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# EFFECTIVE PROCEDURES FOR TEACHING REFERENCE STUDY SKILLS

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In many elementary developmental reading programs, the areas of word attack and comprehension traditionally receive major attention with respect to reading skills instruction. In some other cases there is much emphasis with respect to phonics and other forms of decoding with less priority given to comprehension. Typically, the skill area receiving the least amount of importance is that of reference study skills since it is assumed by some teachers that if a student is efficient in word attack and comprehension, he/she will naturally transmit these skills to assignments dealing with library resources.

Reference study skills must be directly taught in a sequential, direct, and purposeful manner which will insure that each student can develop competence in *locating*, *evaluating*, *classifying*, and *utilizing* information that is desired regarding specific subjects. The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with specific teaching suggestions for helping various learners to attain appropriate study skills in each of the four categories which were listed previously. These ideas will need to be varied to suit the interests, needs, and level of attention of the students being instructed.

## *Locating Information*

Since in a typical school library there may be as many as 10,000 volumes, the task of finding the one book which contains the exact, desired information is a challenging experience. To accomplish the task requires the reader to alphabetize titles, preview books, use the dictionary correctly, find topics in an index, and utilize the card catalogue appropriately. Those students who lack these skills tend to waste much valuable time and find that they are unable to complete simple assignments involving basic reference works.

In order to help students locate information, the following principles should be remembered by the teacher.

1. Each type of school dictionary is different from all others, thus the unique features of this source (arrangement of words, symbols, pronunciation key) must be demonstrated. Using exercises compiled by the publisher or the teacher, demand that each student demonstrate ability to employ the adopted dictionary in a number of assignment situations.
2. Every student should learn how to preview a book and discover the importance and meaning of such aspects as the table of contents, index, special summaries, and other unique features. Several books could be placed on a desk or table and students could be asked to determine

- which one or more of the sources contains specific information on a given topic. Ask selected students to name the section(s) of the book which contains data concerning the location of desired information.
3. The nature and use of a book index should be understood. Sequential instruction should lead each student to discover the types of data contained in the section, the arrangement of the body of information, and the meaning of the various symbols and abbreviations. An exercise could be constructed which would require the reader to determine if a certain topic is discussed; on what page(s) the material is found; and the number of sub-headings which are explained and presented regarding that topic.
  4. Unless a precise, well-directed orientation is undertaken, all students need direct help in how to use the various reference sources such as the card catalogue, unabridged dictionaries, encyclopedias, and special source books. They need to understand the meaning of the Dewey Decimal System and how they can find information through the knowledge of what certain letters and numbers mean. While the training in the use of library resources is usually the domain of the English teacher, each content teacher should have mini-lessons in his/her course which emphasize those materials and aids that are unique to that subject. Following the training, a post-test activity should be undertaken to insure that given competencies have been obtained. The following questions may be illustrative.
    - a. Name four different books or sources where you could get information relating to Halley's Comet.
    - b. Has Clyde Adams written a book regarding the Panama Canal?
    - c. What source would you use to find the length of a conventional tennis court?

### *Evaluating Information*

The many books and other specialized sources in a typical library-media center contain thousands of statements and opinions regarding hundreds of topics. Some of these areas are in the subjective realm and the reader is placed in a position of trying to determine which statements are true, what facts are valid, and which material is relevant. The average student has substantial difficulty in sorting through all of this type of printed matter. Obviously, students are going to need help in this area. Every student should be taught to read printed material with the following questions in mind:

1. Who wrote the material and what are his qualifications?
2. When was the material written?
3. How does the information supplied by this author compare with the information supplied on this subject by other writers?
4. Are there any propaganda devices such as "name calling" or "card stacking" which can be noted?
5. Is the material written for a particular class of readers?
6. What is the writer's chief purpose for compiling the material?

7. Where was the selection written and under what circumstances?
8. Are there inferences indicated which are unsavory?
9. Does the writer support his point of view with appropriate evidence?

In summary, the major considerations of the reader should be those of making certain of a recent copyright, the competency of the author(s), and the relevancy of the publication for the purpose in mind.

### *Classifying Information*

Even after a reader has located and evaluated information there remains a significant problem of organizing, summarizing, and understanding the relationships between and among bodies of data. The successful completion of this type of activity leads to conclusions and inferences which are both sensible and justifiable. Involved in this process are the abilities to compare and contrast, understand cause and effect, determine conclusions, and perceive time order of events or procedure steps.

Students can be helped in the realm of information classification by one or more of the following activities.

1. Teach all students how to make an outline related to the construction of a paper or story involving a single topic which utilizes data from several sources.
2. Provide scrambled lists of causes and effects and determine if individual students can make appropriate matches of the items. Demonstrate the "rightness" of two or three examples before asking students to complete the exercise.
3. Supply copies of three or four short selections. List several statements and ask the students to select the item which represents the best conclusion when considering the total content of the article.

### *Utilizing Information*

One of the important goals of any effective developmental reading program is that of providing the student with the skills for making use of information which he/she has found. These conclusions, implications, or thoughts can be communicated through the use of oral and/or written means. Suitable activities for fulfilling this goal might include debates, brief position papers, term papers, stories for the school or city newspapers, and presentations for local radio and television stations.

### *Summary*

Students should obtain proficiency in a large number of reading skills including work attack, comprehension, *and* reference study skills. Unfortunately, too many educators assume competency in study skills if word attack and comprehension skills have been mastered. *All* content teachers are responsible for instructing each student in the important areas of locating, evaluating, classifying, and utilizing information. The teaching suggestions contained in this article should be of help in achieving this goal.