Improving ADOLESCENT LITERACY

Content Area Strategies at Work

Douglas Fisher
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Fifth Edition

Improving Adolescent Literacy

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Preface

Literacy is the currency of learning, and literacy opens the doors to all other learning, which is why every teacher needs to consider the ways in which reading, writing, speaking, and listening can be addressed in their classrooms. Unfortunately, some students arrive in our middle and high school classrooms underprepared for the demands of their coursework and lacking the literacy skills to succeed academically. In addition to the underprepared students who are enrolled in your classes, it is important to recognize that all students learn through language and that reading, writing, and thinking must be developed in every middle school and secondary classroom. If this is left solely to the English teachers, students will fail to develop the skills necessary to comprehend or produce complex texts in their subject area classes. We believe that it's you, the middle school or secondary teacher, who can make a difference in student success. For this reason, we offer this concise text with instructional routines that will allow you to develop the literacy skills students need to comprehend course content, no matter what content area or elective you teach.

New to This Edition

The past two decades have been exciting for those interested in adolescent literacy. This field emerged in the 1970s with the work of Hal Herber and his associates, who drew attention to content area reading and writing. In its early days, content area literacy was conceived as an approach that infused specific strategies into instruction whenever possible. What has become clear in this decade is that adolescent literacy consist of both a set of generic approaches used across disciplines and the specific and specialized approaches used within a discipline. This edition seeks to incorporate this stance. In this fifth edition of *Improving Adolescent Literacy*, we provide new classroom examples from our colleagues across the disciplines as well as new instructional routines that have been researched and validated since the publication of the last edition. In addition, we have reorganized the text to reflect the knowledge that has been generated over the past four decades.

Text Organization and New Features for Each Chapter

This book is organized into 10 chapters. In the first chapter, we introduce critical goals for adolescent literacy and a rationale for the involvement of content area teachers in improving adolescents' access to literacy. New to this chapter is a discussion about the differences between content area literacy and disciplinary literacy, both of which are important in students' development. We also now include information about the design of learning experiences through the gradual release of responsibility framework.

In Chapter 2, we turn our attention to building and activating background knowledge. This was not included in the fourth edition of this book, but since then it has re-emerged as a topic worthy of attention. This chapter introduces readers to a learning model that begins and ends with knowledge, specifically creation, modification, and use of knowledge. As with Chapters 3 through 9, we provide examples of the topic, in this case building and activating background knowledge, in English, Science,

Social Studies, Mathematics, and Electives classes. In many cases these instructional strategies can be used in other subject areas, so we caution readers to avoid skipping examples that are not consistent with what they teach. In other cases, the examples are discipline-specific and build disciplinary literacy skills.

In Chapter 3 we focus on vocabulary development. In this chapter, we have updated the language used to describe the types of vocabulary students need to learn as well as some of the instructional routines useful in facilitating word learning. Vocabulary remains an important part of students' learning across the content because technical words define the discipline.

Chapter 4 is a familiar chapter to readers of previous editions of this book. We have updated the research on read alouds, shared readings, and close readings, but these tools have been the staple of teaching for decades. Having said that, it's important to recognize that the focus of the modeling teachers provide for students in middle and high school classes during read alouds and shared readings should incorporate disciplinary ways of reading and writing. We have clarified this important distinction in the chapter.

Chapter 5 turns our collective attention to questioning. Questioning has always been a part of this book because it is one of the tools that teachers have at their disposal to check for understanding. Poorly constructed questions are a waste of time and fail to inform the teacher about students' thinking and understanding, whereas strong questions guide students' thinking and provide data for teachers about their next steps instructionally. This chapter has been revised to include text-dependent questions that require students to draw information from the texts they have read.

In Chapter 6, we focus on collaborative conversations and peer-to-peer learning. Some of this information was integrated into different chapters in the last edition, but this fifth edition devotes an entire chapter to this type of learning. As a profession, we have learned a lot about the value of collaborative conversations in the classroom as well as how to structure tasks that encourage collaboration and discussion. The new information in this chapter provides readers with information about group work and productive group work across content areas.

Chapter 7 is another familiar chapter. Graphic organizers and visual ways of representing content have existed for several decades. The research support for these tools is strong. However, we clarify the timing of the use of these tools in this edition and note that students need to have sufficient background knowledge for graphic organizers to be of use. In addition, we have updated the types of tools used in the classroom and included a number of digital tools.

Similarly, Chapter 8 provides time-proven tools in teaching students to take notes. We review a variety of notetaking systems and describe the ways in which these tools can be used in different content area classes. Readers will find much that is familiar in this chapter, as well as updated research information and examples.

Chapter 9 dives into the world of writing. In this chapter, we focus on writing to learn rather than process writing, which is more common in the English classroom. Updates to this chapter include the text types that students must produce to be successful in college and the workplace. We also explore the ways in which teachers can construct writing prompts that scaffold students' learning.

The final chapter of this book focuses on assessments, both formative and summative uses of tools to determine students' learning. This is a new chapter for the fifth edition, and it includes a wide range of strategies for checking for understanding as well as information about what to do with the assessment data once it has been

collected. Using student data to plan instruction ensures that teachers are more responsive to the individual needs in their classrooms and promises to result in more students learning at higher levels.

We hope that the new organization and additions to this book will serve you well. Our goal is to demonstrate that "literacy strategies" are useful across subject areas, and to encourage teachers to think about the ways in which they can ensure that their students learn the language of the discipline they teach. When students do, in fact, master the language of a discipline, they move from apprentice to increasing mastery and learn how to become proficient in the content area.

Acknowledgments

We have had the opportunity to learn alongside a number of skilled teachers as they delivered their content in ways that have increased their students' literacy learning. We thank all of the teachers who invited us in and provided us with detailed information about their practice. We are especially thankful for the teachers at Health Sciences High & Middle College who allow us to engage with them in teaching and learning. The teachers at HSHMC are among the best in the world, and they make a tremendous difference in the lives of students.

We would also like to thank the reviewers who offered their thoughtful comments as this work progressed. Their feedback made this a better book, and we thank them for that: Alysia J. Backman, Literacy Coach, South Burlington High School; Margaret Berg, University of Northern Colorado; John Bishop, University of Southern Mississippi; Glenda Moss, University of North Texas at Dallas; and Michelle L. Page, University of Minnesota-Morris. Previous edition reviewers include Linda Cole, The Barrie School; Karen Ford, Ball State University; Gay Ivey, James Madison University; Courtney Kelly, Manhattanville College; Margot Kinberg, National University; Valerie Kinloch, The Ohio State University; and Scott R. Popplewell, Ball State University.

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Chapter 1
Ensuring All Students Read, Write, Think, and Learn

Learning Objectives

1.1 Identify the role that language plays in learning.

1.2 Describe ways in which struggling readers can engage in learning in content area classes.

1.3 Discuss the shared responsibility for literacy development among all teachers.

1.4 Compare and contrast disciplinary and content area literacy.

1.5 Summarize the concepts of reading comprehension and intentional instruction.

As your eyes pass over these little squiggle marks, consider the amazing feat you're accomplishing. Small ink marks are being transferred from the page or screen, through your eyes, to your brain. Once there, your brain makes a series of connections such that you make sense of the ideas on the page. It's amazing really, and it's how we learn. Humans learn through language. When we read, write, speak, listen, and view, we learn. It's really that simple. It's why we wrote this book. We want to ensure that middle and high school students have opportunities to use language to learn the amazing content introduced to them in school. Whether that content be in the form of a 15th-century sonnet, an experiment in physics, the analysis of a jazz composition, or perfecting a free throw, language is involved in learning.

As a case in point, let's venture into a history classroom. As you read about Ms. Johnson's class, think about the reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing that students do, all in service of learning history.

The students in this 11th-grade U.S. History class are studying the rise of industrialization and immigration at the turn of the 20th century. They attend an urban school where 100% of the students qualify for free lunch and 65% are English learners. The students have been studying industrialization and immigration for several weeks. These dual trends intersected tragically in the sinking of RMS Titanic *in 1912. Christine Johnson wants students to apply their knowledge of the era to a specific event—the* Titanic *tragedy. She*

uses documentary film clips to help students initially understand the event. After discussion, students work in collaborative groups to read excerpts of informational articles written nearly a century apart. Ms. Johnson has drawn from newspaper accounts from the era, as well as modern critiques of the event and an article on the 1985 recovery effort.

Ms. Johnson asks the class, "After seeing the video presentation of the Titanic *accident, what are your thoughts about this tragedy? Write all you know. You have 5 minutes." Time is called and the students share their impressions. They begin to brainstorm prior knowledge using the What do you Know, What do you Want to know, and What did you Learn (KWL) strategy to focus on the assigned text passages. Ms. Johnson follows with the question, "What would you like to know about the* Titanic*?" She asks the students to share their questions as she writes some of them on the whiteboard.*

Anna reads from her writing. "Why didn't they listen to the warnings? Why didn't they look hard enough for an iceberg?"

Isaac asks, "What did they do to the ship that made them think that it was unsinkable? How long does it take an iceberg to disappear?"

"I want to know, why didn't they have enough life boats for everyone?" asks Cesar.

Marco adds, "Who were some of the people in first class? I would like to know about them in more detail."

Latasha wonders, "Who were the survivors and are they still alive? Are they scared to go on trips in a boat?"

"Whose fault was it?" asks Josie.

Ms. Johnson identifies each question as either at the literal or interpretive level. She challenges the students to extend their thinking as strategic readers and to answer their own questions. Ms. Johnson turns their attention to the learning intention and the success criteria for the lesson. "The learning intention today is to analyze passages from primary and secondary source documents written at the time of the tragedy, and contrast them with more modern accounts. The success criteria are to annotate the passages with this question in mind: How did political, economic and social beliefs of the time contribute to the sinking of the Titanic*? You'll use today's notes to write a more formal document-based analysis (DBA) in class tomorrow."*

Next, Ms. Johnson introduces relevant vocabulary, including steerage, transmit, SOS, *and* dispatch, *all of which appear in the news articles from the era. She has chosen these because she has anticipated that her students will be unfamiliar with these terms because they apply to ship communications used a century ago. She constructs a concept map to visually represent both the definitions and relationships among the target words. She also reviews the organization of the texts they are about to read. "We will read and question the text, so that we can build an initial understanding of the human experience in this tragic event." She adds, "Newspaper text is often organized in a temporal sequence that tells a chronological description of events. The main purpose was to report what had happened to its readers." Two other articles analyze the event from the research conducted on the wreckage site. She explains that these texts are organized for cause and effect. "These articles were written more than 70 years later. Expect more analysis and interpretation of the disaster."*

She then draws their attention back to the major analytic question they are exploring: the political, social, and economic forces that impacted this event. "We're reading as historians read, with an analytic frame. We source the information, look for corroboration, and most importantly, contextualize. We know a lot about the era. We're examining these reports to illuminate our analysis."

Ms. Johnson reads aloud the first news report from April 15, 1912, the night after the sinking. "It's titled, 'Save Our Souls' Was Titanic's *Last Appeal." She encourages her students to follow the way she constructs meaning using the three central Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) questions:* What do I think about this? Why do I think so? How I can prove it? *She guides the students with her questions and think-aloud responses through the annotation process. "I noticed that in this first report, it mostly concerned itself with first class passengers. No mention of those in steerage. I'm thinking about the relative lack of concern for immigrants that might have been traveling here. But I also know that information about any of them would have been scarce at the time of this account. I'm wondering about whether they will appear in more modern accounts." This directed questioning guides the students for their independent reading and leads them toward higher level thinking.*

After her guided preparation, the students participate in small group collaborative reading and discussion of the passages. Ms. Johnson monitors the students as they read to achieve individual levels of understanding, and examines their annotations to gauge their learning.

But What About "Struggling Readers"?

It is essential to note that not all of the students in Ms. Johnson's class are reading at or near grade level. Her class is a heterogeneous mix of advanced readers, English learners who are developing skills in the language, students reading several years below grade-level expectations, and some with disabilities. But students who are not yet performing at expected levels are sometimes referred to collectively as "struggling readers," a term with which we take exception, and yet we understand that it conveys information about a group of students who need additional support. "Struggling" is situational; it is not part of the learners' identity. We are not suggesting that you ignore specific needs—in fact, quite the opposite. Effective teachers create the conditions needed for all students to succeed. Ms. Johnson has done this by:

- Building background knowledge
- Linking current learning to prior knowledge
- Explicitly stating learning intentions and success criteria
- Seeking relevance by discussing student impressions and questions
- Modeling her thinking and the processes she uses to critically analyze a passage
- Using small-group heterogeneous grouping so peers can support one another
- Monitoring individual progress in order to render more specific supports

Having read about the students' experiences in Ms. Johnson's class, think about how their understanding would be different—compromised even—had they simply been told the information, rather than experience it through all of the various aspects of language. Listening is one aspect of language, but not the only one. If students are to reach high levels of achievement and understanding, both in terms of literacy and content knowledge, they have to read, write, speak, listen, and view on a daily basis. And that's what this book is about. Over the course of the book, we will introduce you to the various ways that all students—average, advanced, English learners, students with disabilities, and those not yet performing at expected levels—can use language to comprehend your content. The following boxed feature provides some tech tools that can help struggling readers.

Tech Tools for Struggling Readers

1. **Rewordify.** One of the most innovative websites to be developed in the last several years, Rewordify.com is a free online tool that helps improve students' reading comprehension in multiple ways. First, a user pastes or imports text into a text box on the site. Rewordify then analyzes this text, looking for words and phrases that may be difficult to understand. Once the site locates difficult or problematic language, it replaces it with simpler words to aid students' understanding.
2. **Snap&Read Universal.** Created for students and teachers, Snap&Read Universal is a Google Chrome extension that reads language aloud (including text on Flash-based websites that typically can't be copied and pasted) using integrated text-to-speech with synchronized highlighting. To aid in reading comprehension, Snap&Read allows students to use a text-leveling tool similar to the one found on Rewordify.com. Students can select text that they have a hard time understanding, and the Web browser extension will identify and replace difficult words with simpler ones. The level of linguistic complexity can be adjusted in the Options tab.
3. **Newsela.** The idea behind Newsela is simple but powerful, and it can have a big impact on developing the reading comprehension of diverse learners. Newsela is a website that publishes current events articles each day on a variety of topics pertaining to most school subjects. Every article has five versions, each written for students at different reading levels. After a student reads the version that matches his skill level, he can take corresponding quizzes to test his knowledge.
4. **Immersion Reading.** Based on the idea that multisensory activities provide deeper and longer-lasting learning, Immersion Reading is an e-book technology that combines recorded audiobooks with synchronized highlighting of electronic text. The result of a partnership between Amazon.com and Audible.com, Immersion Reading allows students to read books with their eyes and ears at the same time, leading to better comprehension and retention of subject matter. Since it does not rely on synthesized text-to-speech and instead uses the vocal performance of a professional actor or broadcaster, Immersion Reading makes auditory reinforcement of written text a more authentic multisensory experience.
5. **Inspiration.** Another multisensory strategy for improving reading comprehension involves electronic graphic organizers, and Inspiration Software provides one of the best platforms for accomplishing this task. Available for both desktop computers and iOS devices, Inspiration allows students to create visual representations of the characters, themes, and plot summaries of works of fiction. It also lets them visually map the details of textbook chapters and current events articles. Any language that is included can be read aloud with text-to-speech technology. In addition, users can add links to Web-based articles and videos to provide supporting materials.

SOURCE: https://www.noodle.com/articles/5-tech-tools-to-aid-your-reading-comprehension

Why Can't the English Teacher Teach This Stuff?

If you are not an English teacher, you might be asking yourself why the English department can't just take care of this instructional need. It's a good question. After all, English teachers work with language extensively. But that's not the only place where students need to use language. As we saw in Ms. Johnson's classroom, language is used throughout the school day. Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing—those happen regularly in every course. But having said that, the types of texts that students read and compose differ across content areas. In other words, reading like a scientist isn't the same as reading as a historian or musician.

State content standards developed in the last decade put a high value on informational texts. The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes called "the nation's report card" recommends that by the end of high school, 70% of the texts

that students are reading—print and digital— are informational in nature. Yet informational texts are more difficult for students, even those at or above grade level, as measured by their ability to recall and retell (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Romero, Paris, and Brem (2005) found that this difficulty was due to the challenge of monitoring the text globally; that is, students must monitor and integrate ideas that arc over a large amount of cognitive territory.

Students who read and write below grade level are not confined to the English departments of low-performing schools. They comprise a significant portion of the secondary school population nationwide. The NAEP tracks achievement among a representative sampling of students from across the United States. Results of recent NAEP assessments in reading, mathematics, science, engineering, technology, and the arts show limited growth between grades 4 and 8, and virtually no further growth through grade 12. Clearly, if secondary students who struggle to read are to make any gains, then secondary educators must look beyond the English classroom as the place where they will "catch up." Meaningful gains require a coordinated effort across subjects.

As well, English courses are themselves a knowledge domain, and the literary texts used in them have their own unique challenges. Students in middle and high school must read increasingly complex narrative and poetic forms. These works are predominately in the form of novels, plays, and epic poetry, most of which were written decades or centuries before these students were born. The need for background knowledge is high, especially for historical events, and the vocabulary and syntax are often arcane, if not archaic. Knowledge of story elements such as character, setting, and plot will take a reader only so far. Students must recognize complex literary devices such as foreshadowing, anthropomorphization, tone, allegory, paradox, and symbolism. English teachers, faced with their own disciplinary standards, can't solely teach students how to understand texts in other subjects as well. It takes a coordinated effort across all content areas.

Content and Disciplinary Literacies

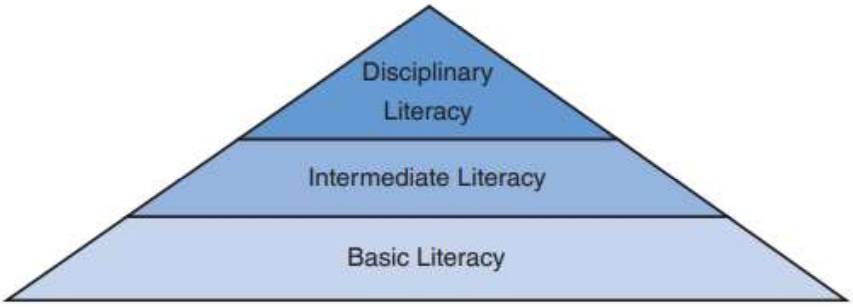
As students use more complex reading materials, their need for additional comprehension strategies increases as well. Although students are typically more comfortable using narrative texts, they are often less adept at using informational reading materials such as textbooks, reference materials, research articles, and historical documents. Lack of instruction using informational texts may explain why even at-grade-level readers in middle school score a full year level lower on comprehension of informational texts when compared to their narrative reading levels (Langer, 1985).

Literacy is integral for building knowledge. This is why most states include literacy standards within the discipline-specific standards of science, history/social studies, mathematics, and technical subjects. Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing are the pathways students utilize to learn concepts. Disciplinary literacy acknowledges that the texts used and the thinking that accompanies it vary according to subject. That is to say, the ways a historian analyzes and reports information is different than the processes used by a mathematician. While middle and high school students are not yet historians and mathematicians, you are apprenticing them in the discipline.

At the same time, students are literacy learners who are developing the attendant skills needed to understand and compose in the subject you teach. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008, 2012) describe the development from elementary through high school (see Figure 1.1). In the earliest grades, basic literacy development, primarily in the form of decoding, happens uniformly in nearly all reading tasks. As students progress

Figure 1.1 Increased specialization in literacy development

SOURCE: Based on Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1), 40–59.



into upper elementary (grades 2–5), they move to the intermediate literacy, which is marked by the acquisition of generic content area literacy tools. These are skills that can be applied in every subject and include study skills, note taking, use of Greek and Latin roots to figure out vocabulary, and so on. Approaches like these are termed content area literacy because they are remarkably fluid across disciplines and are vital for gaining and expressing knowledge. But generic content area literacy skills alone are not sufficient. As students move into middle and high school, they expand their generic literacy skills and they begin to develop disciplinary literacy. These literacies are specific to the subject and are necessary in order to comprehend and compose knowledge understood within a specific subject.

A discipline-specific approach to literacy in history requires that students be able to critically analyze a primary source document through a process of sourcing the information, looking for corroborating evidence to determine accuracy, and applying the historical context of the time to understand events and actions (Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2011). It's what Ms. Johnson was asking her students to do in the *Titanic* scenario. But these same processes would be wildly out of place in a mathematics classroom. Instead, the emphasis is on translating mathematical representations, evaluating the problem, and reviewing for reasonableness.

Students in middle and high school need both generic and disciplinary literacy in order to progress through their courses. The generic content literacy approaches ensure that students have processes for figuring out unfamiliar vocabulary, for creating and using comprehensible notes for studying, and for locating information in a text. But students must also build their discipline-specific literacies as they master the knowledge base of the subject. In other words, content area literacies are not left behind. Rather, both are utilized in tandem to make meaning and deepen understanding.

Discipline-Specific Elements in Texts

The texts associated with specific subjects have unique elements that distinguish them from other disciplines. In English courses, for example, narrative is the most frequent text type students encounter. Teachers can help students understand the way storytelling devices are used to describe both real and imagined events by providing students with knowledge about how subgenres (e.g., poetry, drama, short stories) are structured.

Students should understand character development, setting, and types of conflict, including human versus self, human versus human, human versus circumstances, and human versus society. In addition, students need to recognize the common structures of literature—introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. These structures are not wholly confined to narrative texts in English, however. Students in English read and compose literary critiques, which are interpretations of literature that require the use of rhetorical devices of inductive arguments, especially *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* while avoiding fallacies that can undermine the argument. In addition, students read informational articles to build background knowledge about authors, events, and eras.

As you can imagine, these categorization systems do not work in science. Science texts are often organized using introductory thesis paragraphs. The emphasis is on inquiry as students interrogate theoretical constructs, frame questions, form hypotheses, and examine data. Vocabulary is essential to the field of science and is frequently introduced in text through a bolded word and an example. However, students may find this format frustrating because an explicit definition may not be found in the body of the text. Photographs and scientific charts are used to illustrate phenomena and offer more details about the topic discussed in the text. Science texts utilize a higher degree of nominalizations than other subjects. A nominalization is a verb form turned into a noun. For instance, *investigate* is easier to understand than *conducted an investigation.* This also occurs when an adjective is made into a noun, such as when *applicable* is replaced with *applicability*. Academic writing in general and science writing in particular are packed with nominalizations that can trip up even those students reading at expected levels.

On the other hand, history texts rely on a more journalistic style. Journalistic style is common in newspapers—the main ideas are presented first and then explained or explored in subsequent paragraphs. Narrative text may be embedded, particularly in sidebar features about interesting people or events. In addition, primary sources and quotes are often included in these types of texts. Readers can expect that the chapters and headings will be organized by concepts, and this may prove confusing at times. For instance, a chapter titled "Setting Sail for New Lands" is more ambiguous than one that reads "How European Exploration Changed the Americas." Prior knowledge is critical—and often assumed—in many history texts. Gaps in a student's experience or prior knowledge may derail his or her ability to comprehend the passage. Consider the prior knowledge required to understand the following example from a 10th-grade world history textbook:

> The era from the beginning of the Sui Dynasty to the end of the Song Dynasty lasted nearly 700 years. During that period, a mature political system based on principles first put into practice during the Qin and Han Dynasties gradually emerged in China. As in the Han era, China was a monarchy that employed a relatively large bureaucracy. Beyond the capital, government was centered around provinces, districts, and villages. Confucian ideals were the cement that held the system together. (Spielvogel, 2003, p. 105)

Beyond the content directly related to this passage (Chinese dynasties from 581 to 1279), the reader must understand political systems, monarchies, the hierarchical nature of human settlements, Confucian philosophy, and the idiomatic use of the word *cement*. Photographs are more frequently used in historical materials to illustrate important people, places, and events, unlike diagrams in science books that are usually more conceptual in nature. Like all textbooks, history texts rely on a variety of text structures, although cause and effect is dominant within a chronologically arranged format.