



Do I Really Have to Teach Reading? Content Comprehension, Grades 6-12 by Cris Tovani

What Do Readers Do When They Aren't Given a Purpose?

Recently I was encouraging teachers at a summer institute to find engaging, accessible text for students to read. All of a sudden, an arm attached to a gruff-looking principal shot up into the air. Before I could call on him, he started to talk. "Interesting and well-written text is fine, but what are teachers supposed to use for students planning on attending college? Everyone knows that college students and even adults have to read boring, difficult text."

He had a point. In the real world, readers are expected to read all types of text. As a teacher, I am often asked to read dry, difficult text that holds little interest for me. However, I don't read every piece of boring text that crosses my desk. Much of it goes unread and into the trash can. I don't arbitrarily throw it away; I have a specialized screening process. For me to spend time getting through a piece of uninteresting, ho-hum text, I must have a purpose. I must have a reason for reading the piece. There must be something in it that will make my life as a teacher or a person better. If the piece isn't going to entertain, teach, or improve my life in some way, I throw it out.

The same is true for our students. If they don't see how the piece is going to improve their life in some small way, they will have difficulty getting through it. Sometimes our students can't see the importance of something that we

Determining Possible Purposes

Decide how you will hold your thinking as you read. What does the teacher want you to do with the information? Maybe your purpose is to answer questions or write an essay later. What thinking do you need to hold?

1. Look for interesting details that could have multiple meanings. Ask yourself, "Why did the author or cartoonist add that detail?"
2. Ask questions about the title and subtitle. Try to figure out how the title and subtitle are connected to the piece.
3. Ask questions about the piece. As you read, record the questions and keep them in the back of your mind. Look for the answers as you read. If you don't find the answers, ask the questions the next day in class.
4. Look for the author's opinion. Compare his or her opinion with your own. Does the author agree or disagree with you?
5. Read a piece to learn new information. Is there anything in the reading that helps you understand the topic better?
6. Make a connection to the piece. Does the piece remind you of an experience, a movie, or information you already know? Does the connection help you relate to a person or situation? Use information you have about the topic to connect more personally to the piece.
7. Who is the author? Do you know anything about the author and his or her style of writing? Is he or she sarcastic or serious? Is he or she politically conservative or liberal? What you know about the author might help you anticipate what is coming in the reading.

ask them to read. They may just need to read the piece to pass the test. Sometimes we have to read something we don't want to in order to keep our job, or we may have to read and understand something so that we don't get cheated.

My former principal often put articles in my box that I wouldn't normally read on my own. At the top of the article, she would write, What do you think? I couldn't anticipate her position, so I wasn't sure how to respond. I knew she would call me into her office to talk about the article. Sooner or later I would have to read it. Often the pieces were boring, but if I wanted to look good in front of my boss, I had to read the article and be able to share some thinking about it.

I realize that no one now gives me a purpose for most of the reading I do. I have to give myself a purpose if I am to remember what I've read. When I read a challenging piece, asking questions often pulls me through it. I begin right at the title, marking my questions directly on the text. If I am reading a contract or a textbook that I can't write on, I write my questions on sticky notes and attach them to the margins next to the words that cause me to have the question. I ask questions that directly affect me—questions I truly care about. The questions I ask propel me to read on to find my answer. If my questions aren't answered in the text, they are held in the margins to discuss later.

There is a direct translation from this process to classroom instruction. When students perceive a piece to be boring or difficult, setting a purpose will help them through the read. Not long ago my senior English students asked me what they should do when they have a teacher who doesn't give them a purpose for their reading. We began to generate a list of possible purposes that they could set for themselves as they read (see the list on the previous page).

I hesitated to put this list in the book. My fear is it will be used as a checklist, and that students will be asked to read for all of these purposes with a single piece of text. The intention of this list is to give readers some options by which to read a difficult or boring piece.