

The **Teacher's Essential Guide** Series



Jim Burke

Content Area Reading

How to:

- Boost Student Comprehension of All Texts
- Engage Students as Strategic Readers
- Improve Memory of Key Information



Dedication:

To America's newest teachers

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Introduction

“Literacy involves the ability to encode or decode meaning in any of the symbolic forms used in the culture.”

—Eliot Eisner, “Preparing for Today and Tomorrow,” *Educational Leadership*

I teach students in developmental reading classes, college prep, and Advanced Placement English classes. In these classes, all students struggle at one time or another with various types of text—or at least they should. If we assign texts that offer no challenge, it’s not likely our students will develop the skills, strength, or fluency they need for powerful reading across content areas. While the students in my college prep freshmen English class seem, in so many obvious ways, different from the students in my senior AP Literature class, they face a common challenge: both groups routinely encounter texts that resist easy understanding. Their history and science classes, for example, require them to read an array of texts: Web sites, maps, primary source documents, infotexts such as charts and graphs, photographs, and, of course, more traditional texts such as speeches, textbooks, and articles on issues related to health, science, or history.

In other words, reading is a daily demand, one that is fundamental to students’ success in school (and, of course, beyond). Such literacy demands only get more complex as

students get older. A report published by the Alliance for Excellent Education sums up the challenge best:

After the elementary years, not only do reading assignments become longer and more full of content, they also become increasingly *varied* in their style, vocabulary, text structure, purpose, and intended audience. . . . Middle and high school students must learn that in some classes they are expected to follow written instructions to the letter, while in others they are expected to read skeptically, or to question the author's assumptions, or to analyze the writer's style. Moving from one subject area to the next, they must tap into entirely different sets of vocabulary and background knowledge. . . . To enter into any academic discipline is to become comfortable with its ways of looking at and communicating about the world (Heller and Greenleaf 2007, p.7).

When it comes to reading, we know so much more today about what kids need and how to teach it; what's more, as the result of various reforms, schools and teachers are now held accountable for the success of all students. What does this mean for those of us who walk into the class every day to teach our subject—English, math, history, science, health—to thirty or more students, many of whom are English learners, students with special needs, struggling or disengaged readers? We must be more strategic and effective in teaching students how to read those texts they will face in class and on state exams. This addition to the *Teacher's Essential Guide* series offers you core strategies, each based on reliable research, which you can use efficiently in your class to help all students read your content with greater skill and confidence and, in this way, develop the skills they need to succeed as students, citizens, and future employees.

Content Area Reading Self-Assessment

For each of the items below, record an answer between 1 and 5.

1 Never 2 Rarely 3 Sometimes 4 Usually 5 Always

After completing this self-assessment, identify those areas with most urgent need of attention and improvement. For each statement to which your response was “never,” “rarely,” or “sometimes,” go to the corresponding chapter and learn what you can do to improve in that area.

Understand the Reading Process

- I prepare students to read by using a variety of strategies before they read.
- I ensure that students are active readers by having them apply a range of techniques during the reading process.
- I teach students how to evaluate, reflect on, and refine their performance after they read.

Teach Students to Be Strategic Readers

- My students know how to identify the main idea and supporting details in whatever type of text they read.
- My students and I use a variety of strategies to develop and access their background knowledge as it relates to the texts they read.
- My students learn to ask a variety of questions throughout the reading process about the different types of text they read.
- My students employ a range of strategies to help them visualize what they read.

continued on next page

Use a Range of Instructional Strategies to Enhance and Extend Comprehension

- My students use writing before, during, and after they read to improve their comprehension and retention of what they read.
- We use discussion throughout the reading process to increase engagement, improve comprehension, and aid memory.
- We read aloud texts during the reading process.
- I use think-alouds to improve reading comprehension and use of strategies.
- I use graphic organizers to help students understand and analyze what they read.
- I use a variety of techniques to help students visually represent their thinking about the content of the texts they read.
- I create and ask my students to use different anticipation guides throughout the reading process.
- I model for students what they should do as effective readers throughout the reading process.
- I incorporate a variety of performances to help students engage with, understand, and remember what they read.

1. Understand the Reading Process

Watching artists begin a drawing is intriguing. Some start with what you eventually realize is the nose, others with some slant of what becomes the jaw, others with what we soon recognize as an eye. The point is that all artists have their own way of approaching the task, one that works for them and helps them bring to life the subject they are trying to understand for themselves and convey it to others accurately and clearly. As readers, we are not much different when it comes to our own idiosyncratic processes. Some of us ask certain types of questions before we begin, others make connections, still others find ways to “see” what they are reading, using a variety of techniques to help them visualize. Of course, there are those readers who have not developed a useful process for themselves; for these readers, their process is something like hitting the play button on a movie they don’t know the title of, which they then watch with their back to the screen and with the sound turned off. In other words, they have a process, but it’s flawed or even counterproductive, and results in little pleasure and less understanding.

Guiding Principles

- Prepare to read by setting a purpose and choosing a strategy before reading.
- Keep the purpose and plan in mind while reading.
- Reflect on the results and reread as necessary to improve comprehension and memory after reading.

No one these days questions the validity or the value of thinking of writing as a process. *Writing as process* makes sense and is consistent with our own experience. Writing, however, is observable, public—we can see what we are doing on the page. Reading, on the other hand, is a private process, one taking place in the workshop of our mind, only yielding evidence of success or trouble when we finally take a test or write about or discuss the text in class. When a student in my AP English class offers a hilarious but totally invalid misreading of a poem about whippoorwills, assuming (as he later explained) that a whippoorwill is an electronic bug zapper on the back porch, something terribly wrong has happened during his process, something he was unable to recognize and remedy. In that case, then, we discuss his reading process and the steps he followed to arrive at that amusing interpretation. If we consider his first reading as the writer's equivalent of a *draft* of his final interpretation, one that is subject to revision, it opens up the process. It renders more public the process we use to make sense of what we read and disabuses students of the notion of a “reading gene” or any other such belief that reading is something you either get or don't, can do—or can't.

The following model of a reading process offers just one way of looking at this idea of reading. It is not meant to be a lock-step process; rather, it is flexible, offering teachers and students a way to approach reading while they identify and refine those steps in their own processes. Because we read a range of text types—literary and informational, visual and symbolic, media and print—we need a process that we can adapt to any of these different texts, refining and changing it in whatever ways are necessary to make sense of a particular text in the context of a specific task.