

10-1-1966

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Recommended Citation

Wright, J. A. (1966). Important Insights into the Reading of Social Studies Text. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 7(1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol7/iss1/3

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IMPORTANT INSIGHTS INTO THE READING OF SOCIAL STUDIES TEXT

James A. Wright

In a broad sense, the world is a stage and social studies is the recorded drama of man's struggle for survival in an ever-changing environment. Man's own implacable desire to improve continuously his situation provides the plot, or underlying theme. The social studies text defines people's basic needs and the activities through which they meet their needs. It describes the antagonistic forces affecting human behavior. Only the guidance of an expert teacher makes it possible for a young reader to interpret and appreciate the inherent drama of social studies.

Possessing a reasonably complete understanding of the scope and sequence of the interpretative skills employed in appreciating the drama in stories, a teacher may logically analyze and classify those skills required for full comprehension and appreciation of social studies selections. Basically both sets of skills are one. Contrary to the opinion of some reading specialists, reading in this content area does not make demands upon the reader which contrast from those of a properly directed basal reader lesson. Concentrated study is demanded of any reading matter which is to be thoroughly understood and appreciated.

Often the social studies content is indistinguishable from that of a basal reader selection. And, excluding the fact that one is intended to promote reading skills, the young reader's general purposes are identical for both texts. When reading either stories or social studies, the student might profitably adopt the attitude that the page is the stage.

Grasping Main Ideas

At the base of the hierarchy of interpretative skills is that of grasping the main ideas. For it is only in its relationship to a main idea that a detail is perceived as relevant or important. Skill in finding the main idea in a paragraph or longer selection, and not mistaking a detail for the main point, is a crucial ability if the author's organization of thoughts is to be understood. The proficient author provides titles, subtitles, topic sentences, key words, illustrations, diagrams, maps, and other literary devices which identify the main ideas. The proficient teacher guides the young reader in the practice of recognizing these clues to the author's classification of information.

In a story, details derive their significance in the light of the plot. Likewise, in the social studies text the details are significant only as they relate to the main situations. The following basic exercises provide practice in reading to find main ideas. More importantly, they permit a pupil to understand how an efficient reader attacks a selection and hunts for the main ideas.

WANTED**Main Ideas**

1. Find the main word in the title.
2. Rewrite the title as a telling sentence.
3. Rewrite the title as a question.
4. Find the main word in each subtitle.
5. Make up subtitles.
6. Find topic sentences.
7. Make up topic sentences.
8. Rewrite the topic sentences as questions.
9. Write a subtitle for each paragraph.
10. Write subtitles for groups of paragraphs.
11. Rewrite the subtitles as telling sentences.
12. Rewrite the subtitles as questions.
13. Answer your own questions.
14. List your answers as topics. (outline form)
15. Write a summary. (Who, What, Where, How, When, Why)
16. Summarize the problem or conflict.
17. Summarize the solution to the problem or conflict.

Through discussing the results of the student's bounty hunt with him, the teacher guides the pupil toward the ultimate ability of accurately summarizing a social studies selection. Teacher and student should share a diagnostic attitude which will reveal the inadequacies of the first attempts. While some early summaries may contain unimportant or irrelevant details, others might be too brief or vague. However, the logical sequence of skills on the wanted poster has guided many of our intermediate-grade students at Myers School toward facility in composing full, accurate summaries.

Skills 1 through 12 can be used to formulate a most useful study guide for any social studies selection. Or, the skills may be used in

various combinations. No other single experience has greater potential for improving the ability to interpret and appreciate social studies text than that of preparing a study guide. A teacher need only refer pupils to the permanent list of activities and advise them which combination of skills would seem most appropriate for the particular selection of the day.

In compliance with the sound principle that comprehension exercises must be provided in logical sequence, instruction should begin with an explanation and demonstration of a specific skill. Exercises for independent practice should begin with liberal clues to guide the learner, and clues should be gradually removed as more and more independence is achieved.

Perceiving Relationships of Significant Details

The ability to note important details is closely related to that of grasping the main idea. Somewhat meaningless when considered in isolation, significant details clarify and amplify the main ideas of the selection. Therefore, it is necessary that the young readers be able to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant and the important from the unimportant. They should learn to differentiate between details which merely offer interesting sidelights and those which support the main idea. Fake dialogue, often inserted in an attempt to make the text more readable, must be recognized as irrelevant.

A perception of the relationship between the main point and the supporting details is a vital prerequisite to comprehension. In addition, an understanding of the interrelationships among the details is also required. When a reader has the ability to sense relationships of time order, enumeration of facts or examples, cause and effect, and comparison, he is no longer assailed by jumbled isolated facts. Instead, he recognizes the concreteness of that which would otherwise seem too abstract, and he derives the author's pattern of thought.

The following activities serve well to provide practice in appreciating the relationships of significant details. As prescribed for the placard of activities for hunting main ideas, the skills may be assigned in various combinations to fit the pattern of the text.

WANTED

Important Details

1. Find the signal words.
2. Tell what detail follows each signal word.
3. Tell what kind each detail is.

4. List the important details.
5. Tell what main idea the details explain.
6. List the important events in time order.
7. List the examples beneath the author's statement.
8. List the facts beneath the author's conclusion.
9. List the causes and effects. Label each.
10. Tell what the author has compared.
11. List the details of the comparison.

Examples of Signal Words:

Time Order—first, then, soon, meanwhile, next, earlier, recently, suddenly, before, after, at last, finally, later.

Facts or Examples—besides, moreover, and, also, in addition, another, furthermore, nor, but, still, yet, however, although, nevertheless, while, though.

A Cause—because, since, when, if due to, as, in order to, so that, as a result of, on account of.

An Effect—therefore, so, so that, consequently, hence, as a result, as a consequence, eventually.

A Comparison—before, after, some, others, then, now, once, today, but, while, than, like, as though, although, unlike, as.

Further practice may be provided by the following additional sequence of exercises:

1. Time Order
 - a. List the important events in order as they happened.
 - b. On what page and in which paragraph does the part about . . . begin?
 - c. Find the paragraphs which tell about . . .
 - d. Which pages tell about . . . ?
 - e. List the steps in the process mentioned in the selection.
2. Statement—Examples
 - a. How many examples of . . . does the author give?
 - b. List the examples of . . . given by the author.
 - c. How does the author make you understand . . . ?
 - d. On page . . . how many examples of . . . are given?

- e. What examples does the author present on page . . . ?
3. Facts—Conclusion
- What is the author's conclusion?
 - How many facts does the author give to prove his conclusion?
 - What are the facts the author gives to prove his conclusion?
 - What important facts does the author present on page . . . ?
 - Why does the author present the important facts found on page . . . ?
4. Cause—Effect
- Find pairs of facts in which one fact caused the other. Write the second fact, then the word *because*, then the fact which caused it.
 - Read the assigned section in the social studies text then list
The important effect, or result, stated by the author.
The important effect, or result, stated in your own words.
Examples or proof of the effect if any are given.
Causes, or reasons, which brought about the effect.
Any further effects we might expect in the future.
 - Arrange cause and effect details in chart form, (e.g., natural resources—occupations, location—modes of transportation, weather—clothing, seasons—occupations, housing, clothing).
 - Find the important changes which take place in the selection. Describe each change and tell what was the cause.
 - Describe the cause or causes of the problem mentioned. Next, list the causes which brought about the solution to the problem.
5. Comparison—Contrast
- What has the author compared with . . . ?
 - What has the author said . . . is like?
 - What has the author said . . . is not like?
 - What has the author compared?
 - In how many ways has the author compared . . . and . . . ?

Drawing Valid Conclusions

The most significant interpretative skill is that of evaluating what is read and making inferences based on sound judgment. These inferences provide the reader richer meaning as well as greater appreciation.

Only through inferences can characters and scenes come to life or a full awareness of the importance of factual data be realized.

The inferential thinking required for valid conclusions is initiated in the primary grades. In the social studies lessons, this thinking ability should be consistently nurtured through experiences which call for reasoning from facts to conclusions concerning how the basic human activities are carried on at each community level. The student must be guided to select relevant facts leading to valid inferences regarding reasons for and consequences of behavior, past and future conditions or events, steps in a process, and the like.

Whether reading social studies or a story, appreciation of content is always increased when the reader (1) judges the author's purpose, (2) considers the relevance of the facts presented, (3) appraises the moods, motives, and traits of the characters, (4) reckons those events omitted by the author, (5) anticipates what should happen next, (6) visualizes images of comparison, (7) infers humor, (8) interprets implications, (9) perceives the author's style, (10) discerns opinions, (11) confirms validity, and (12) discovers generalizations. The reader's ability to think on the inferential level may be promoted through the practice motivated by the following exercises.

WANTED

Thoughtful Conclusions

1. Why did the author write the selection?
2. What subjects do the facts tell about?
3. Why did each character behave as he did?
4. What events did the author leave out?
5. What do you think should happen next?
6. What comparison did you think about?
7. What was the funniest incident? Why?
8. What do you know which was not stated?
9. What style of writing did the author use?
10. Which ideas were only opinions?
11. Could the events really have happened?
12. What is the central idea or theme of the selection?

Further systematic guidance in making judgments and drawing conclusions may be found in the following sequence of thought-provoking questions and directions. Especially with inferential questions, a

discussion of wrong responses provides an excellent opportunity for skill development. However, the teacher should gradually transfer the responsibility of posing questions onto the pupil himself, equipping him with a growing independence in the capacity to read between the lines. This capacity leads logically to an attitude of inquiry concerning the purpose, quality, and accuracy of all that he reads.

1. Judging the author's purpose or viewpoint
 - a. Why did the author write the selection?
 - b. How did the author feel about the topic?
 - c. How did the author want you to feel as you read the selection?
 - d. Did the author have a worthwhile purpose? Explain.
 - e. Did the author succeed in carrying out his purpose? Why not?
2. Considering relevance
 - a. The assigned section tells the reader facts about what subjects? Why did the author include this section?
 - b. Find as many details as you can about . . . and list them.
 - c. On what pages will you find answers to the following questions?
 - d. In what way can the knowledge of the given details help a person?
 - e. Use the index to find answers to the following questions . . .
3. Appraising moods, motives and character traits
 - a. Find descriptions, conversations, events, and any other clues which show what kind of person the main character is. Make a list of the character traits.
 - b. Choose a character you like in the selection, and describe him.
 - c. Choose a character you dislike, and tell why.
 - d. Describe the main character as he was in the beginning of the selection and at the end. What is the difference? Why was there a change?
 - e. Why did each character behave as he did? Find sentences in the selection which support your answer.
4. Reckoning action or events omitted by the author
 - a. What events did the author leave out when he wrote the selection?
 - b. What happened on page . . . which the author left out as he wrote the selection?

- c. How much time elapsed during the omitted parts?
 - d. Where in the selection has the author left out an event?
 - e. How do you know the author left out an event?
5. Anticipating outcomes
 - a. What do you think will happen next? Why?
 - b. What will each character do? Why?
 - c. What problem do you anticipate?
 - d. What might be the solution to the problem?
 - e. After reading only the title, subtitles, and beginning paragraphs, write questions you think are answered in the selection. Read the selection and then answer your own questions.
6. Visualizing comparisons
 - a. As you read the selection, what comparisons did you make in your mind?
 - b. Did this selection remind you of one of your own experiences? Explain.
 - c. Did you read about another character who had a similar experience? Explain.
 - d. List what you know about the main character and compare him to another you read about.
 - e. Did this selection remind you of any other problems or conditions you know about? (analogies)
7. Inferring humor
 - a. What was funny about what happened on page . . . ?
 - b. On page . . . what is meant by the word . . . ?
 - c. What was the funniest incident? Why was it funny?
 - d. Why was it funny when . . . ?
 - e. What was funny, even though the selection was not humorous?
8. Interpreting implications
 - a. What does the author mean by the title?
 - b. Change the title into a question, then answer the question.
 - c. What did you think when you read . . . ?
 - d. What clues told you that . . . ?
 - e. What important facts do you know which are not stated directly by the author?

9. Perceiving literary style
 - a. What style of writing does the author use?
 - b. What did you like about the author’s way of writing? What did you dislike?
 - c. Which selection did you like best in the unit? Why?
 - d. Find figurative expressions. Tell what they mean.
 - e. Did the author stir your thinking? Explain.

10. Discerning opinions
 - a. Find three statements of opinion. Which key words tell you that you are about to read an opinion?
 - b. Rewrite the opinions in order for them to appear as facts.
 - c. Find an example of a superstition, then find an example of a belief based on facts.
 - d. What facts does the author offer to support his theory?
 - e. Find an opinion and tell how it might be proved or disproved.

11. Confirming validity
 - a. Was this a “true to life” story? Exp!ain.
 - b. Could the situation have happened in our community? Why?
 - c. What would you have done in the main character’s place?
 - d. What do you know about the author? Does the author know the topic well? How do you know? Is the author wrong in any of his facts?
 - e. Does it seem that the author has left out some important facts? What are these facts? In what way are these facts important?
 - f. Have some important facts changed since the selection was printed?
 - g. Does the author draw valid conclusions from the facts?
 - h. Are the statements expressions of fact, or inferences?
 - i. Does the material contain any unstated assumptions? Can you accept these assumptions?
 - j. Have you changed your mind about something after reading the selection? Explain. What facts disagree with what you thought you knew?

12. Discovering generalizations
 - a. What kind of situation is described?

- b. What kind of person was . . . ?
- c. What kind of people are the . . . ?
- d. What did you learn from this selection, which can help you in your daily life? What did you learn that will help you understand others?
- e. What generalization can you draw from this selection? What evidence do you find in the selection to support this conclusion? (Explain to your students that generalizations can apply to everyone or everyone in a certain area.)

Through selecting, correlating, and evaluating facts found in the social studies selection, the young reader formulates an inferred summary or generalization. This reorganization of the content is a genuine experience of discovery. In addition to reading stories to reorganize the content in the form of a moral, a student should often practice formulating generalizations based upon factual data.

Social studies, like other content areas, has its unique framework of basic concepts and generalizations. The authors and editors have tried to present these in sequential order throughout each series of textbooks, proceeding from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract, (e.g., helping others is fun and makes us feel better. Postmen, policemen, and other community workers are very important. Our dreams for the future should include a sense of personal responsibility for making the world better for all people.) An appropriate sequence of generalizations provides an integration of new ideas which acquaint the student with the world from his perspective, letting him know what it offers and what it expects of him as a responsible citizen. A teacher lacking an awareness of the basic understandings presented in a particular text could possibly reduce the reading to vague descriptions.

The value of the social studies text is determined by the ability of the reader and the guidance of the teacher. In the hands of an unthinking reader, the book is not valuable. In the hands of a highly motivated, clear-thinking, well-guided student, the book is invaluable.

James A. Wright is principal of the Myers Elementary School in Grand Blanc, Michigan. He is President of the Flint Chapter of the International Reading Association. Readers of this quarterly will undoubtedly remember his article, "A Taxonomy of Thinking Skills for Young Readers," which appeared in the Fall 1965 issue.