

## ALERT

### ADOLESCENT LITERACY: ENGAGING RESEARCH AND TEACHING

#### Necessary for Some HOW TO HELP STUDENTS WHO STRUGGLE WITH READING

##### THE SITUATION

Ms. Waters teaches students in a Grade 9 Applied course, and finds that some have difficulty understanding and using information from their reading. Students are required to comprehend the explicit and implicit meaning of texts, as well as make connections between their reading and other knowledge and experiences. Ms. Waters also notices that how well students read affects how deeply they understand content.

Ms. Waters uses different types of texts in her class, including videos, articles, graphic texts, and web pages. She engages her students in reading in a variety of ways, including through the use of anticipation guides, mind maps, and talk to help build and support students' understanding of what they've read. These practices are effective with some students, but others still have difficulty making meaning and finding connections to what they have read.

She recognizes the adolescent learner is required to read and make sense of texts that are more complex in their structure and content.

*"By the time adolescents enter the middle grades, they have learned a great deal about literacy. However, they need to learn more. Literacy continues to evolve as the world changes, its demands shifting and becoming more complex."* - Adolescent Literacy Guide, 2012

##### WHAT'S GOING ON?

Ms. Waters' students represent a wide range of development and reading proficiency. Well into early adulthood, adolescents continue developing intellectually. They can think in ways that are more advanced and more efficient than when they were children; however, they still benefit from learning that is targeted to their needs.

During adolescence students want to see relevance in their learning. Their ability to process and make connections is increasing. Effective readers have an expanding repertoire of reading strategies and experience with a wider variety of texts. However, students who struggle with texts, in general or in particular contexts, may miss out on understanding information and ideas related to the content.

In addition, the adolescent learner develops a number of literacy proficiencies outside of school. Incorporating these proficiencies in learning can be motivating for students, and will allow them to work from their strengths to develop new understanding and skills. **Because texts and topics are becoming more complex for adolescent learners, they benefit from explicit instruction in all subject areas to support reading.** They also benefit from reading that is connected to their interests and experiences, and draws on their strengths as learners.

*"Students can be taught to be strategic readers."* - Think Literacy, Cross - Curricular Approaches, 2003

## What Good Readers Do

Reading is much more than saying the words, and readers use a process when reading. Good readers draw on a wide variety of skills during the process.

### Before Reading

- select a purpose for reading
- preview (e.g., title, visuals, organizational features)
- activate prior knowledge (e.g., topic, format, vocabulary)
- predict
- question

### During reading

- question, visualize, confirm predictions, make connections
- determine important ideas (e.g., take notes, highlight, summarize)
- monitor understanding (e.g., identify confusing parts, self-correct, re-read, break text into chunks)
- use context clues to understand vocabulary
- infer meaning
- question author's purpose and point of view
- use text features to help understanding

### After reading

- clarify understanding
- respond through talking, writing, drawing
- analyze and evaluate ideas, information and perspectives
- summarize, synthesize, and draw conclusions
- extend understanding in critical and creative ways

## WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

Because subject area teachers have the background knowledge of a content expert and understand the literacy demands of the subject, they can best help students make meaning from course texts. They also have experience using different text structures that may be unique to their subject area (e.g., a lab report in science or a bill of materials in technological education).

**Struggling readers benefit from learning reading skills as subject content is taught, rather than as an add-on that may be disconnected from their learning.** Instruction should include a flexible approach incorporating explicit modeling, guided instruction, as well as both collaborative and independent practice, according to student needs.

One highly effective option to address specific reading needs of adolescents in subject areas is through purposeful, guided, small group instruction. The students in the small group have an opportunity to learn from the teacher and each other as they work toward independent practice.

Ms. Waters wants to identify and respond to specific reading needs of her students, so she follows these steps:

- **devise and deliver a short, purposeful assessment**
- **identify student needs** by analyzing strengths and gaps
- **learn more about effective reading instruction** in the identified areas

- **design instruction to address the student needs**
- **form a temporary group(s) to provide targeted instruction** for those students in need of additional support
- **plan what the rest of the class will do**
- **provide instruction for the small, temporary group** (e.g., through modeling, prompts, sentence starters, or guided practice) while the other students work independently

*When reading material is difficult and ideas are complex, strategies give readers a way to interact with text. Too often secondary students surrender when meaning doesn't magically arrive ...All readers, regardless of age or ability, need to know how to proceed when meaning breaks down. Strategy instruction affords them the opportunity to engage deeply with sophisticated content." - Cris Tovani in Comprehension Going Forward, 2011*

### **DEVISE AND DELIVER A SHORT, PURPOSEFUL ASSESSMENT**

There are many ways for teachers to seamlessly assess their students' current reading skills within the day-to-day class work. Teachers can use observations, conversations, or products to find out more about their students' reading needs.

As one example, Ms. Waters asks her students to read a short text related to the course content and learning goals. She uses I Read, I Think, Therefore from *Think Literacy Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7-12* as a short, purposeful way to gauge how well students understand and respond to the text. She selected this graphic organizer because it asks students to demonstrate three key reading comprehension skills:

- identify key information from the text ('I Read')
- make connections between the text and what students already know ('I Think')
- draw conclusions based on what they have read ('Therefore...')

I Read	I Think
Therefore...	

*"Good readers ... read with purpose; [they] select, apply, and adjust their strategies; bring their prior knowledge to a text to help them understand it; and reflect on what they have read by asking questions of themselves and the text." - Think Literacy Success, Report of the Expert Panel, 2003*

## IDENTIFY STUDENT NEEDS

Once students have completed the task, Ms. Waters uses the student work to gauge their understanding of the text and how well they use the identified comprehension skills.

As Ms. Waters analyzes the student work, she asks herself questions, such as:

- What strengths do I see in the work?
- What gaps are evident in their thinking? Where, specifically, are students struggling in their understanding of the text?
- What additional information do I have about their reading comprehension? (e.g., from observations, conversations, products)
- What are the learning needs of these students? What should I focus on as I move forward?
- How might I cluster the students to meet their needs through small group instruction?

Ms. Waters noticed that most students had little difficulty with the 'I Read' section, but some were challenged when it came to 'I Think' and 'Therefore'. Some students continued to list explicitly stated information instead of making connections and some students had difficulty drawing conclusions based on information from the text.

For example, Sample A tells her that:

- Key ideas from the text are included; there is evidence that the learner knows how to identify main ideas
- Thoughtful connections are made; there is evidence that the learner is thinking about what the ideas in the text mean to him/her
- A conclusion is drawn; the conclusion states an outcome and a possible solution to the problem

Sample B tells her that:

- Few key ideas from the text are included; an idea not explicitly stated in the text was erroneously included in the 'I Read' section
- Limited connections are made; the response repeats points from the 'I Read' section
- A conclusion is drawn, but it is not based on the main ideas from the text and/or connections

## Sample Subject-Specific Text

### *Energy Use in Canada*

Canada is one of the biggest energy consumers in the world, especially when you consider the amount each person uses compared to others in the world. In fact, Canada is one of the top 10 energy consumers, even though we have a small population compared to many other countries.

People in Canada use a variety of sources of energy including non-renewable resources such as oil, natural gas and coal, and renewable resources such as wind, solar and hydro. Our use of non-renewable resources is far greater than our use of renewable sources of energy.

There are a number of reasons why Canadians use a lot of energy.

- In general we have a high standard of living compared to others in the world. This means we own more and we spend more. We tend to own and use more appliances, technology and equipment than some others in the world, and many of these require energy to operate.

- We live in a climate that requires a lot of energy use. Canada has long, cold winters, and some areas of Canada have hot humid summers. Both conditions require lots of energy for heating and cooling to keep people comfortable.
- Canada is a big country with a population spread over great distances. We need to use energy to get products to people, and for people to travel from place to place. There are also many Canadians who travel longer distances to work than in the past.
- Compared to some other countries in the world (for example, in Europe), overall Canadians pay less for energy.
- Canada has many industries which provide jobs, but which also require great amounts of energy to bring in raw materials, turn them into finished products, and deliver them to consumers.

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2012.

**Sample A**

Sample A indicates that key ideas from the text are included ('I Read'), thoughtful connections to the text are made ('I Think'), and a conclusion based on the text is drawn ('Therefore').

I Read	I Think
<p>Canada is one of the biggest energy consumers in the world</p> <p>We use non-renewable energy sources like gas and oil</p> <p>We use a lot of energy because</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are a rich country</li> <li>• Our climate</li> <li>• We pay less for energy</li> </ul>	<p>Using a lot of energy is not good for the environment</p> <p>Canadians need to use less energy</p>
<b>Therefore...</b>	
<p>Canadians can use less energy. We should do our part.</p>	

### Sample B

Sample B indicates that a few key ideas from the text are included ('I Read'). Limited connections are made ('I Think'); in fact, the response essentially repeats points from the 'I Read' section. A conclusion is drawn, but it is not related directly to the text ('Therefore').

I Read	I Think
Canadians use a lot of electricity It's bad for the environment. There are lots of reasons why we use lots of energy	We use a lot of electricity We need oil and gas to make electricity There are many reasons why we need lots of electricity
Therefore...	
If we use less electricity our bills would go down	

*"Thus, comprehension is not reached in a single act; it is a constant recurring process. Understanding is built through a series of interactions between what is in the reader's head and what is on the page or the screen" - A Guide to Effective Instruction, 2008*

### LEARN MORE ABOUT EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION

From analyzing the student work, Ms. Waters sees that students need explicit instruction on the difference between explicitly stated information ('I Read'), implicitly stated information ('I Think'), and how to draw conclusions ('Therefore'). She considers the following options: collaborating with a colleague (e.g., a coach, board support staff), reading more about how to address students' needs, and looking online at sites such as [www.eduGAINS.ca](http://www.eduGAINS.ca).

Ms. Waters begins by collaborating with a colleague who has worked with struggling readers and she does some research online. She and her colleague decide to co-plan and co-teach some classes together. They are particularly interested in the use of prompts to assist students with comprehension skills.

### DESIGN INSTRUCTION TO ADDRESS STUDENT NEEDS

To make the most of instructional time Ms. Waters decides to group students based on their specific needs; she knows she does not have time for individualized instruction. While other students are working on their own, either individually or in small groups, Ms. Waters will spend time with one or two groups of students providing specific guided instruction related to their needs.

In guided groups, Ms. Waters will support the students to be able to identify where they may have become lost during reading and why, and to ask any questions they have about the text. They will also have time to reflect and share their reading and thinking in order to consolidate their learning while building their metacognitive skills. She is actively engaged with the group – observing, conferring, providing feedback, and intervening as required. Ms. Waters will challenge the students to identify main ideas, make their own connections, and ask their own questions.

## FORM A TEMPORARY GROUP(S) TO PROVIDE TARGETED INSTRUCTION

During her research, Ms. Waters learned the following about forming temporary groups for targeted reading instruction:

- Groupings are flexible and ideally have no more than five students to allow for optimal support and feedback
- The purpose of the small group instruction is based on need and/or interest, and its members share a common goal
- If students are not able to read a text independently they will need instruction on comprehension strategies or have alternate texts in other formats (e.g., visual, video, audio, graphical) to make meaning
- The small group meetings are brief; sessions usually last approximately 20 minutes

Ms. Waters realizes that all students in the class can benefit from targeted instruction based on their needs and she makes a commitment to ensuring that she meets the needs of each of her students.

## PLAN WHAT THE REST OF THE CLASS WILL DO

One of the first questions many teachers ask is what is the rest of the class doing while the teacher is leading a guided group. Ms. Waters also needs to plan for the rest of the class to be involved in meaningful independent work. This may include individual or group tasks related to the reading they completed previously (for I Read, I Think, Therefore). She and her students have spent considerable time creating a learning environment that is safe, respectful, and allows for flexible groupings.

Previous instruction around independent work is key as often students will be working on self-selected or assigned tasks related to the reading. Some typical activities may include reciprocal teaching, independent reading/writing, journal writing, open-ended problem solving, or research.

### Struggling Readers Need:

- knowledge of different types of texts and the best strategies for reading them.
- multiple and meaningful opportunities to practise reading in subject-specific contexts.
- opportunities to practise reading with appropriate resources.
- opportunities to talk about their reading and thinking.
- background knowledge in subject areas.
- expanded sight vocabularies and word solving strategies for reading subject-specific texts.
- strategies for previewing texts, monitoring their understanding, determining the most important ideas and the relationships among them, remembering what they read, and making connections and inferences.
- strategies for becoming independent readers in any context.

*Think Literacy Cross-Curricular Approaches, 2003*

### Creating a Responsive Learning Environment

A learning environment that is welcoming, inviting and engaging is a place where:

- all learners have agreed upon ways of working and learning together
- all learners know what is expected of them— in their learning and in their interaction with others
- people obviously enjoy each other's company and work productively together
- the teacher attends over time, to individuals, small groups, and the whole class, and is always aware of everyone in the room
- students have choices in their learning
- all learners respect and value individual differences

For ideas on creating a learning environment that allows for responsive and flexible instruction, see:

[Student Success, Differentiated Instruction Educator's Package, 2010](http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesDI/EducatorsPackages/DIEducatorsPackage2010/2010EducatorsGuide.pdf)

<http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesDI/EducatorsPackages/DIEducatorsPackage2010/2010EducatorsGuide.pdf>

[Student Achievement Division, Capacity Building Series, The Third Teacher, 2012](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_ThirdTeacher.pdf)

[http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS\\_ThirdTeacher.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_ThirdTeacher.pdf)

## **PROVIDE TARGETED INSTRUCTION FOR THE SMALL, TEMPORARY GROUP WHILE OTHERS WORK INDEPENDENTLY**

In the small group, Ms. Waters works with students who need additional support to make connections with and draw conclusions from the text. Deeper connections with the text will support these students to more fully understand the content. She has decided that she will use prompts, modeling and/or guided practice in her targeted instruction. If required, Ms. Waters is also prepared to provide additional background knowledge in the subject area of the text.

Targeted small group instruction supports students to talk, think and question their way through a text. In this case, Ms. Waters wants students to talk to her and to other members of the group to enhance their understanding of the text.

When she meets with the group, she makes sure that the students have their texts with them, and encourages them to use any tools that might be helpful, such as highlighters, pens/pencils and/or sticky notes.

She has also created a handout of prompts and sentence stems that she and the students will use to keep the conversation focused on the specific learning needs that are presented. These prompts include:

Making connections (*I Think...*)

- I already know about...
- This text reminds me of...
- The ideas here makes me think about...
- This (section, statement, idea) is similar to...
- One thing that this text doesn't say is... I wonder if this was left out because...

Drawing conclusions (*Therefore...*)

- I think the author wants me to know that...
- I wonder if...
- Based on this information, it is likely that...

During the conversation, Ms. Waters keeps the learning goals in mind, looks for evidence that the students are understanding the content and are using strategies to understand the text. She provides encouragement and feedback that is specific and that helps students see their growth.

If the prompts are not working for students, Ms. Waters plans to do a think aloud to show how she makes connections and draws conclusions from the text. She is also going to listen to see if students are able to articulate ideas orally that were not included in their writing. She guides students to clarify and elaborate on their thinking, support their ideas, and build on others' ideas. She also supports students to think metacognitively about their use of strategies and how their understanding may have shifted.

After the conversation, she uses the assessment information she has gathered to determine next steps. During the targeted instruction with the small group(s), Ms. Waters makes note of strategies that are used by students in the small group, as well as their reflections. Where appropriate, Ms. Waters will share these with the whole class so that everyone can benefit from this learning.

## IN BRIEF

Reading skills continue to develop through adolescence. Reading requirements become more complex as the increasing reading demands in subject areas diverge. All adolescents need explicit, subject-specific literacy instruction, embedded with instruction about content. As adolescents continue to develop their reading skills, some may need targeted support in order to develop understanding of texts, engage in ideas related to content, and build their comprehension strategies.

Teachers, as content experts and as skilled readers, are the best resource adolescents have to increase their reading proficiency. As teachers support adolescent literacy learning, targeted small group instruction may be necessary for some students to build their repertoire of literacy strategies. By assessing students' literacy needs and using the information, teachers can plan for targeted small group instruction to provide explicit instruction in reading.

## REFERENCES

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## FOR MORE ON...

### Adolescent Literacy

Literacy GAINS. (2012).

[Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy, Grades 7-12.](#)

### **Learning Environment**

Ministry of Education, Student Success. (2010). [Differentiated Instruction Educator's Package](#).

Ministry of Education, Student Achievement Division. (2012). [The Third Teacher, Capacity Building Series](#).

### **Instructional Strategies for Reading**

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2003) [Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7-12](#). Toronto: Author.