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**Conclusion: Cognitive Strategies Instruction Revisited**

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Numerous reports from policy centers and blue-ribbon panels have indicated that students who struggle as readers and writers have poor command of cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are the acts of mind, or thinking tools, that experienced, effective readers and writers access when they construct meaning from and with texts. This book provides a rich array of clear, practical, teacher-tested lessons and engaging activities that take a cognitive strategies approach to promote higher literacy in grades 2–8. We have designed this text for classroom teachers, literacy specialists, students in elementary and middle school literacy methods courses, graduate students in literacy programs, and researchers, as well as for interested members of the general public. The goal of this kind of literacy instruction is to help young readers and writers to think BIG. To think big—to make inferences, form interpretations, reflect and relate, and evaluate—also means to go deep, to go beyond the literal and construct a richer, more complex, or more profound meaning. This type of higher-level academic literacy, the ability to “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” and to “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasons and evidence,” is precisely what the Common Core State Standards, and other state-adopted standards, expect students to know and be able to do in order to become college and career ready (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, pp. 10, 18).

Showcasing the work of classroom teachers affiliated with the National Writing Project who are conversant with the current research literature, the book provides a detailed and in-depth look at the narrative, informative/expository, and argumentative genres. It provides specific examples of how to embed cognitive strategies seamlessly into instruction to create confident, competent, and engaged young readers and writers. The weblinks interspersed throughout the book connect readers to a companion website that offers a treasure trove of resources, including extended lesson plans, graphic organizers, student writing samples across grade levels, anchor charts, color versions of some figures in the book, scoring rubrics, classroom videos, digital apps, tools, and more.

Readers can use this book to:
Thinking Tools for Young Readers and Writers: Strategies to Promote Higher Literacy in Grades 2–8 is divided into five chapters. Each chapter ends with a summary of the key points.

Chapter 1, “Why Use Thinking Tools to Promote Higher Literacy in Grades 2–8?,” establishes the substantial research base for the efficacy of cognitive strategies instruction and explores the cognitive, linguistic, communicative, contextual, textual, and affective constraints young readers and writers juggle when they construct meaning. It also invites readers into the authors’ classrooms to see cognitive strategy instruction implemented firsthand.

Chapter 2, “Best Practices in Reading and Writing Instruction for Students in Grades 2–8,” summarizes the current research on best practices for reading and writing instruction with specific recommendations: Create a community of learners, implement strategy instruction, connect reading and writing, model with mentor texts, scaffold instruction to lessen the constraints on readers and writers, offer frequent opportunities to practice writing different text types through Writer’s Workshop, provide explicit vocabulary instruction, and administer formative assessments to inform instruction. It also provides an extended lesson focused on how to introduce students to the cognitive strategies in their reader’s and writer’s tool kit, using the text *Big Al* as a model.

Chapter 3, “Reading and Writing Narrative Texts,” is dedicated to narrative writing and begins with an explanation of why it is important to prioritize the reading and writing of narrative texts in the classroom. The chapter outlines the language demands of the genre for younger readers and writers and provides concrete ideas for teaching the elements of narrative with multiple lessons and activities to demonstrate how each element might be taught. The chapter also provides full-length lessons and minilessons on teaching narrative writing and concludes with a lesson on how to blend genres in a research paper.

Chapter 4, “Reading and Writing Informative/Expository Texts,” begins with an explanation of the language demands of this genre for young readers and writers. The chapter discusses various text structures involved in reading and writing informative/expository texts, such as description, sequence,
comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution. It also includes a variety of high-interest activities that involve reading and writing informative/expository texts across the curriculum and concludes with a lesson that blends genres involving robots.

Chapter 5, “Reading and Writing Opinion, Persuasive, Interpretive, and Argumentative Texts,” discusses the challenge of teaching young readers and writers argumentation and offers a scaffolded sequence of lessons moving from opinion to persuasion, to interpretation, and then to argument. The chapter includes minilessons on teaching the components of the analytical/argumentative essay such as making a claim, quoting from the text, providing interpretive commentary, acknowledging and refuting counterarguments, etc. Sentence fluency strategies are also addressed. The chapter concludes with a real-world Project Based Learning unit that engages students in promoting a cause.

In the Conclusion, “Cognitive Strategies Instruction Revisited,” we make a case for why teachers themselves need to be strategic in order to enable their students to internalize cognitive strategies and become competent, confident, and engaged readers and writers. We hope these pages will provide readers with their own tool kit of pedagogical strategies to promote higher literacy in grades 2–8.
CHAPTER 1

Why Use Thinking Tools to Promote Higher Literacy in Grades 2–8?

READING AND WRITING LIKE A DETECTIVE: THE MYSTERY TRASH CHALLENGE

On a warm September morning, 10 2nd- and 3rd-graders entered Emily McCourtney’s classroom in a blended learning technology school and found a trash bag sitting in the center of a large table, along with ten magnifying glasses, one at each of their seats.

“I wonder what Mrs. McCourtney is up to?” Chloe remarked.

“Mrs. McCourtney can be really sneaky,” Braden chimed in. Clearly hooked, the students eagerly awaited Emily’s instructions.

“OK, class. I have some new neighbors who moved in last week. I’m really curious about them, but they’re never home when I am so we haven’t met yet. But I guess they had so much trash that they put some in my can. So, guess what you get to do.” she asked. Bright-eyed, students leaned forward expectantly. “You get to be detectives and help me figure out what my new neighbors are like. We need to make a plan before we start. What kinds of questions do we need answers to?”

“Oh! Oh!” the students shouted as they waved their hands, anxious to participate.

“Do they have any kids?” Steven volunteered.

“Good question. How would their trash tell us if they had any kids?”

“Diapers, or maybe some broken toys,” Mark conjectured.

“Or maybe baby food jars,” Aimee added. “The food wrappers could also tell us if they like stuff like McDonald’s or if they’re more healthy eaters,” she continued.

After listing their questions, the students got to work examining the evidence. Using their iPads, they took pictures to document each item and began piecing the clues together (see Figure 1.1).

Jonathan was confused. “What’s this?” he asked, holding up a Metrolink card.

“How could we find out what Metrolink means?” Emily asked.

Already on it, River yelled out, “I know. I found it on the Internet. Metrolink is a commuter rail system. So that could mean they don’t have a car.”
“Or maybe one of the grown-ups works a long way away,” Diego ventured.
“Hey, guys,” Vianne remarked, getting everyone’s attention, “I just found
this cute little pink bracelet. But it won’t fit on my wrist. It’s too tight.”
“So what does that tell you?” Emily probed.
“They probably have a little girl who’s not old enough for school yet.”
An hour later, after wading through Target gift cards, candy bar wrappers,
Pampers boxes, magazines, receipts from Old Navy, and the like, each student
wrote up his or her conclusion via Google slides in a digital notebook. For
example, Aimee wrote:

Your neighbors’ trash makes me think that they went on expensive
vacations because I found Hawaii tickets. They have kids because they
bought kid food. They went to an Angels game because they have an
Angels ticket. I think they’re healthy because they have organic food. I
think they have a baby because I saw a box of diapers. I think they are
39, 40. I think they like tea because they had a box of tea.

At the close of the activity, Emily congratulated the class on their sleuth-
ing: “Hey, guys. You really did a great job looking at the evidence, piecing the
clues together, and predicting what my new neighbors are like. I can’t wait to
meet them and let you know if you were right. Tomorrow, we’re going to talk
about all the thinking tools you used to create a picture of my new neighbors
and how we can use those same tools to act like detectives to figure things out
when we read and then to write up what we discovered.”

In her more traditional 5th-grade classroom with 27 students and less
access to technology, Mary Widtmann had to be even sneakier than Emily
McCourtney. Her students arrived to find six mystery boxes, each containing
between 15 and 20 items of trash. Since Mary’s school is in a beach commu-
nity with summer rentals and Mary needed a plausible excuse for collecting
six boxes of trash, she told the students she was helping a friend who man-
aged a vacation rental apartment building to clean out six different apart-
ments whose families had moved out just before Labor Day. She customized
the items in each box to depict different types of families: a retired couple
who likes art, museums, and traveling; a family that likes to go camping and
eats junk food; a young family with kids who like amusement parks, etc. For
example, the box for a healthy, sporty young family contained items like a
Nespresso package, dental floss, a Quaker Oats box, a Planet Beauty receipt,
Mizuno and Brooks running shoe boxes, a Perrier water bottle, and One-A-
Day men’s vitamins. To model the process of analysis, she demonstrated with
trash collected from another teacher. Pulling each item out one by one and
thinking aloud in front of the class, she reinforced that you have to examine
several pieces of evidence before making a prediction or drawing a conclusion,
and also that you might be visualizing one type of family and then some new
piece of evidence might cause you to change your mind and form a new interpretation. Students were then charged with working in groups to solve the Mystery Trash Challenge by creating a portrait of the family based on eight pieces of evidence from the box. Equally as engrossed as Emily’s 2nd- and 3rd-graders, these 5th-graders eagerly launched into the task. As they perused the items, they created evidence tags just like a CSI investigation team.

Figure 1.2 shows students in Mary Widtmann’s class filling out evidence tags.
After presenting the outcomes of their Mystery Trash investigation as a group, each student wrote an individual account of his or her process of analyzing the evidence. Here’s what Scarlett had to say:

My group worked together to solve the Mystery Trash Challenge. When we first opened the box I said “It’s a family with a girl.” Then as we got farther into the mystery I was changing my thoughts. I realized that it wasn’t just a girl it was a little girl. We knew that it was a little girl because there was “My Little Pony” toys and “Frozen” toys. Then we pulled out more and more stuff and there was “Gogurts” and the applesauce squeezers. Me and my group talked and said it was a family with a little girl going back to school. After that I was set for my conclusion, but then I looked at my items a little more carefully and realized that there wasn’t just girls toys but there was also boys toys. Me and my group talked a little
more and came up with the conclusion a family with two children a girl around the age of five and a boy around the age of seven and they were going back to school. That was my mystery trash project.

In engaging their students in solving the “problem” of the Mystery Trash Challenge, Emily and Mary were teaching the young readers and writers in their classrooms to think BIG. That is, they were teaching their students to be strategic—to deliberately and consciously employ thinking tools, or cognitive strategies, as a means of obtaining a goal (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012). As Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1991) point out, students who perceive themselves as being academically successful “know how to learn effectively rather than just ‘try harder’” because they have “multiple tactics available to monitor and improve” their learning (p. 625). In other words, experienced readers and writers are strategic. They know how to purposefully select strategies to “orchestrate higher order thinking” (Tompkins, 2005). According to Paris et al. (1991), “Strategic readers are not characterized by the volume of tactics that they use but rather by the selection of appropriate strategies that fit the particular text, purpose, and occasion” (p. 611). Similarly, Flower and Hayes (1980) liken the use of strategies within the writing process to having “a writer’s tool kit” (p. 376) that the writers can access, unconstrained by any fixed order, to solve the problem of composing a text. The purpose of this book is to explore the research base for taking a cognitive strategies approach to promoting higher literacy in students in grades 2–8 and offer practical ideas in order to cultivate confident and competent readers and writers who can construct meaning from and with narrative, informational, and argumentative texts. Judith Langer argues that being literate in today’s society necessitates that students go beyond reading and writing written texts to strategically “reading” the world. She writes,

Although basic reading and writing skills are included in this definition of high literacy, also included are the ability to use language, context, and reasoning in ways that are appropriate for particular situations and disciplines. Students learn to “read” the social meanings, rules and structures, and the linguistic and cognitive routines to make things work in the real world of English use. It is reflected in students’ ability to engage in thoughtful reading, writing, and discussion about content in the classroom, to put their knowledge and skills to use in new situations. (Langer, 2001, p. 838)

It is this capacity for higher literacy that we strive to cultivate in elementary and middle school students.