmental studies, you could use the lens of *How do humans affect the environment?* Students then examine their thinking at the beginning of the unit, during the unit, and at the end of the unit. The answer to the initial big question should transform as they learn.

Transforming Equation:
_____ (from my brain)
+ _____ (from the
text) = _____ (new
understanding)

Sample Essential Questions

Social Studies

- How is Canada’s current government structure similar to or different from those used in Upper and Lower Canada?
- What are the causes of oppression?
- How does the natural environment influence settlement?
- How much impact can an individual have on history?
- How much control should governments have over their citizens?
- How does where you live affect how you live?