

# **Teach and Assess Critical Readers and Writers Using Socratic Circles**

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Do you struggle to push your students beyond rote summary or superficial interpretation of literature? Have you ever found yourself trying to explain the significance of a great piece of literature to students who just don't "get it"? Are any of your students more interested in writing what you want to hear than communicating original ideas?

We can all recognize critical thought (or the lack thereof) when we see it in student work. Many students, having mastered basic reading comprehension skills, reach a plateau and fail to develop an analytic approach that allows for sophisticated appreciation of novels, nonfiction, poetry, or periodicals.

This workshop will present a discussion format to teach and assess the critical thinking skills that underlie quality reading and writing. Socratic circles are a rigorous alternative to literature circles that allow for focused instruction of analytic skills. Students develop critical thinking skills as they collaboratively build meaning from a variety of sources. The analytic focus and contagious energy of this student-centered exchange drive the writing process and contribute to lively classroom discourse.

**Intended Audience: Upper Elementary, Middle School, and High School (English/Humanities)**

Education Week

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Commentary

## Reading-Comprehension Skills? What Are They Really?

By E.D. Hirsch Jr.

The reading-test scores of 4th graders have risen. But, somehow, that improvement has not resulted in higher reading scores for grade 8 and beyond. What's the explanation? Why don't later advances in reading go hand in hand with earlier ones?

*It used to be thought that once a student learned how to sound out words fluently and accurately, later reading gains would follow naturally through wide reading. There is merit in this idea. Wide reading will certainly enhance students' general knowledge and vocabulary, and thus enable them to read still more widely. That's all very true; wide reading should certainly be encouraged. But suppose you are a student who can sound out words fluently and accurately, but cannot successfully understand much of what you read on your own. It's hard to see how wide reading will help such a student. It's doubtful that he or she will readily engage in such an arduous and confusing activity, and equally doubtful that doing so will foster big improvements in reading proficiency.*

*For such uncomprehending students (and test scores suggest that there are many of them), wide reading is hard and unrewarding. For them, the theory of a natural progression—from decoding, to opportunities for wide reading, thence to high general reading ability—doesn't currently work. The reasons for the failure of this natural progression provide, I believe, an explanation for the current pattern of improved reading scores in early grades, followed by low and stagnant reading scores in later grades.*

Enhancing students' general knowledge is the most promising approach to enhancing their ability to comprehend what they read.

Professor Joseph Torgesen and his colleagues at Florida State University have shown that reading tests in succeeding grades tend to test different aspects and dimensions of reading. In early grades, the most important factors are fluency and accuracy of decoding, but in later grades the tests place an ever-increasing emphasis on the student's previously acquired knowledge. It would seem that to achieve higher reading scores in later grades, the missing ingredient is not primarily technical skill—not even skill in performing comprehension strategies—but knowledge. This hypothesis is supported by analyses of the gains induced when students practice comprehension strategies. The small gains quickly level off. Six lessons in comprehension strategies yield as much or as little benefit as 25 lessons. The very limited efficacy of strategy-practicing is explained by the fact that the most important factor in reading comprehension is the reader's prior knowledge about the topic, as recent cognitive science has determined.

It follows that enhancing students' general knowledge is the most promising approach to enhancing their ability to comprehend what they read. Let's test out this hypothesis with a concrete example. (The passage is chosen with the expectation that most readers will not be able to understand it. As will be seen, that's the point.) The example was chosen completely at random from one of the most influential books ever written:

*A manifold, contained in an intuition which I call mine, is represented, by means of the synthesis of the understanding, as belonging to the necessary unity of self-consciousness; and this is effected by means of the category.*

Some readers of *Education Week* may well understand that sentence, and know instantly where it came from: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. But for those readers who are not familiar with the argument of

Kant's book, their going on to read the next sentence will probably not further enhance their comprehension:

*This requirement of a category therefore shows that the empirical consciousness of a given manifold in a single intuition is subject to a pure self-consciousness a priori, just as is empirical intuition to a pure sensible intuition, which likewise takes place a priori.*

And so on.

Now pretend you are in the position of an elementary school student taking a reading test, and are asked a typical multiple-choice question about this passage:

The main idea of this passage is:

1. Without a manifold, one cannot call an intuition "mine."
2. Intuition must precede understanding.
3. Intuition must occur through a category.
4. Self-consciousness is necessary to understanding.

To help you answer, what if I offered you a bit of extra time so you could summarize, classify, and find the main idea? Didn't help? How about "questioning the author": What is Kant trying to get at here? Still clueless?

But here's a clue: Learn, as background, the philosophical problem Kant was trying to solve, and the structure of how he attempted to solve it. Then you will find out that the right answer is No. 3. Of course, that will take quite a bit of what psychologists call "domain-specific knowledge." But surely that pursuit would be more worthwhile than time fruitlessly spent in practicing reading strategies such as "finding the main idea" and "clarifying" and "summarizing." The vast amount of time that teachers and students are spending on those strategy exercises is time that they aren't spending in learning about domains of knowledge critical for understanding books, newspapers, and newscasts.

Let's look at an easy example from a New York state reading test for grade 4. It begins as follows:

*There is a path that starts in Maine and ends in Georgia, 2,167 miles later. This path is called the Appalachian Trail. If you want, you can walk the whole way, although only some people who try to do this actually make it, because it is so far, and they get tired. The idea for the trail came from a man named Benton MacKaye. In 1921, he wrote an article about how people needed a nearby place where they could enjoy nature and take a break from work. He thought the Appalachian Mountains would be perfect for this.*

The passage goes on for a while, and then come the questions. The first one concerns, of course, the main idea:

This article is mostly about:

1. How the Appalachian Trail came to exist.
2. When people can visit the Appalachian Trail.
3. Who hikes the most on the Appalachian Trail.
4. Why people work together on the Appalachian Trail.

Try to put yourself in the position of a disadvantaged 4th grader who knows nothing of hiking, does not know the difference between an Appalachian-type mountain and a Himalayan-type mountain, does not know just where exactly Maine and Georgia are, and does not grasp what it means to "enjoy nature." The Appalachian Trail might become as hard for her as Immanuel Kant is to most adult readers. Such a child, though much trained in comprehension strategies, might nonetheless answer the question incorrectly. Her advantaged counterpart, equally well trained in comprehension strategies, is not innately smarter, but happens to be familiar with hiking in the Appalachians, has been to Maine and Georgia, and has had a lot of experience of "enjoying nature"; this child easily answers the question correctly. But was it because

she had practiced comprehension strategies, or was it because she had the background knowledge readily to comprehend what the passage is saying? Remember Kant!

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Consider how schools are reacting to the pressure of the No Child Left Behind Act in order to score higher on reading tests. You can gain an insight into their activities from an excellent front-page story that Linda Perlstein wrote some months ago in *The Washington Post* about things children are doing in the many hours being spent on “reading” (May 31, 2004):

*Here is 9-year-old Zulma Berrios’ take on the school day: “In the morning we read. Then we go to Mrs. Witthaus and read. Then after lunch we read. Then we read some more.”*

These reading and writing periods, Perlstein points out, come at the expense of classes in history, science, and art. The reading materials themselves are quite vapid. In this particular class, the children were reading a book about a grasshopper storm. But the point of the class was not to learn anything in depth about grasshoppers; the point was to learn how to ferret meaning out of a text by using formal “strategies.”

*For 50 minutes, Tracey Witthaus pulls out a small group of 3rd graders—including Zulma—for Soar to Success, an intensive reading-comprehension program used at many county schools. Instead of studying school desegregation and the anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, Zulma’s group finishes a book about a grasshopper storm and practices reading strategies: Predict, summarize, question, clarify.*

*“Clarify,” said Zulma, who began the year reading at the late 1st grade level. “When I come to a word I don’t know, I look for chunks I do. Reminded. Re-mine-ded.”*

*“Clarify,” said Zulma’s classmate Erick Diaz, 9, who began the year reading at a 2nd grade level. “When I come to a word I don’t know, I look for chunks I do. Hailstones. Hail-ston-es.”*

The teachers tell Perlstein that all this activity doesn’t seem to be working.

The blame for all this drill-and-kill activity is being laid on the federal No Child Left Behind law and the standardized tests that are being used to fulfill its provisions.

The blame for all this drill-and-kill activity is being laid on the federal No Child Left Behind law and the standardized tests that are being used to fulfill its provisions. But I have a different take. I would lay the blame for these deadly activities on inadequate theories of reading. Schools have been assuming that skills-oriented, test-prep activity in comprehension strategies will improve test scores in reading. Yet they haven’t done so significantly. On the other hand, there is evidence, not just from cognitive science, but also from the successes of Core Knowledge schools, that cumulatively building up students’ general knowledge leads to much higher reading scores in later grades, where the reading scores really count. It’s in later grades, 6-12, that the reading scores really count because, after all, gains in the early grades are not very useful if, subsequently, those same students, when they get to middle school and then high school, and are about to become workers and citizens, are not able to read and learn proficiently.

What shall teachers do, then, instead of continuing to teach trivial stories in basal readers in the service of practicing deadening comprehension strategies? Well, that is a subject I pursue in my new book, *The Knowledge Deficit*. Outlining the solution here would take me far beyond the space allotted. Suffice it to say that achieving a more adequate approach to reading will require us to qualify the ideas and assumptions that now underlie comprehension exercises in the basals as well as much expertise in the field of reading. And it will cause us instead to focus laser-like on imparting knowledge to children, starting no later than kindergarten—the substantial knowledge of words and the world that will be essential to their later proficiency in reading.

This systematic, knowledge-based approach will be radically different from the approach advocated by many reading experts, and currently embodied in reading programs that cost publishers tens of millions to make and schools hundreds of millions to buy.

With all that expertise and money ranged against a radical change of ideas, one can only worry and tremble. As Dr. Johnson once observed, after he had commonsensically challenged a long-received idea:

“I am almost frightened at my own temerity; and when I estimate the fame and the strength of those that maintain the contrary opinion, am ready to sink down in reverential silence.”

But on the other hand, Dr. Johnson turned out to be right.

E.D. Hirsch Jr., the author of *The Knowledge Deficit*, set for release this week by Houghton Mifflin, is a retired professor of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, Va., and the founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

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COMMENTARY

## Bibliophobia

By Will Fitzhugh

**As long as the English department controls reading and writing in schools, the reading will be fiction, and the writing will be personal, creative, or the five-paragraph essay.**

*The Boston Globe* reported recently that Michelle Wie, the 16-year-old Korean-American golfing phenomenon, not only speaks Korean and English, but also has taken four years of Japanese and is beginning to study Mandarin Chinese. She is planning to apply early to Stanford University. I would be willing to bet, however, that in her high school academic writing has been limited to the five-paragraph essay, and outside reading assignments never include a complete nonfiction book.

For the last two years, and especially since the National Endowment for the Arts unveiled the findings of its large study of the reading of fiction in the United States, I have been seeking funding for a much smaller study of the assignment of complete *nonfiction* books in U.S. public high schools. This proposed study, which the education historian Diane Ravitch calls “timely and relevant,” has met with little interest, having so far been turned down by the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as a number of foundations and institutes both large and small.

Still, I have a fair amount of anecdotal evidence—some of it from people who would be quite shocked to hear that high school English departments were no longer assigning any complete *novels*—that the nonassignment of nonfiction books on subjects like history is unremarkable and, in fact, accepted.

A partner in a Boston law firm, for instance, told me there was no point in such a study, because everyone knows history books aren’t assigned in schools. This was the case, he said, even decades ago at his own alma mater, Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., where he was assigned only selections, readings, and the like, never a complete book. A senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, sometimes thought of as a conservative place, said when I lamented the fact that I couldn’t find anyone who agreed that high school students should be required to read at least one nonfiction book, “The only hope is parents introducing their kids to reading, and that’s a mighty slim hope.”

For the last two decades, I have been working to encourage the writing of history research papers by high school students. But it has become apparent to me that one of the problems involved in getting students to undertake such a task is that so many of them do not read any history, and so have little to write about. Even so, as I began to try to find out more about the reading of nonfiction books in high school generally, I found more and more apathy and acceptance of the situation. As long as the English department controls reading and writing in schools, the reading will be fiction, and the writing will be personal, creative, or the five-paragraph essay.

Why is this important? ACT Inc. found last spring that 49 percent of our high school graduates (half of the 70 percent who *do* graduate) cannot read at the level required by freshman college texts. Common sense, buttressed by such work as that of E.D. Hirsch Jr., would lead to the conclusion that perhaps one reason so many students need remedial work in college and don’t return for sophomore year is that they have never read a nonfiction book, and thus have so little knowledge that they don’t know what their professors are talking about.

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These days, of course, there is a great deal of attention given to many educational issues, and one of the popular Edupundit maxims is that the most important variable in student academic achievement is teacher quality. So lots of attention and many millions of dollars go into teacher training, retraining, professional development, and the like.

The truth may lie elsewhere. The most important variable in student academic achievement is, in my view, student academic work. Those who concern themselves with teacher quality only assume that better teachers will lead to more student work. If they would care to look, however, examples of both lousy teachers with diligent students who do well and superior teachers with students who do no academic work are everywhere to be found.

Ignoring academic writing and the reading of nonfiction books at the high school level can only prolong our national bout of remediation and failure in college. Let's find out whether our high school students are indeed discouraged from reading a history book and writing a serious term paper. Then we may be able to turn more of our attention to assigning the kind of academic work that leads to the levels of achievement we wish for students.

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<b>Dialogue</b>	<b>Debate</b>
Dialogue is collaborative. Two or more sides work together toward common understanding.	Debate is oppositional. Two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.	In debate, winning is the goal.
In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.	In debate, one listens to the other side to find flaws and to counter its arguments.
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Debate affirms a person's own point of view.
Dialogue complicates positions and issues.	Debate simplifies positions and issues.
Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.	Debate defends assumptions as truth.
Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.	Debate causes critique of the other position.
It is acceptable to change one's position.	It is a sign of weakness and defeat to change one's position.
Dialogue is flexible in nature.	Debate is rigid in nature.
Dialogue stresses the skill of synthesis.	Debate stresses the skill of analysis.
Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than either of the original solutions.	Debate defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
Dialogue strives for multiplicity in perspective.	Debate strives for singularity in perspective.
Dialogue affirms the relationship between the participants through collaboration.	Debate affirms one's own strength in opposition to other points of view.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to change.	Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenges to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.	In debate, one searches for glaring differences.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other position.	In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.	Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship, and often belittles or deprecates the other position.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer, and that together they can put them into a workable answer.	Debate assumes there is a right answer and that someone has it.
Dialogue encourages depolarization of an issue.	Debate encourages polarization of an issue.
In dialogue, everyone is part of the solution to the problem.	In debate, one person or viewpoint wins over the other.
Dialogue affirms the idea of people learning from each other.	Debate affirms the idea of people learning individually in competition with others.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate implies a conclusion.

FIGURE 3.2 Dialogue vs. Debate chart ("Comparison of Dialogue and Debate" reprinted with permission of Saskatchewan Learning, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada)

# ***SOCRATIC CIRCLE GRADING CRITERIA***

## **Responding to Literature**

Make a thoughtful connection between the text and the world at large or life in general.

Thoughts are derived from the text.

## **Group Collaboration**

Ask probing questions that build on others' ideas and advance the group toward greater understanding.

Facilitate participation of all members.

### Close Reading Strategies for Poetry

Your poem/song annotation must show evidence of CAREFUL READING and CRITICAL THINKING.

1. Read the poem from beginning to end.
2. Write any questions that have come to mind in the questions column.
3. Hypothesize about the author's overall message.
4. Reread the poem from beginning to end. Look for clues about your questions. Find evidence that might support or contradict your initial hypothesis.
5. As you read the poem for the **THIRD TIME**, you should make detailed notes in both the Questions and Interpretation columns. You can help to illustrate your thinking by underlining or circling portions of the text. Make notes about any of the following:
  - ✓ Language: tone, style, word choice
  - ✓ Devices: imagery, metaphor, simile, repetition, symbols
  - ✓ Organization: couplets, sequence of ideas, structure
  - ✓ Themes: ideas that run throughout the poem (don't limit yourself to only one)
  - ✓ Connections: to other works by same author, to the author's life, to the time period, to something else discussed in class

Reading Comprehension	Self Evaluation	Peer Evaluation	Teacher Evaluation
The reader has made a variety of notes regarding language, devices, organization, etc.			
The reader's notes show critical thought on a number of issues.			
<b>Specific observations are combined to form an OVERALL INTERPRETATION.</b>			

### *Explanatory Paragraph*

Your paragraph should focus on an important idea or the main message you noticed as you made your notes and participated in class discussions. Expand on the thinking in your notes. You **MUST** provide examples or quotations from the poem to support your reasoning.

Written Communication	Self Evaluation	Peer Evaluation	Teacher Evaluation
The main message is clearly stated.			
The writer elaborates on the message showing evidence of complex thinking.			
Examples and/or quotes from the piece are used to support reasoning.			
Ideas fit together well. The writer does not jump suddenly from one point to the next.			

## Sample Student Paragraph

### First Attempt (immediately following Socratic circle discussion)

The poem "Race Politics" (Luis J. Rodriguez) mainly states how different people were according to their race and origins and how so many people were against difference. In the poem, the author tells us in a number of ways how each side was. For example: one side was called South Gate where white Americans lived and the other side, Watts was where the colored and natives were. In the poem, there were two kids (ages 6 and 9) that were shopping for la jefita decided to get the "good food over on the other side of the tracks". This part of the text states that the two kids had a boss referred to as "la jefita" and that the other side had a much better food market, "good food". They knew it was dangerous to cross because it states, "We dared each other. Laughed a little. Thought about it. Said what's the big deal. Thought about that. Decided we were men not boys." The part about being men, not boys caught my attention because they were 6 and 9 years old and maybe in their side of the land, the pressure for growing up was hard on them and gave them too much courage. They crossed to the other side and "Five teenagers on bikes. Plenty reason to knock the groceries from our arms. Plenty reason to get my brother by the throat, taking turns punching him in the face." Five American teenagers beat the older kid up for crossing the tracks and one thing that caught my attention as well was when it said, "Plenty reason" (said by the 6 year old) and thought that he knew it was dangerous to cross and not right and he also said: "Oh my brother, how he was bad. Tough dude. Afraid of nothing. I was afraid of him." So maybe he knew they were going to get in trouble, but decided to be tough, like his older brother.

### Subsequent Revised Version

The overall message of "Race Politics" was how different life styles and beliefs are divided by race. In the poem, there is one land divided in two. One side, Watts, is where the blacks and Hispanics live in a poor environment and the other side, South Gate, is populated with whites and Americans who live a good and wealthy life. Racial divisions affect children in ways that can lead them to dangerous consequences. Their pressure of growing up and becoming men can make them think they have the strength that they don't have. They can think that they can cross to the other side and do what they please because their education didn't tell or warn them how important and crucial race used to be. In America, children were turned against opposite or different races and were influenced to mistreat what they didn't agree with. If black or Mexican children were seen on their opposite side, they would be beat or possibly killed depending probably on what they were doing there, on the "wrong" side. Racial division can be a dangerous thing for any person, especially children that have curiosity of what lies on the other side of their land.

(<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/read/118622.htm>)

## How About Adolescent Literacy and Ways to Support Teachers in Meeting Students' Needs

Commission on Reading

Provide a research-based approach that acknowledges the complexity and addresses the needs

Reading has produced a statement, "[On Reading, Learning to Read, and Effective Reading Instruction](#)," that defines reading as a complex,

in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and their knowledge of their own reading process. A reader's competence continues to grow through engagement with various types of texts

and academic discourses and disciplinary concepts in such fields as science, mathematics, and the social sciences that require different reading approaches (Langer, 2005). These new forms, purposes, and processing demands require that teachers show, demonstrate, and make visible to students how literacy operates

in the classroom, using literacy as a social and political endeavor in which they engage to make meaning and act upon their worlds. Their texts range from clothing to the classroom it is important for teachers to recognize and value the multiple literacy resources students bring to the acquisition of school literacy.

Understanding how, why, and what we read are important parts of the literacy curriculum (Applebee, 1996; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko & Hurwitz, 1999). Research on student achievement (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran, 2003). However, high stakes testing, such as high school exit exams, is not only a barrier to reading (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Madaus, 1998) Limited, "one right answer" or "main idea" models of reading run counter to recent research (Applebee, Donahue, Reese & Phillips, 1996; Taylor et al., 1999).

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Reading in social and cognitive realms, with textual understandings growing from students' knowledge of their worlds to knowledge of the external world (Langer, 2005). Langer et al. found that literacy programs that successfully teach at-risk students emphasize student conversations to make those connections.

For all readers need opportunities and instructional support to read many and diverse types of texts in order to gain experience, build fluency, and develop reading skills (Langer, 2000). Through extensive reading of a range of texts, supported by strategy lessons and discussions, readers become familiar with written language and read efficiently and effectively. Conversations about their reading that focus on the strategies they use and their language knowledge help adolescents build

Reading instruction in phonics or decoding skills (Ivey and Baker, 2004). Research summarized in the National Reading Panel report noted that the benefits of phonics instruction are most apparent in the early elementary grades. Phonics instruction has not been seen to improve reading comprehension for older students (National Reading Panel, 2000). In cases where phonics is targeted and embedded in authentic reading experiences.

Instruction focused on basic skills can lead to the mislabeling of some secondary readers as "struggling readers" and "non-readers" because they lack extensive reading experience or in more complex ways. A large percentage of secondary readers who are so mislabeled are students of color and/or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This may perpetuate low literacy achievement rather than improve their competence and engagement in complex reading tasks. (Allington, 2001; Bull, 1991; Sizer, 1992). In addition, prescriptive, skills-based reading instruction mislocates the problem as the students' failure to learn, rather than

Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller, 2001)

to deeper understandings of texts and increase their ability to generate ideas and knowledge for their own uses (Newmann, King & Rigdon, 199

knowledge in the larger curriculum and on strategies for thinking during literacy acts (Darling-Hammond and Falk, 1997; Langer, 2000; Smith, 1998) should focus on the critical components above.

texts in a variety of genres and

to provide diverse experiences. Although many of these texts will be required by the curriculum, others should be self-selected and of high interest to the reader. Text should be broadly viewed and offer readers the experiences they need to read and construct meaning with more challenging texts. Text should be broadly viewed

texts that are authentic,

Such discussion should lead to diverse interpretations of a text that deepen the conversation.

how they engage with texts:

Text?

Text?

breaks down?

Texts that help them to:

Engage in various disciplines and genres

Understand social, political, and historical content and purposes within texts

Connect texts, and between texts and personal experiences to act on and react to the world.

Appreciate the richness of texts and layers of complexity

Texts that tap students' diverse interests and represent a range of difficulty

Developments that assist them to:

Build on their literate backgrounds and school literacy

Engage in learning in their disciplines

Make meaning with text and provide appropriate, strategic assistance to read course content effectively

Engage in conversations regarding texts that are authentic and relevant to real life experiences.

Encourage students to engage in critical examinations of texts as they dissect, deconstruct, and re-construct in an effort to engage in meaning making and construction

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