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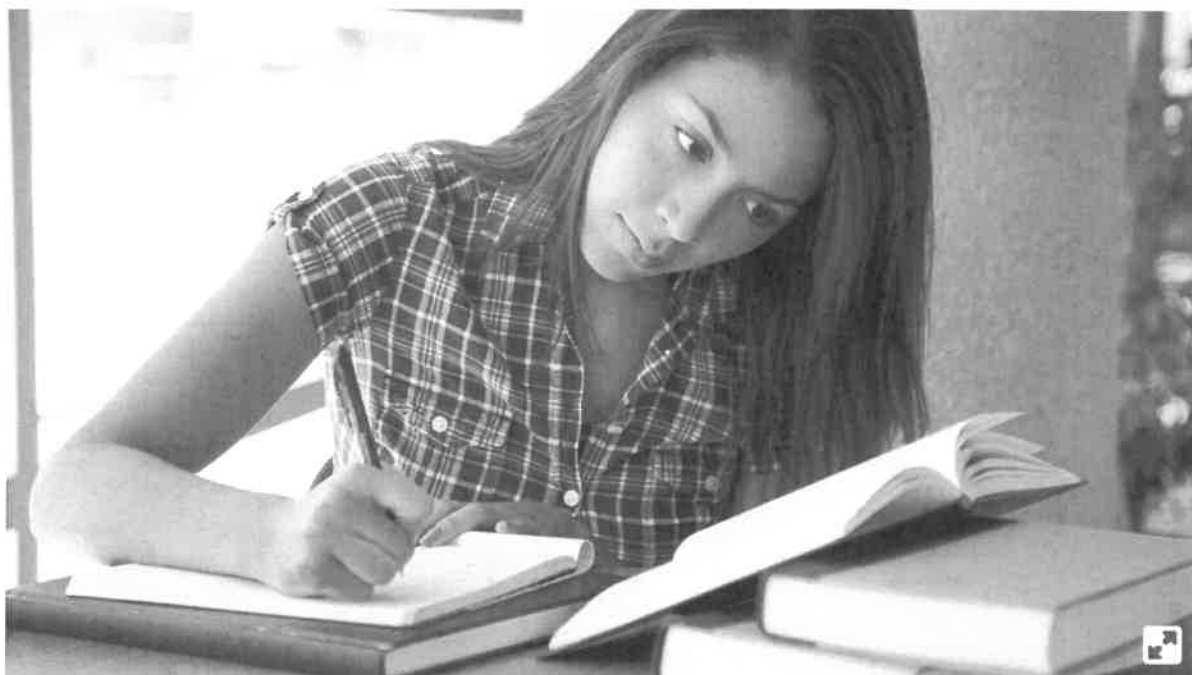
## LITERACY

**Encouraging Students to Read for Deeper Comprehension**

Attentive coaching and carefully crafted assessments guide high school students toward literacy skills that last a lifetime.

**By** *Benjamin Barbour*

March 16, 2021



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We've all had moments when a student has read an assigned document or chapter but retained little. Whether they didn't take the time to look up new words, seek help for confusing portions, or reread conceptually or linguistically demanding sections, the results are often clear when you check for understanding: The student's responses might be correct but lack nuance or complexity.

Good reading is a learned skill, and it's particularly challenging when distractions are plentiful. Practice helps students read in a mindful manner.

**SCAFFOLDING AND THE FIRST READ**

Sometimes the size of a reading intimidates students. Break up the reading into manageable chunks. After each chunk, ask a single question or give a short comprehension quiz. This strategy can be particularly helpful for students who have learning disabilities or struggle to read for other reasons.

Students often find it advantageous to just read a new text without having to take notes, annotate, or think about an assessment—an initial, unencumbered feel for substance and language can set them up well for deeper understanding later. Encourage students to take that first pass at texts or passages aloud in class, without stopping to analyze; you can clarify points and help with pronunciation along the way.

After that once-over read, have students read again; then they're primed to read for nuance. At this point, you can incorporate some of the recommendations below.



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### ANNOTATING THE TEXT

Annotation, or text talk, helps students conduct a dialogue with reading materials. This conversation can take many forms.

If you're using digital resources that allow students to write on the text, encourage them to define unknown words, ask questions, or make comments in the margins, or use symbols to express surprise, pleasure, anger, confusion, or agreement.

Font colors or highlighting can also help them connect with the digital text. Sometimes a standard color system is helpful—for example, pink for key points, green for confusion, and yellow for quotes. Students can also highlight in separate colors facts or phrases that they think will definitely be on the test or might be on the test.

If students have a physical notebook, they can use it to do the following:

1. Define unknown words.
2. Write down the two or three most important facts from each of the reading's subheads.
3. Complete a *KWL chart* (<https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/kwl>) for the lesson (or each portion of the lesson).
4. Implement a note-taking strategy such as the *Cornell Strategy* (<http://lsc.cornell.edu/how-to-study/taking-notes/cornell-note-taking-system/>) OR *any other method* (<http://lsc.cornell.edu/how-to-study/reading-strategies/textbook-reading-systems/>) while reading the text.

You can periodically check and grade physical notebooks too.

## SHORT WRITTEN RESPONSES

I'm a fan of *short writing assessments* (</article/power-short-writing-assignments>)—even ones that are just a sentence. When students decipher concepts simply and succinctly, they're primed to contemplate what they read at a deeper level. Summarizing, for instance, obliges them to read the text several times, identify key concepts and main points, and decode complex passages.

Try asking students to summarize a lesson or chapter in five to seven sentences. If the reading is broken up into sections, ask them to summarize each section in a single, grammatically correct sentence. Students can read their sentences or share them on the board.

## RECALL ASSESSMENTS

Fill-in-the-blank notes or questions rarely rise above *Webb's Depth of Knowledge*

(</blog/webbs-depth-knowledge-increase-rigor-gerald-aungst>) Level 1, "basic recall of information." Nonetheless, they can be an important first step in reading comprehension.

Try giving students a rudimentary exercise or even worksheet in which they fill in missing words related to the assigned reading. For example, I give students a "guided reading" that requires them to answer very basic questions or complete fill-in-the-blank questions that correlate identically to the reading.

You can also try a comprehension quiz that demands a close reading of the text. With a mix of multiple-choice, matching, and fill-in-the-blank questions, the quiz shouldn't require strategic or extended thinking—students will only need to demonstrate the basics by locating and reproducing information in a straightforward manner.

Depth of Knowledge Level 1 assignments work best as a stepping-stone for further analysis.

## CONVERSATION ASSESSMENTS

Oral assessments in the style of an informal conversation also work. After students complete a reading, ask a series of prepared questions; unprepared follow-ups and queries can also be effective and more natural. With this approach, students tend to read the material carefully, knowing they might be put on the spot.

When preparing the questions, keep track of the pages where students find the answers to the questions. If a student has difficulty answering a question, I say, "Read page 32. I'll get back to you in a few minutes." Then, I move on to another student, making sure to circle back to the original student after allowing enough time for them to find the answer.

## STUDENT-MADE ASSESSMENTS

When students create their own assessments using an assigned text, they often read in a new and dynamic way. Ask them to create their own study guides and reading comprehension quizzes for their classmates.

Their reading comprehension quizzes can consist of fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, and matching questions. If you want to challenge students even more, introduce them to Webb's Depth of Knowledge and ask them to create a few questions that satisfy one of the higher levels of thinking.

Teachers are accustomed to reading, we like reading, and for many of us reading is easy. This is not the case with all of our students. Before we employ any strategies, we first need to empathize with those for whom reading does not come so naturally.

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## LITERACY

*A Different Approach to Teaching Annotation*

Annotation 'rules' can zap students' natural curiosity, but building a culture of observation encourages them to ask questions.

**By** *Praise Lee*

March 10, 2023

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## A Different Approach to Teaching Annotation

Annotation 'rules' can zap students' natural curiosity, but building a culture of observation encourages them to ask questions.

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The act of reading elicits a feeling of curiosity. We notice stuff, certain words or phrases that make us pause or experience a feeling of weight. I know this is true for adult readers, for high school readers, and for my own children. My 3-year-old son stops me while we read together so that he can touch illustrations or ask random questions. When my 6-year-old daughter reads, her eyes grow wide as she shouts, "Wait! I see something!"

My high school students notice stuff, too. Their eyes also grow wide with recognition. They see repetitions and discrepancies. They experience cognitive dissonance and ask questions. However, at the beginning of the school year, many consistently claim, "I don't know" or "I don't see anything," when approaching an unfamiliar text. They annotate nothing or highlight everything. Only after months of observation routines do they admit the truth: They didn't think their annotations would be correct.

In the late 1990s before No Child Left Behind, the National Reading Panel performed a large-scale secondary analysis to determine the effectiveness of reading instruction. Not surprisingly, they learned that teaching reading

comprehension does in fact improve reading, which ignited a series of conditional arguments. If I must teach comprehension, I should teach how to annotate correctly. If there are correct ways, there must be incorrect ways. If there are incorrect ways, there must be ways to assess.

The unsettling consequence of using annotations to assess comprehension is that annotations are no longer used to record curiosity or investigation while reading. Perhaps this is why students constantly ask if their annotations are correct or, more compellingly, why they express contempt toward annotating.



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## BUILDING A CULTURE OF OBSERVATION

Allow me to make myself clear: I am not asking students to stop annotating. I am asking teachers to guide students to observe as a habit of mind, rather than explicitly teach how to annotate.

When we prescriptively teach annotating, students comply rather than comprehend. When we use annotation guides, students scan the text for answers rather than observe and question. When we grade annotations, students

are afraid of being incorrect. The more explicitly we teach it, the more they hate it.

Often, teaching annotation leads students to notice what the teacher has decided is important, and they too quickly forfeit their own observations and ideas in order to finish an assignment. Instead, teachers must explicitly reframe the skill of annotation and build a culture of observation.

## 6 WAYS TO ENCOURAGE OBSERVATION

1. Prioritize “observing text” as a habit of mind. Insist that “good reading” is not fast or perfect reading. Good readers slow down to observe, to notice. Observe texts together, and annotate collectively. Do not reject any observation, even if it sounds wrong.

2. Reframe annotation, and invite students to observe through mantras.

- “No one knows what’s important on the first read; trust what you notice—it could matter!”
- “I’m not asking you to find something specific or deep. Notice any little thing.”
- “Can you take this big text and break it down into little parts? What do you see?”

3. Reframe annotation using different analogies or metaphors.

- “Read with a pencil. Let the pencil be an extension of your thoughts—from brain, to arm, to pencil, to paper.”
- “Have you ever played I Spy? I Spy stuff, and don’t judge what you find.”
- “Don’t run—walk. Walk through the text, and smell the flowers. Notice everything.”

4. Exemplify various styles of annotations. Laud and display different styles. Victoria loves colors, Angel uses arrows, John draws boxes around phrases, and Oscar only uses a pencil. Omit examples that have scant annotations.

5. Model annotation using different students. While collectively annotating, ask different students to annotate on a projected text as the class shouts out what they notice. Then explicitly state that the style doesn’t matter. What matters is the content—the stuff you notice!

6. Encourage marking words and phrases. Patricia Kain’s essay

(<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-do-close-reading>) from the Harvard College Writing Center invites students to focus on words and phrases instead of whole sentences. This is the only suggestion for annotation that I give explicitly. I do not correct their annotations but explain that words and phrases create connections in a way that whole sentences do not. A repetition of phrases or discrepant word choices could lead to important discoveries.

The suggestions above seem simple, but they must be implemented consistently to build a culture. Teachers must genuinely forfeit their own sense of correctness and resist the lure of leading students to the teacher’s answers. Building a culture will require more time, patience, and practice, but not necessarily extra work.

Teachers will no longer have to tediously grade annotations, trying to guess whether a student understands the text. Students will no longer have to guess what the teacher wants them to mark down and feel like they cannot master a reading assignment. Instead, both will engage in a more observational and analytical learning culture that will pay off in time and energy when students begin to meaningfully engage with texts. They will shout, "Wait! I see something!" and endearingly take photos of their messy annotations, proud of all the scribbles and arrows and stuff that only they can understand.

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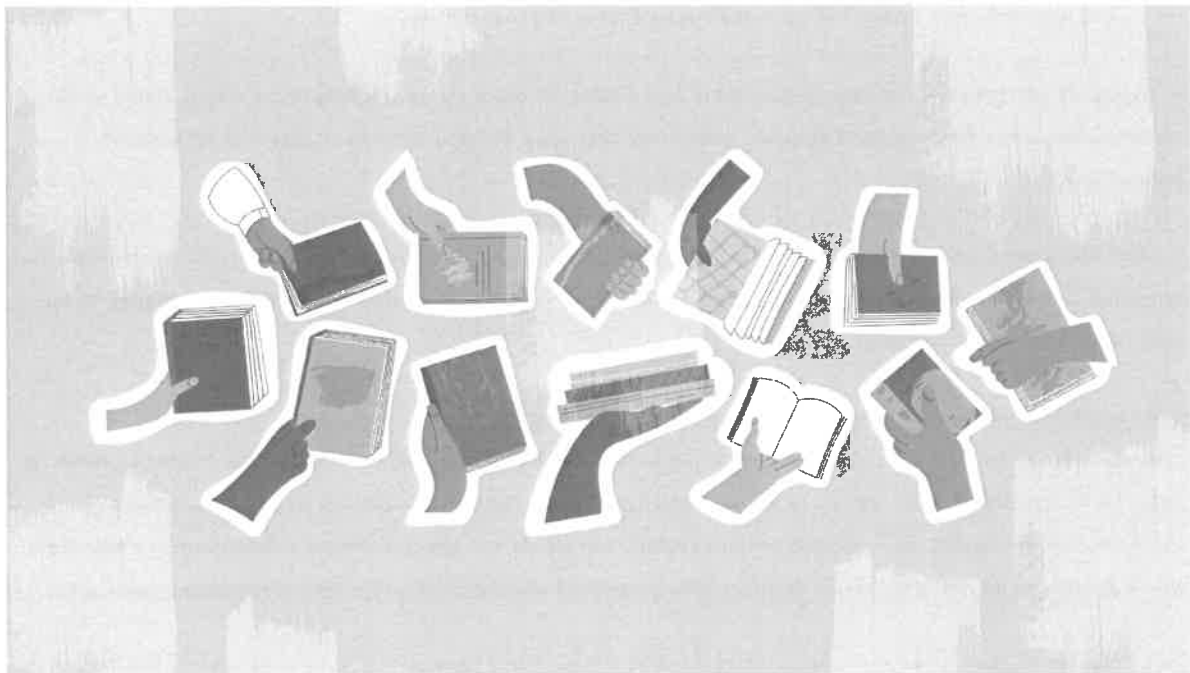
### LITERACY

*'Speed Booking' Lets Students Share Book Recommendations*

This fun, fast-paced activity guides middle school students to share their reading recommendations, and it can be adapted to suit a variety of literacy activities.

**By** *Carly Van Der Wende*

March 7, 2023



As a language arts teacher, I've found that one of the best ways to keep students motivated to read books independently is to provide them with opportunities to share with classmates about their current reads. Speed