Strategies to Improve Students' Content Area Reading Skills

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The purpose of reading is to gain information from text. In content areas like science and social studies, some students find it difficult to locate and remember important information from the text. Factors contributing to a student's difficulties in content or informational reading include:

- Lack of interest and experience.

- Vocabulary in the subject area is too technical.

- Concept overload–too many concepts packed into a small amount of text.

- Misunderstanding of how to use maps, charts, tables, and diagrams to communicate information.

- Inexperience in navigating through chapters with headings, subheadings, sidebars, etc.

- Difficulty relating to informational writing that has no plot or characters.

In order for students to become proficient in content area subjects, they must master several important skills. Students should be able to

- Identify the main idea and details within a passage.

- Locate facts in sidebars, captions, and reading passages.

- Adjust their speed of reading and focus on the purpose for reading.

- Locate key vocabulary and concepts.

- Notice and pick up on visual cues in print and structure/presentation of information (italics, bold print, headers, subheaders, photos, and sidebars).

There are five main types of organizational patterns for informational text.

Description: Paragraphs in this pattern list pieces of information (facts, ideas, steps, etc.). The order of facts reflects an order of importance or just a logical sequence. Words like one, two, first, second, third, next, finally, most important, and too are common in this sequence. Text in this format puts facts, events, or concepts in order of their occurrence. Words signaling this pattern are *not long after, now, before, after, first, second, during, finally,* and *until*.

Question and Answer: The author presents a question to the reader and then answers it. This is a common text pattern in social studies.

Comparison-Contrast: The author points out likenesses and/or differences among facts, concepts, events, people, etc. Words such as *however, as well as, on the other hand, while, unless, meanwhile,* and *compared to* are present in this type of text organization.

Cause-Effect: The author shows how facts, events, or concepts occur because of other facts, events, or concepts. Words such as *if…then, so that, this leads to,* and *as a result* signal a pattern typically found in science texts. This pattern is typical in science texts.

Problem and Solution: Authors present and analyze the development of a problem, document finding the solution to the problem, and then solve the problem using sequential steps. This text pattern uses words such as *since, therefore, so that,* and *nevertheless*. This pattern is very common in science texts.

Reading Strategies to Help Comprehend Content Area Subjects

If your students have difficulty comprehending content area subjects, review the objectives for proficiency previously listed. Then, use some of the strategies below to guide your students to successful comprehension of content material.

- Assign one notebook or folder for each content area. Use it to keep all notes, old tests, teacher handouts, etc. to study and prepare for tests.

- Use the table of contents to preview the unit/chapter first. Focus on the titles, main ideas, or important points outlined. Activate prior knowledge that the student may have about any topic within the chapter. Preview the chapter by flipping through the pages and looking at pictures, graphs, sidebars, etc. Have students write two or three questions of interest about the unit/chapter based on the titles/headings. Use background information or activate the student's prior knowledge to make informed guesses to answer the questions. Answer the questions correctly after reading. Students should continue to self-question during the reading of the text.

- Identify the type of text pattern in the book/chapter.

- Have the students create a study guide as they progress through the chapter by writing one sentence, phrase, or point of interest for each paragraph while reading.

- Make a list of key vocabulary words/expressions to address the concepts they represent (e.g., Desert lands? hot, dry, cold temperatures at night, sandy soil, little wildlife, 4" of rain per year, etc.)

- Make drawings, sketches, or webs and label them with appropriate terms to help remember details.

- Write short summary sentences or paragraphs about the chapter/unit using the key vocabulary in correct context.

- Outline chapter topics by writing short explanations/definitions/phrases.

- Read the chapter summary several times. Write a two or three sentence summary in your own words at the conclusion of each chapter, especially if there is no chapter summary in the text.

For many readers, informational reading can be very complex, so it is not always easy to identify the text pattern. Sometimes authors switch from one expository text pattern to another, even within the same chapter or event. However, comprehension of informational text is typically stronger when readers can identify and use text patterns to mentally organize and remember information.

Resources

Using an Author's Style and Text Patterns to Support the Reading of Information: retrieved July 2007. http://www.kidbibs.com/learningtips/lt39.htm

Using Expository Text Patterns to Enhance Comprehension: http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/reading/68477