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CHAPTER 1:

Beyond the Book Report

This book starts out with a confession. When I was in year three, my school had a reading incentive program called Book Bucks. For every book we read and book report we handed in, we would get a coin that we could use every Friday to buy something from the classroom shop: a pencil with a wispy top, a marker pen set and even a Speak & Spell if you earned enough. Whoever got the most Book Bucks at the end of the month got to choose anything they wanted from the shop. I had my eye on an art set with coloured pencils, glitter pens and marker pens, all in one bright purple box.

Mrs Matthews recorded the number of Book Bucks everyone earned on a manila poster that hung on the cupboard door. Every time someone handed in a book report, Mrs Matthews made a blue or black dollar sign next to their name with a pen. My row was one of the longest, about the same as my two best friends, Valerie Haddad and Michelle Brooks. All three of us loved to read, so reading all those books wasn't much work. Writing a book report, however, wasn't something any of us liked to do. But if that's what it took to get Book Bucks, so be it.

One morning I came into the classroom just as Mrs Matthews was adding something to the Book Bucks poster. Three blue dollar signs had been added to Michelle's row. Three!?! Now she was definitely ahead of me. But I really wanted that marker pen set. So later that night I took a chapter book off the shelf in my room, read the summary on the back cover, wrote a book report by changing the wording around and then handed it in

the next day. One more quick Book Buck for me. I did feel a bit guilty turning it in, but that subsided when Mrs Matthews took out her pen and added a dollar sign next to my name.

Even in years four and five, writing about reading usually took the form of a book report. We simply had to explain what happened in the book. This wasn't so much a reflection of my school but of the times. Everyone I know around my age had to write book reports in primary school. No one was particularly fond of them. Retelling a plot is just not that interesting. Book reports might show that we read and somewhat understand a book (or, in my case, that we read the back of the book), but they don't do much to support our higher-order thinking. Writing about what we *think* about the events and characters in our books was never really an option.

Fortunately, times have changed. In recent years, educators have started to use writing as a vehicle for thinking and learning. Many classrooms now use reader's notebooks, which allow students to explore independently questions and ideas about what they read. This type of reflective writing has allowed written assignments to go beyond assessing literal comprehension to assessing and *developing* inferential comprehension.

One would think that, with this new freedom to write personal reactions, theories and questions, the reader's notebooks in our classrooms would be full of different types of thinking unique to each student. But quite often, this is not the case. For some students, the direction to "write about your thinking" is enough. But for many students, this kind of direction is not a clear next step for what to do. So even with teachers modelling, talking and guiding students to make theories, inferences and connections in lessons and read-alouds, and colourful classroom posters reminding students that "Reading Is Thinking!" many students open their reader's notebooks and write what resembles the traditional book report. The very type of writing I found to be a chore.

One reason for the lack of transfer between whole-class lessons or activities and students' independent entries is that there is a large gap between what students do when they participate in guided instruction or discussions and what they do when they write independently. The skills students need to take part in whole-class and small-group reading lessons or to respond to teacher-generated prompts are just not the same skills they need when they write and think critically about the books they read *on their own*. If we expect students to write quality, independent entries in their reader's notebooks, then their instruction should target the skill of writing about reading.

The lessons presented in this book address this need, providing teachers and students with specific, concrete strategies for thinking critically about texts through writing. These strategies, grounded in language and in specific concepts, support different kinds of comprehension skills but are far more tangible. As a result, these strategy lessons are

not only easy to teach but also easy for students of many different ability levels to understand, to do, to remember and to use when writing independently. Strategy lessons are less about teaching students *about* comprehension strategies and more about teaching students specific ways to verbalise thinking in the context of writing.

Strategy Lessons

There are five main components to the strategy lessons presented in this book (Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1

Components of a Strategy Lesson

NAME IT	Explicitly name the strategy you are teaching.
WHY DO IT?	Explain why this strategy supports thinking and writing about reading.
MODEL IT	The teacher demonstrates the strategy within a paragraph of writing. Students name where you used the strategy.
TRY IT	Students try out the strategy in a designated section of their reader's notebooks.
SHARE IT	Students share entries in pairs followed by a whole-class share.

This lesson format rests on the important idea that, if students are taught one small way of writing about reading, and then have time and space to practise this one small strategy, then they will be able to use it on their own in their independent entries, days after the lesson is over.

The Reader's Notebook

To support this dual emphasis of teaching students specific strategies for writing about reading and giving time for students to write independently, there are two main sections in my reader's notebooks (Figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2

Reader's Notebook Layout

Strategy Entries	Independent Entries
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The first half of the notebook, called the “strategies” section, is where students try out each of the strategy lessons I teach. The second half of the notebook is for students' independent entries, where students write in response to their own independent reading

books. The last few pages in the back of the notebook are for conference notes, where students keep track of strengths and next steps taught in their one-on-one conferences. There are also other sections teachers may want to add such as book logs or places to write book recommendations. Toward the end of the year, students create tabs for each section and decorate a cover, which can be covered with clear contact paper. Even for students in the upper-primary years and middle years, a colourful cover that reflects each student's personality makes these notebooks more desirable.

Selecting Texts

For both narrative and informational strategy lessons, I use a book we are currently reading or one that has been read recently. These books create a shared context for when I model the strategy and for when students practise the strategy in their notebook. With narrative strategy lessons, for example, I use the same chapter book for many different lessons in a row. Using the same book for many lessons is a very intentional practice because it allows my modelling to match what I am asking students to do in their notebooks.

Using picture books that are “great for predicting” or “great for description” is a common practice and can offer important scaffolding for understanding and developing comprehension skills. But writing about reading well requires students to use a variety of comprehension skills *whether their books lend themselves to certain types of thinking or not*. We don't, for example, want our students to predict only with very suspenseful stories. And we don't want students to be adept at making personal connections only with books that have characters, stories or settings that are similar to their own lives. In fact, I would argue that it is the subtler, less obvious connections that require and encourage more thoughtful and analytical thinking compared to the more obvious ones that lie at the surface level.

Narrative strategy lessons in this book use *Rules* by Cynthia Lord and the informational strategy lessons use *The Honey Makers* by Gail Gibbons. Although strategy lessons can be used with almost *any* book you use as a read-aloud, Appendices A and B offer suggestions for narrative and informational read-alouds that work particularly well with strategy lessons. Each book suggestion includes a brief summary and a related chart that explains how that particular book supports each of the five categories of strategy lessons: questioning, connecting, analysing, synthesising and evaluating.

Once in a while I do use a picture book in a strategy lesson, either because my read-aloud is not conducive to a particular strategy or because I am teaching a more advanced strategy and my students would benefit from more scaffolding and a more purposefully aligned text. In this case, I use a picture book students already know or I read the book out loud earlier in the day. Some of the more advanced strategy lessons in this book include

suggestions for certain narrative or nonfiction picture books you can use and how you might use them during the lesson.

Differentiated Instruction

I usually teach these writing-about-reading strategies in whole-class lessons. Because strategy lessons are so doable, students at any ability level can be successful. The key is that strategy lessons teach students *one small way* they can bring thinking into their writing at a time. This ability to create conditions of academic success is important for all students, but especially for our students who struggle with reading or writing. As any teacher knows, success is an important aspect of learning because it can have a compounding effect in which engagement, self-perception and learning reinforce one another (Pinnell and Scharer 2003). I have seen many students who previously disliked anything to do with reading, let alone writing about reading, become engaged in writing strategy entries once they understood they were capable of “doing the lesson”. They actually *liked* taking out their reader’s notebooks, and their relationship with reading comprehension turned from negative to positive.

Strategy lessons are also particularly beneficial for English as an Additional Language or Dialect students (EAL/Ds), for both affective and academic reasons. Research on second-language learners indicates that, even when students are conversationally fluent, they lack academic vocabulary critical to accessing and expressing complex ideas and texts (Lesaux et al. 2010). Strategy lessons not only teach students specific words and phrases that can be used to access different kinds of higher-order thinking, but they do so in a meaningful context. In one lesson, students experience this “thinking language” in multiple ways: direct teaching, modelling, trying it out in writing, sharing it in speech and finally listening to other students’ writing. Through both writing and talking, all students actively process the language taught, which supports ownership of vocabulary taught for *all* students, not just those who raise their hands and want to be called on.

The reader’s notebook also offers a place conducive to taking risks with language and where students’ points of view are valued, two characteristics of learning that are critical for EAL/D students’ confidence and academic investment (Cappellini 2005). For students whose English is extremely limited, the notebook can provide a context in which students can use both their native language and target language to express critical thinking (Ortiz-Marrero and Sumaryono 2010).

Although the lessons in this book were written for students in the upper primary and middle-year levels, they can also be used for high school students who need support with reading comprehension. Older students in remedial reading often receive ample support in decoding and fluency skills but less support in how to think and write about

texts. This over-support in the mechanics of reading is particularly true of adolescent language-minority learners who, despite having a wide range of potential difficulties that could be contributing to reading difficulty, are often seen as one subgroup, all with the same needs (Lesaux and Kieffer 2010). Strategy lessons can offer stepping-stones for thinking about texts and create critical experiences of capability and, even if in small ways, academic success. In addition, because strategy lessons in this book are presented in a developmental order, from the most basic to the more advanced, high school teachers can tailor even whole-class instruction to show students specific, but more complex, ways to write about reading.

While strategy lessons are attainable for below-year-level students, they are also satisfying, engaging and beneficial for students who are proficient or advanced in reading, critical thinking or writing. The strategy entries that students write during the lesson are unique to each student's thinking, experience and potential. All students practise using the same strategy or phrase, but each student is writing an entry at his or her own ability level. Strategy lessons are also meant to show students one specific way to add variety to the thinking they are already doing. So if a few students are already using the strategies or thinking language I teach, naming the strategy and helping them understand its benefits can help them use these words and phrases more purposefully and call on them strategically.

Curricular Connections

For teachers whose time is highly constricted because of a structured reading program, strategy lessons can be taught for a month or so early in the year, as an investment for the rest of the year, with an occasional follow-up lesson as needed. Although many reading programs require students to write about their reading, few actually *teach* students how to do this kind of writing well. Whatever your reading curriculum, the lessons in this book can help students reach this frequently given, but not often taught, expectation – to independently use writing as a way to think reflectively and critically.

Chapter 2 describes in detail how a strategy lesson looks in the classroom and how one particular lesson might sound. Chapter 3 includes many different strategy lessons that can be taught with narrative text. All lessons are categorised under five general comprehension skills: questioning, making connections, analysing, synthesising and evaluating. The next two chapters focus on informational text. Chapter 4 discusses students' literal comprehension of nonfiction text and offers an instructional strategy called Expert Team reading, which scaffolds students' independent reading of informational texts to their potential. Chapter 5 presents strategy lessons that can be taught with nonfiction texts.

These lessons fall under the same comprehension categories used in Chapter 3 and also include lessons that support visualising, monitoring and paragraph development.

Chapter 6 looks at the transition from teaching strategy lessons to supporting students as they begin to write independent entries in their reader's notebooks. Chapter 7 describes a process for noticing and identifying comprehension strategies within student writing, which supports effective lesson planning and conferring. Chapter 8 takes a closer look at conferring and shows teachers how the reader's notebook can be used as a powerful vehicle for teaching comprehension in a reading conference. Finally, Chapter 9 describes how homework assignments and notebook rubrics support the strategies students learn in class.

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