

GETTING THE MAIN IDEA:

An Effective, Multi-Level Reading Curriculum Workshop with Prototype Sample Activities

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NOTE: Don't forget that because the *content* of this workshop is reading instruction, the content of all the sample activities is also reading instruction. In the language classroom, of course, the principles of these activities can and should be applied to reading in all content areas that interest students—stories, current events, vocational material, the subjects of other courses they are taking, and so on.

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GETTING THE MAIN IDEA: An Effective, Multi-Level Reading Curriculum
A Letter to Workshop Attendees

Dear Workshop Participants:

I am conducting this workshop to demonstrate how I teach reading—and teach teachers to teach reading. Every activity in this session mirrors what the instructor actually presents and supervises in class. If these techniques work for you, you can teach reading in your classroom by replicating what *I* do during the session. You can guide your students to acquire and improve reading skills by having them replicate what *you* do here.

Because this is a workshop in *reading* skills (rather than listening skills), I'd prefer that you "get my message" through reading. Because our time is severely limited, I may "take the floor" to give instructions, get feedback, or answer questions. But—just as in my reading classes—the focus will be on reading—and, I hope, your written responses.

After many years of reading theory, attending and giving workshops, using and writing textbooks, and teaching ESL classes, this is what I believe about reading instruction:

1. **In any language, there are only three purposes for reading:** (1) for pleasure, (2) to get information (i.e., to learn), and (3) to develop cognitive thinking skills. No readers can fulfill any of these purposes without understanding what they are reading. Therefore, beyond the beginning levels of language instruction (in which teachers may present reading activities in order to practice phonics, grammar, or vocabulary), *all reading lessons should focus on reading for meaning.*
2. At least in theory, **reading in a second language is the same as reading in one's native language.** People read better—i.e., faster, and with better understanding—when they *want* to read, and they want to read when they are successful at it—i.e., when they understand and can comment on what they have read. It is not only the interest value of the material that makes people want to read; it is also the readers's level of ability. People want to *enjoy themselves* or, at least, not to "suffer from anxiety" during the reading process.
3. In a reading lesson or reading course, **the most efficient activities are those in which learners spend their time either *reading* or *demonstrating comprehension* of what they have read.** Of course, going over interesting materials together, doing comprehension and vocabulary exercises, and discussing ideas are engaging ways to fill classtime, reassuring to students who tend to rely on step-by-step teacher-centered lessons or on groupwork. Nevertheless, such activities are probably *not* the most effective methodology for developing reading skills. The purpose of "teaching" reading (if it can be "taught" at all) is to "empower" learners to read on their own, making use of the information and skills they learn in their own lives, studies, and work.

To demonstrate that you have understood my message, please turn to pages 13 and 14 of this workshop handout. In writing, follow the instructions in Column 1 of the chart.

READING SKILL: Following Instructions Accurately

READING ACTIVITY: Responding to Written Instructions

This reading game is a race. Work as fast as you can. The first "player" to finish wins a valuable prize.

1. Before you do anything, read all the instructions in this game carefully.
2. On the last page of this handout, fill out the information in the box at the bottom (name, address, etc.)
3. In the boxes below, check (✓) the languages that you are *fluent* in. Put an X in the box before the languages that you know at a beginning or intermediate level. Cross out the languages that you don't know at all.

- | | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> British English | <input type="checkbox"/> Russian | <input type="checkbox"/> Swahili | <input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin Chinese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> American English | <input type="checkbox"/> Polish | <input type="checkbox"/> Amharic | <input type="checkbox"/> Cantonese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish | <input type="checkbox"/> Serbo-Croatian | <input type="checkbox"/> Africaans | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese | <input type="checkbox"/> Hungarian | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindi | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Italian | <input type="checkbox"/> Arabic | <input type="checkbox"/> Urdu | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> Farsi | <input type="checkbox"/> Indonesian | <input type="checkbox"/> Thai |
| <input type="checkbox"/> German | <input type="checkbox"/> Hebrew | <input type="checkbox"/> Malay | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

4. Circle the appropriate answer(s) to each question:

A. What is your job title?

- administrator
- full-time (contract) faculty
- part-time (hourly) instructor
- teacher's aide
- counselor
- librarian
- other: _____

B. At what kind(s) of school do you work?

- public school (K-12)
- community adult school
- community college
- university
- skills center
- private school
- other: _____

C. What subjects do you usually teach?

- general English as a Second Language (ESL)
- Vocational English as a Second Language
- Adult Basic Education (ABE)
- English for Academic Purposes
- a language other than English: _____
- a content area: _____
- other: _____

D. What levels do you usually teach?

- preliterate or semi-literate
- beginning
- intermediate
- advanced
- college prep
- college credit courses
- other: _____

5. Complete these sentences by writing the missing words in the blanks.

- A. I have been teaching for _____ years.
- B. Of all the skills areas, I most enjoy teaching _____
(e.g., pronunciation, spelling, grammar, reading, writing, speaking, listening, etc.)
- C. Of all the materials available, I most enjoy using _____ (e.g.,
textbooks, photocopies of copyrighted materials, games, "kits," films, audio tapes, etc.)
- D. The biggest teaching problem (i.e., "challenge") that I face is _____
(e.g., getting along with administrators, maintaining quiet in the classroom, setting up viable
courses, hiring staff, getting funding for materials, creating curriculum, supervising others, etc.)

6. In a few sentences, summarize (describe briefly but completely) your philosophy of teaching ESL or language arts:

7. In a few sentences, summarize your fantasy of the ideal teaching situation:

8. Please fill in the blank and sign this statement of intent:

I, _____ (name), being of sound mind and body and desiring to bring back to my school and district the most creative ideas and materials available from this conference, do hereby promise to visit the Authors & Editors and the Miller Educational Materials booths in the publishers' exhibit to examine and purchase products suited to my teaching style and needs.

(signature)

9. Now that you have read all the instructions carefully, complete only Item 2 on the previous page. If you are among the first three "players" to finish, collect your prize!

10. You probably have plenty of time left, so use it to think of the kinds of reading lessons in which you could use features of the above "Following Instructions" game effectively. Notice that many common "test words" (such as *read*, *check*, *circle*, *cross out*, *choose*, and *summarize*) are included in the instructions. You could use these in the instructions for scanning, surveying, and practice test-taking activities. And the main point—that in order to complete a task successfully, you have to *do* what the instructions say—is applicable to all kinds of exercises, activities, and games.

ARTICLE: What are Reading Skills and Strategies?

I. READING FOR MEANING

All reading—in your native language or a second or third language—is really *reading for meaning*. People read for two main purposes—to get information and for pleasure. In both cases, if you don't understand the meaning of the words and sentences, you aren't reading effectively. In all situations—at work, at school, and in daily life—you must understand the *meaning* of what you read.

A. Getting the Main Idea

There are two steps in understanding the meaning of what you read. The first, and the most important, step is *getting the main idea*. It is easiest to *recognize* the main idea in a paragraph or a reading selection if it is actually stated in one or more sentences. More often, however, you must figure out the main idea on your own. A reading textbook often provides exercises in which you can *choose* the main idea from several numbered sentences. But when you read other materials, you should be able to *state* the main idea in your own words—probably by creating one or two sentences that tell the point the writer is trying to make about the topic of the paragraph or the reading selection.

B. Understanding Supporting Detail

When you understand the main idea of a paragraph or selection, you may decide to stop reading it because you already have all the information you need. Or you may want to read it again. The second time, you will be able to *understand the supporting detail*. For example, if a writer is trying to *persuade* you of something, the supporting detail is the *reasons* for the author's point of view. In a *narrative* (a news article or a fiction story), the supporting detail is the *events* that happened. When you read *instructions*, the supporting detail is the steps to follow. *Examples* are also supporting detail.

How can you show that you have understood the main ideas and supporting detail of what you have read? If the material is organized in a clear and simple way, you can *list* the supporting points under the main idea. If the material is more complex, you can show the relationship of the points by *outlining*. In addition to (or instead of) listing or outlining information, you can *paraphrase* what you have learned—either by *retelling* the ideas in your own words or by *summarizing* it in writing. (A summary is a brief restatement of the important information.)

C. Making Inferences

As soon as you understand the literal meaning of what you have read (what the words and sentences mean), you should learn how to *make inferences*. In many kinds of practical reading (instructions, explanations, etc.), the writer says exactly what he or she means—as briefly and as clearly as possible. But in other kinds of reading, such as humor or fiction, the author may not state his or her points directly in words. The reader is expected to *infer* the important information—to figure out what the writer wants to communicate. In other words, the reader must *understand what is implied*, including *recognizing the author's point of view*. The reader must also learn to *separate fact from the writer's opinion*.

II. READING FASTER WHILE UNDERSTANDING MORE

A. Scanning for Specific Information

Once you can understand the meaning of what you read—whether in your native language or in a second or third language—you can learn to *read faster while understanding even more*. The first technique used to increase reading speed is called *scanning for specific information*. You probably already scan—when you look up a name in the telephone book, for instance, look for prices or dates in an advertisement, or make use of a table of contents or index. When you scan for information, you notice the arrangement of the material and look for clues (such as numbers, symbols, or capital letters) to help you find what you are looking for. You move your eyes down the center of the page or column (or from left to right and back again) as fast as you can, and you stop looking as soon as you have found the information you need. Scanning is most useful for information presented in visual form rather than paragraphs—lists, charts, maps, tables, and the like. But you can also use this skill to find information in paragraphs—such as facts you need for a report.

B. Skimming for Main Ideas

A second reading technique that will increase your speed and understanding is called *skimming*. When you skim an article or reading selection, you read as fast as you can—the first one or two paragraphs, the first line of the following paragraphs, and the last paragraph. The purpose of skimming is simply to get the main ideas—so that you can decide whether or not to read the material more carefully later on. You don't have to worry about the details.

C. Having a Purpose in Mind

Third, you can read faster if you *have a purpose in mind* for reading. Do you need only to know the *results* of an experiment? Then you don't have to read the steps in the process carefully. Are you looking only for facts and figures for a chart you are making? Then you can skip the explanations of the rationale behind the experiment. In other words, if you read *selectively*—paying attention to the parts you need and skipping or skimming over the other information—you will be able to read much faster. Always read with a purpose in mind—it will increase your understanding as well as your reading speed.

D. Improving Reading Speed

Fourth, here are some other techniques to increase your reading speed: (1) *Avoid vocalization*—i.e., avoid saying the words you see out loud or "hearing" them in your mind. The meanings of the words you see should go directly from the page through your eyes to your mind. (2) *Avoid regression*—i.e., moving your eyes backward over words you have already seen. Instead, force your eyes to move forward—from left to right and then back to the beginning of the next line—even if you have missed some words. If you don't allow yourself to regress when you read, your concentration will improve along with your speed. (3) *Increase your eye span*—the number of words you "take in" with one glance. Word-by-word readers are poor readers, both in speed and in comprehension. To read more quickly and better, read in phrases—take in ideas directly rather than individual words. Concentrate on reading for meaning.

III. STUDY-READING

All of the previous reading skills and strategies are useful for everyday reading—at work, at school, and in daily life. You can use these techniques to get more pleasure out of your fiction reading, to read magazine and newspaper articles more quickly, and to get through your work faster. In addition, there are techniques to use for *study-reading*, so that you can learn better, get higher grades, pass your college courses more easily, and advance in your career.

A. The SQ3R System

One study-reading system is called "SQ3R." (1) The "S" stands for "survey." Before you begin to study any textbook or technical material, you should *survey* or *preview* it by getting an overview of its parts—the title and author, the chapter titles, the preface or introduction, the table of contents, the special features, etc. (2) When you begin any part of the book, you should *question* (Q) what you are about to read. Keep your questions in mind as you read so that you can focus on finding out the answers. (3) The first "R" is for "read." Use the techniques described above—especially skimming for main ideas and understanding supporting detail—for your first and second readings of the material. (4) The second "R" stands for "recite." This step is similar to the "paraphrasing" technique mentioned above. If you retell or summarize what you have read in some way—orally to yourself or someone else or in writing—you will understand and remember it better. (5) The third and final "R" is for "review." After you have learned the material well, you should review it at intervals—perhaps the next day, then after a few weeks, and finally before a test.

To review, the five steps of the SQ3R system are: *survey*, *question*, *read*, *recite*, and *review*. You can use these techniques to learn any kind of material, but they are probably most useful for textbook or technical reading.

B. Active Reading

All of the above steps will help you to *read actively*. Passive reading is ineffective reading: passive readers often see words without understanding meaning. They may not be able to retell what they have read, make use of the information, or remember even the main ideas. Active readers, on the other hand, read more with their brains than with their eyes. They *think* as they read, perhaps by relating new information to what they already know about the topic, perhaps by "talking with the author" in their own minds.

One way to become an active reader is to *mark* the books that you own. A book doesn't really "belong" to you until you "own" (understand and can make use of) the information inside the book. If you underline or highlight important phrases and make notes in the margins (main ideas and lists of supporting details, your reactions, questions to answer, and so on), you will be "reading actively." And when you read actively (with your hand and your brain as well as your eyes), you will understand better and remember the information longer. You will be an effective study-reader and a successful student.

Reading Skill: Understanding Supporting Detail
Reading Activity: Outlining and Summarizing

ARTICLE: What are Reading Skills and Strategies?

INSTRUCTIONS: To show that you have understood the article "What are Reading Skills and Strategies," fill in the blanks in this outline. Write brief notes in your own words.

I. Reading for Meaning

A. Getting the main Idea

1. Recognizing the main idea (stated)

2. _____

3. _____

4. Asking and answering a main-idea question

B. _____

1. Listing details (reasons, events, steps, etc.)

2. _____

3. _____

C. Making inferences

1. _____

2. Recognizing the author's point of view

3. _____

II. Reading faster while understanding more

A. _____

B. _____

C. Having a purpose in mind (reading selectively)

D. _____

1. Avoiding vocalization

2. _____

3. _____

III. _____

A. The SQ3R system

1. **S** _____

2. **Q** _____

3. **Reading** _____

4. **R** _____

5. **R** _____

B. _____

1. _____

2. Marking a book

INSTRUCTIONS: From your notes in the above outline, write a brief summary of the article "What are Reading Strategies and Skills?" Remember that an effective summary of any material is:

- correct (It tells what the reading says)
- in your own words (It is not a copy of the original material.)
- as short (concise) as possible
- complete (It must cover all the important points.)

ANSWER KEY: OUTLINE AND SUMMARY

NOTE: Your answers may not contain exactly the same words as mine, but they must contain the general information (the main ideas and supporting details) in the correct relationship to one another.

Outline: "What are Reading Skills and Strategies?"

I. Reading for Meaning

A. Getting the main Idea

1. Recognizing the main idea (stated)
2. Choosing the main idea (multiple choice)
3. Stating the main idea (topic + controlling idea)
4. Asking and answering a main-idea question

B. Understanding Supporting Detail

1. Listing details (reasons, events, steps, etc.)
2. Outlining
3. Paraphrasing (retelling or summarizing)

C. Making inferences

1. Understanding what is implied
2. Recognizing the author's point of view
3. Separating fact from opinion

II. Reading faster while understanding more

A. Scanning for specific information

B. Skimming for main ideas

C. Having a purpose in mind (reading selectively)

D. Improving reading speed

1. Avoiding vocalization
2. Avoiding regression
3. Increasing the eye span

III. Study-reading

A. The SQ3R system

1. Surveying a book (previewing)
2. Questioning
3. Reading
4. Reciting
5. Reviewing

B. Active reading

1. Thinking while reading
2. Marking a book

SUMMARY "What are Reading Skills and Strategies?"

All reading is really *reading for meaning*. To read for meaning, you must first *get the main ideas*¹ and then *understand the supporting detail* (the reasons, the events, the steps, the examples, and so on). You can show that you understand the meaning by stating the main idea and *listing* or *outlining* the details and/or by *paraphrasing* (retelling or summarizing) the information orally or in writing. Then you can go beyond the literal meaning of the words to *make inferences*—to *understand what is implied*, to *recognize the author's point of view*, and to *separate fact from opinion*.

As soon as you understand meaning, you can learn to *read faster while understanding more*. One fast-reading technique—used most often for lists, charts, maps, and other visuals, is *scanning for information*. Another is *skimming for main ideas*. A third is *having a purpose in mind*—so that you can read only the parts you need for your purpose and skip or skim the other words quickly. Other ways to *improve reading speed* are to *avoid vocalization*, *avoid regression*, and *increase your eye span*.

If you are in school or need to understand technical material, you probably also need the techniques of *study-reading*. If you use *the SQ3R system*, you will probably *survey* a textbook before you begin to study it. You will *question* the material before you *read* an assignment, and later you will *recite* and *review* what you have learned. You will practice *active reading* by *thinking as you read*. Finally, you will probably *mark your book* by *underlining*, *highlighting*, and *making notes in the margins*.

¹ To learn to "get the main idea," you can follow these steps:

- Read paragraphs or passages in which the main idea is *stated* in a topic sentence. Find the topic sentence.
- Read paragraphs or passages in which a choice of main-idea statements is supplied. Choose the *most general* statement—the sentence that tells the point the writer made about the topic.
- Read well-organized paragraphs or passages in which the main idea is clearly indicated. To *state* the main idea, say or write one or two *general* statements. These sentences must tell (summarize) the writer's main point about the topic of the reading selection.
- Another way to get the main idea is to ask *one* general question that the paragraph or passage answers. If your answer to this question is a brief summary of the important information in the reading selection, then you have "gotten the main idea."