REAL READING,
REAL WRITING
REAL READING, REAL WRITING
Content-Area Strategies

Donna Topping
and
Roberta McManus

Foreword by Richard Vacca
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Real teachers are well acquainted with frustration. They see it on the faces of students who have difficulty comprehending their reading assignments, are unable to follow written directions, need lessons repeated, or want to be spoon-fed answers to tests and assignments. Teachers feel their own frustration when students arrive in September with extremely negative attitudes toward reading textbooks.

The blame for this frustration is placed on many shoulders. We accuse textbook companies of presenting material too briefly—can World War II really be explained in three pages, or photosynthesis in two paragraphs? Parents unwittingly contribute to this negativity when they beg off helping with homework by saying, *I can’t help you with that—I don’t understand it—I never had that in school.* The subliminal message is *Reading is hard; your adult parent can’t do it.* And sometimes we contribute to the negativity ourselves when we say things like, *Didn’t you learn how to read in English/reading/any-other-class-than-mine?* No wonder so many students approach their reading assignments as something to finish rather than as a means to gain new knowledge.

We love it when we say, read Chapter 2 for tomorrow, listen to today’s lecture, or watch this video, and students *do it* period and especially when they do it with such understanding that we can get on with our business of lecturing, clarifying, and stretching them to the max. What happens, though, when our commands to read, listen, or view go unheeded or are met with difficulty? Research in comprehension underscores time and again that learning is not a passive act, akin to having knowledge poured into an empty vessel (Anderson and Armbruster 1984; Anderson et al. 1985; Goodman 1984; Pearson et al. 1978; Pearson and Fielding 1991; Smith 1994). Successful readers actively construct meaning when they read, listen, and view.
Actively Engaging Students

Think about students in your classes. Make two lists. On one, list the students who just seem to “get it” when they read your texts, listen to your lectures, or view your videos. On the other, list those who don’t. You may not know why, or what the ones who “get it” are doing that the ones who don’t “get it” aren’t, you just know there is a difference.

Now look at Figure 4–1. Do you recognize anyone here? Our successful and unsuccessful readers differ in their overall level of activity and involvement in the act of making meaning from texts. Our good readers recognize that reading is making meaning. They access their prior knowledge. They think of what they already know and build bridges from this to the new information they are about to encounter. They hypothesize and predict, combining what they already know with their best guesses about what the new information will convey. They visualize. They make mental pictures of what is happening in the text and of the way the text is organized. They monitor their comprehension. They know that the goal of reading, listening, and viewing is meaning and they expect these activities to make sense. When they don’t, red flags go up—This isn’t making sense! Recognizing that it doesn’t make sense, they pull from a repertoire of reading strategies to fix up the break in meaning.

Our poorer readers, on the other hand, tend to be very passive—dragging their eyes and ears across the page, the teacher’s voice, or the screen without actively constructing meaning. Unlike our better readers, they do not make connections with their prior knowledge, hypothesize and predict, or visualize. Since they do not actively associate reading/listening/viewing with making meaning, they don’t monitor their comprehension, recognize when something does and doesn’t make sense, and employ subsequent fix-up strategies.

Some of our students come to us as active meaning makers. Others don’t. The job of real teachers is to structure conditions within our lessons to get all students to do

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what the successful comprehenders do intuitively. The activities in the following chapters actively engage students in:

- Using the *processes* of reading, listening, and viewing.
- Seeing a *model* of what these processes look like when they are done well.
- Learning to be *strategic* when using them.

The level of activity they foster increases student involvement. The guidance they provide equips students with the skills and strategies they need to be successful learners.

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**What Do People Do When They Read?**

Let’s begin with a very basic question: Do you know what you do when you read? Over the years, real teachers have confessed to us (sheepishly, on the sly, and in whispers most of the time) that they really don’t know what happens when they read. Roberta notes that no one ever mentioned this in her preservice training as a secondary teacher. Donna, the elementary-trained, felt almost as ill prepared. It is sadly ironic that the very people who are charged with conveying content through texts and who use the processes of reading intuitively so well themselves are the least able to empathize with those who need to learn how to do them better. Sympathetic, yes (*that poor kid has such difficulty reading—I wish there was something I could do*); empathetic, no. Reading has been on automatic pilot for us for so long that we do it unconsciously, unaware of what really happens when we read. Could this, perhaps, be at the heart of some of our problems in getting our students to do it effectively?

Be honest. Do you know what you do when you read and, therefore, what you ask your students to do every time you say, *Read Chapter 2*? Take a moment to read the following passage, one that Donna intentionally wrote to cause you difficulty, and try to be conscious of what you do when you read.

This task commonly is associated with mammals, genus: human. Their orientation toward the time for completing this task is influenced by how they acquire their subsistence. For some, this task is required anno meridian; for others, post meridian. Educational level appears not to be a factor in influencing this decision; those holding advanced medical degrees and those who fall into the category of unskilled labor alike often can be found performing this task at a time different from the majority of the population.

Regardless of the time, a rather simple sequence seems to exist. First, they must rid themselves of all semblance of that which was used in the preceding time period. Next, they select from an assortment of choices those things that would be deemed most appropriate. (It should be noted that some find that the first two steps are better when reversed; others eliminate step two altogether, having made this decision earlier.)

Before performing the third step, most people elect to engage in an act of purification, this having been recognized as a cultural norm in American society. Having done so, they
first add to their persons those items that generally are not shared with the public. The exact choice here depends upon one’s gender.

Unless an intermediary step of heat application is needed, the fourth step begins. They place component parts to achieve an overall composite that is appropriate to the anticipated activity and to the image they wish to project. In the vernacular, this often is referred to as achieving “the look.”

The final step is quite simple. They look into a full-length reflectoimagographum and check to see if any adjustments are necessary.

Notice that we used a testing posture here. We gave you an assignment with no associated modeling or strategic information. We merely told you to read it. We now ask: What was that passage about? We have given this passage to hundreds of very bright elementary and secondary teachers and the responses have ranged from “going to the bathroom” to “going to work” to “getting dressed” to “washing one’s hands.” Donna constructed this passage based on the activity of getting dressed, but that’s not the most important point here. Our second question is the more important one: How did you figure it out?

This passage is obviously not an easy read. You had to pull up your repertoire of reading strategies to construct meaning actively. You had to “know about your knowing,” that process known as metacognition (Palinscar and Brown 1984; Paris et al. 1993). Here are the things that real teachers have told us they did when they tried to make this text make sense. Compare theirs with yours.

I stopped, went back, and reread.
I slowed down.
I thought about things I do that are like this.
I tried to picture it.
I kept reading on to see if something later would make it make sense.
I tried to figure out how it was organized. It seemed to be telling me something in sequence (first, next, the final step).
I focused on key words—“the look,” first, next, final.
I tried to read over a paragraph and then restate it in my own words.
I kept trying to summarize what I had read before.
I underlined.
I jotted notes in the margin.
I talked to Jennifer—was I allowed to do that?

What the heck is a reflectoimagographum???

Okay, real teachers, what did you do with reflectoimagographum? Donna made it up, so it’s not a word you’ve encountered in your past reading or vocabulary study.
Chances are, however, you knew it was a mirror. How did you know that? Didn’t you use the context of the rest of the sentence (look into, full-length, to see), the phonetic cues (sounds cued by the letters you saw), and structural cues (reflector = reflects back, image = something you see)? Real readers use all those cueing systems when they encounter unknown words.

Our intent in giving this passage to real teachers is to get them to become conscious of strategies so deeply embedded in their successful reading that they are automatic. Our hope is that, in becoming aware of what happens when they read, they will be better able to help their students use a broad repertoire of strategies in their reading. These deeply embedded strategies always do come to the surface, but some interesting affective feedback often comes up as well. Here are some of the teachers’ remarks:

I felt so dumb!

Why couldn’t I understand this? I just knew everyone else was getting this and I wasn’t.

When Freda turned the page before I did, I panicked.

I was so glad when I heard Roy turn back to reread this. Maybe he wasn’t getting it either.

When you left the room, I real quick asked Kayce what she thought this was about, but I knew this was cheating and I was afraid I’d get caught!

These comments were made by mature, successful readers. Imagine the feelings of our students who find some of the texts we give them as elusive as that getting-dressed passage was for us! Perhaps we assume too often that the texts we give our students in science, history, economics, or math read easily for them because they do for us and that they can successfully be read alone. Perhaps we need to be more empathetic and guide students in acquiring a repertoire of strategies to become more independent—to “get it” on their own. In short, we need to remember to build scaffolds between where they are and where they are capable of being, just like a builder does when he is taking a building to its most soaring peak (Bruner 1986; Vygotsky 1962, 1978).

Given that all readers need to be strategic, to be able to cope successfully and confidently with all kinds of texts, what do real teachers do? Could you give the “getting dressed” passage to your students and have them come up with a list of strategies they use when they read? Perhaps. Better yet, give them a difficult passage from your content area. Use it as an opportunity to talk about the different strategies readers use, to model for them how you go about constructing meaning from texts, to elicit their strategies from them, and to develop an action plan for reading texts in your subject. Students read more confidently (I’m not the only one who has trouble sometimes) and more successfully when the year begins with a frank discussion on how to go about reading.

Charts like those in Figure 4–2 can highlight reading strategies. Students of all ages love the image of “clicks” and “clunks” (Anderson 1980)—and especially love knowing
WHEN YOU'RE READING...

Ask yourself...

-Am I CLICKING ALONG? (I get it.)

-Have I hit a CLUNK? (I don't get it.)

FIX-UP STRATEGIES TO USE WHEN YOU HIT A CLUNK

- Slow down or stop.
- Reread.
- Read on.
- Connect to something you already know. (Use your prior knowledge.)
- Predict or hypothesize.
- Make a picture in your head.
- Use text aids (pictures, headings, title, graphs).
- Figure out the pattern (cause and effect, sequence, listing, comparison/contrast, description, problem-solution).
- Identify the controlling idea.
- Find key words and signal words (first, second, in summary).
- Chunk long, wordy parts into fewer words.
- Restate in your own words (paraphrase).
- Summarize.
- Ask yourself questions.
- Ask someone else what they think it says.
- Write (underline, jot margin notes, write in your own words).
- Use a system to figure out an unknown word:
  - Read to the end of the sentence (context).
  - Try the first few sounds (phonics).
  - Break the word apart (structure).
  - Use the dictionary/glossary.
  - Ask someone for help.

Figure 4–2. Action plan for reading
that their teachers hit clunks when they read, too. Post these charts and refer to them throughout the year. (As an added bonus, you’ll have an “instant bulletin board” that never has to be changed!)

Not everyone uses all these strategies all the time, nor is this the definitive list. You and your students undoubtedly will have a lot of fun coming up with one that is particularly relevant to the types of texts you read in your class. Starting the year with an ethos that says, We’re a community of readers joining together, sets a great tone for the rest of the year.

**Getting to Know Your Text**

“In September all teachers should do an activity to introduce the textbook to their students.” We’ve all heard that line whether in methods classes, inservices, or faculty meetings. Some of us follow through, some don’t. Some of us make it a priority; some pay lip service to the idea. Nevertheless, whatever the subject or grade level, if a textbook is an integral part of what is taught and tested, we must familiarize students with it.

Many successful readers in middle and high schools have already developed a set of coping skills and apply them to their texts. But what about students who are not so successful? These are the ones who really need our help in making texts make sense. They need to know how to recognize features designed to aid comprehension, examine scope and organization, and discover the strengths and weaknesses of their books. The goal is for them to become competent enough to use their texts independently, noticing how graphs, pictures, and other features are integrated into the main body of the work.

In Appendix A, pages 167–69 is a textbook survey that Roberta uses in her seventh-grade classes. Her students enjoy the confidence of dealing with familiar features such as the table of contents, glossary, and index. The young text examiners are surprised to find some information listed in the table of contents but not the index. (They delight in finding evidence of adult “mistakes.”) They stumble and require help with items asking them to look at how chapters are divided. Together, the class and teacher develop a common language for the headings, subheadings, and self-check questions that eases discussions and clarifies assignments throughout the year. They become familiar with special features such as short biographical sketches, career awareness inserts, and information on technology—information that less savvy readers often skip because it’s “not the real text.” By writing, discussing, and examining the text together, the “two-ton-science book” becomes less intimidating and more user-friendly—a tool ready to become an integral part of the year’s learning.

Not all classes rely on regular textbooks. Roberta’s eighth-grade physical science classes use primary source material—books, pamphlets, magazines, newspaper articles, and labs. The standard text survey does not work well here. However, even with these
materials she remembers that her role is that of teacher-coach. She previews how these materials are organized and presents her game plan for using them.

SQ3R: An Old Friend Revisited

Once Roberta introduces and overviews the course text(s), she has begun to guide her students toward independence. The real task lies ahead—reading and remembering what is in those texts. The teacher-coach recognizes how overwhelming that can be for many students and is prepared to continue showing them how.

One simple way to read and remember is to use the SQ3R study plan. Its mantra of Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review makes reading informational text a less mysterious process. Perhaps you’re saying, But my students don’t need this. That’s for elementary kids. My students can read the text. Great! However, what if you want them to read a more sophisticated text? Let’s be honest. All literate adults find some writing difficult to follow. Maybe your nemesis is Scientific American, the works of John le Carré, or the dreaded tax forms. If you examine your approach to difficult reading, don’t you use the steps of SQ3R? Again, we make this same point with our students.

We know some of you are saying, “Good grief, SQ3R is as old as the hills! I spent money for this book to get new ideas. SQ3R certainly is not new; its roots go back to the 1930s and it has continued to garner respect since then (Robinson 1961, Anderson and Armbruster 1984; Caverly and Orlando 1991). What is “new” about it is the context in which Roberta uses it. It stops being a cut-and-dried lesson in a reading class and takes on vitality as she models its use in science. Students actively make connections between what they already do as readers and new strategies to try. SQ3R is placed squarely within the community of readers.

Here’s what happens. Entering Roberta’s classroom on the first day of school, students are greeted with a bulletin board bearing the glow-in-the-dark heading, The SQ3R Study Plan. Cartoons with captions outlining the plan invite students’ attention. Keep in mind, Roberta teaches science. Discussing books and reading in this context is risky, scary, but well worth it. Friendly and frank, she sets the tone for the year: a caring adult is willing to guide you through the process of learning, not just present subject matter to you.

Roberta begins by asking, “How many of you like to read science books for fun?” Only four of her last 472 students have raised their hands. When she asks why not, typical answers are, “It’s hard and uses too many big words.” Roberta readily agrees and mentions that many science books have sketchy explanations and too-brief summaries. She also points out that new vocabulary is often introduced too rapidly. With further prodding, one brave soul finally admits that reading science is boring. Roberta agrees that it’s not thrilling material but promises to provide more interesting reading during the school year.
Students are now ready and willing to hear about a plan to make reading and comprehending easier. Roberta directs their attention to the bulletin board and passes out a form students can use to take notes (Figure 4–3). This ensures that everyone actively engages with each step of the plan as it is explained. Roberta reassures them that they already use SQ3R every time they go to the library or bookstore: they just need to learn to transfer the process to science class.

Here’s a typical exchange between Roberta and her students as they participate as a community of readers investigating the use of SQ3R:

ROBERTA: If you don’t like to get science books out of the library, what kinds of books do you like? [A discussion of favorite genres ensues, somewhat subdued at first, but more open when students realize that their opinions count.] How do you pick a book out of the library or bookstore? After all, you don’t go in and grab the first book that you lay eyes on.

A STUDENT: I look at the cover.

ROBERTA: What do you look for on the cover?

A STUDENT: The title.

ROBERTA: Does it influence your selection? [Students look puzzled.] For example, if the title were something like Fun and Games for Six-Year-Olds, would you check it out? [Big chorus of “nos!”] What else do you look for on the cover?

A STUDENT: The picture on the front.

ROBERTA: I’ll bet this also influences your decision. I know that if I see an action figure or a baby doll on it, that book’s not for me. [Nods and laughter.] What else helps you decide to check out a book?

A STUDENT: The author.

ROBERTA: My favorite authors are Tom Clancy and Dick Francis. What authors do you like? [S. E. Hinton, Judy Blume, and Madeline L’Engel are mentioned every year, but Stephen King is always the most popular author in every class.] How can you read his stuff? You’ve all got sick minds! I read one of his books and had nightmares for three weeks! [Squeals of delight. Now, everyone has bought into the lesson. The once subdued discussion has become very lively as students interact with their teacher and each other.] What else about a book do you look at before you decide to read it?


ROBERTA: Can you say that you survey a book before you check it out? [Nods from the students.] That’s the first step in the SQ3R study plan. When you do this for a library book, you know what to expect from the book. It’s the same with science, social studies, or first-aid books. You survey a text, chapter, or section to get a
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Figure 4-3. SQ3R listening guide
general idea of what the reading is about. You look at the layout of your assignments. Are there questions or summaries at the end of the selection? Are subheadings found throughout? Are any pictures, maps, or graphs found in the pages? Surveying takes less than thirty seconds, but it’s an important step when you begin a reading assignment. Let’s go back to searching for an interesting book in the library. After you’ve quickly looked at the title, print, author, and pictures, what’s your next step?

A student: I read the back cover or the inside flaps.

Roberta: Why?

A student: To see what it’s about.

Roberta: In what way?

A student: Is it fiction or nonfiction?

A student: What’s the genre—historical, horror, romance, mystery, science fiction?

A student: The setting—past, present, future?

A student: Does it look interesting to me? Will I want to finish reading it?

A student: What’s the sex of the main character? [Roberta finds that the girls are more comfortable reading a novel where the protagonist is male than vice versa. Why? A topic for another day!]

Roberta: This is what questioning is all about. It lets you make predictions about what you will read. It also gives you a purpose for reading. You need to find the answers to your questions in science. We can handle the question part of SQ3R in two ways. One, we can make up questions of our own. If the title of a chapter is “Cells—The Basic Unit of Life,” we might ask several questions about that phrase. For example, How small are cells? Can you think of any questions about cells?

A student: Are all living things made of cells?

A student: Are all cells alike?

A student: How many cells are in humans?

A student: How long do cells live?

A student: How do cells produce new cells?

Roberta: Very good. Next, I want you to be absolutely sure to do this next part of the question phase with every assignment I give you. Read the questions first! It drives me absolutely crazy to give kids a worksheet and reading assignment, watch them read everything, then look at the questions, and next start to reread the entire assignment. Read the questions first! It doesn’t matter if they are the questions in your text or questions on a paper that I’ve given you. Read the questions first! It’ll help you concentrate, give you a purpose for the reading, and let you focus on the information that I want you to understand. I see so many kids try to skip this step but, believe me, it makes a big difference. Now we’re at the read stage of
SQ3R. We’re all readers in this room and know what to do, right? [Yeses and nods of agreement.] What I want you to remember with all of your reading is to read for ideas, not just words. Answer your questions as you go along. I also want you to recognize that reading a science book is different from reading an English anthology or a social studies text. Here, you need to slow down. Read carefully. I’ll bet that you do your slowest reading of all in math class. You really need to take in every single word there. I bet you’re all thinking, Okay, I can survey, question, and read library books, but I definitely do not recite or review them! Well, I think we do. For example, how many of you have ever come to the bottom of a page to realize suddenly that you have no idea what you just read? [All hands go up, including Roberta’s.] What do you do?

A STUDENT: Go back and reread.

ROBERTA: Exactly! Do you ever have to do this when you read your school textbooks? [Nods again.] This is called the recite stage. You go over what you’ve just read to make sure you understood it, can remember it. And if you don’t? Go back and read again.

A STUDENT: Reread. Why is it called recite and not reread?

ROBERTA: Would you rather call it reread?

A STUDENT: Yes.

ROBERTA: That’s okay with me. Next, we need to apply this recite—or reread—portion of SQ3R to our science reading. How often should you stop and check your understanding? [Discussion follows until students agree that they should stop at the end of each paragraph to monitor their comprehension.] Since you’ve decided to stop at the end of each paragraph, try to list the main ideas of each paragraph. What should you do if this gives you trouble?

A STUDENT: Reread!

ROBERTA: When you go home tonight, pick up your library book and open to the page at your bookmark. What do you do? [Puzzled frowns.] Don’t you have to remember where you are in the story? For example, I’m reading The Bear and the Dragon, by Tom Clancy [2000]. When I open the book tonight, I need to remember that trade negotiations between China and the USA have just broken off and the President’s men are concerned about the effect on the global economy. If I couldn’t remember that, what could I do?

A STUDENT: Reread the last several pages or skim the previous chapter.

ROBERTA: Exactly. I review the story in my mind or review the previous pages to spark my memory. We need to do the same thing in science. At home, you should review the day’s work every night. Be sure you understand and are prepared for quizzes and other questions from me. I’ll try to start lessons with a quick review also. There. We’ve just shown how we use SQ3R every time we use library books.
It’s automatic, unconscious; we just do it. Now, I want you to do this consciously with every reading assignment in science class or social studies or music or whatever.

At this point, Roberta fields questions, checks that her students understand every aspect of SQ3R, and have completed the notes side of their worksheet. Next, she asks students to write their honest reactions to each phase of SQ3R. Circulating around the room, she offers encouragement and gives her reactions to their opinions. Asking students to give their reactions helps them internalize the lesson and understand how they can do what they automatically do with library books with science books as well.

Many students give reactions that teachers always hope to get. For example, Brad wrote the following about survey: “Make better grades because you know what you’re reading.” For question, he wrote, “Good idea so you won’t have to go back and look for answers.” He really understood the lesson and recognized the helpfulness of SQ3R. On the other hand, Amanda said for survey, “I’ve never done before. Sounds stupid.” For read, “I usually answer the questions when I’m done.” She obviously was quite honest and received a great deal of encouragement to try to integrate SQ3R into her approach to reading. (Guess which child found reading easier.) Roberta’s favorite reaction page (Figure 4–4) is that of Nick, a man of few words.

Roberta’s presentation of SQ3R fills one forty-three-minute period. The class the following day begins with a review of SQ3R and a practical application of it using a science textbook. This first exposure to SQ3R is a whole-class activity, with Roberta modeling the behavior required to move through each phase in order to comprehend the passages being read. Students see that SQ3R not only makes sense but also makes reading easier and increases comprehension.

After these initial presentations, Roberta does not allow SQ3R to be forgotten. She repeatedly reminds students to let the study plan guide their reading. One chemistry exam even contains the question, “What do the letters in SQ3R represent? Pick one letter and explain how it relates to reading science assignments.” She urges students to use this study plan and make it an automatic approach to all their reading. Even good readers need to be exposed to this plan. When she was in seventh grade, Allyson’s reading ability was tested and found to be in the post–high school range. Obviously she was a very good reader. Yet after applying SQ3R to her lessons, Allyson commented, “Now this really makes sense. I can see it helping me in science, but I’m using it in social studies, too. It just all connects.”

Got the Picture?

Students need the big picture of what we expect them to do when they read their textbooks. By understanding what reading is as it relates to each particular subject, by
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<th>REACTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>survey</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question</td>
<td></td>
<td>50/50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read</td>
<td></td>
<td>50/50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recite</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>review</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arghhh!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4–4. Nick’s reactions to SQ3R
understanding how the texts of that subject are organized, and by developing a plan for the overall approach to studying those texts, all students will be equipped to play on an even field as learners of content.

The big picture is important to establish and reinforce all year long. We believe in sharing accountability across all grades and subjects. We are committed to engaging students, cross-curricularly, in the processes of reading; modeling the behavior we want to engender; and helping them become strategic learners not just for today but for a lifetime. There is, however, the matter of getting through each day’s lesson.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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