**Critical Reading**

**What do we mean by a ‘higher-level reader’?**

Throughout this book, we outline many ways to develop readers and challenge thinking. Reading at a ‘higher level’, ‘developing mastery within reading’, ‘extending thinking’ and ‘reading at greater depth’ are all terms with which we are becoming familiar but what does this look like in terms of learning gain for pupils and how do we define a ‘higher-level reader’?

If we start with the discussion around what might be considered reading at an advanced level, we can begin to explore the various ideas and opinions that surround this concept. This is some­what problematic as a survey of the literature around higher-level readers suggests that there is no one definition (Brighton *et al*., 2015). However, there is some consensus as to the attributes one might expect a higher-level reader to demonstrate. These include a more sophisticated vocabulary development, an enjoyment of reading, the ability to analyse, evaluate and synthesise effectively together with the ability to be critical yet creative in their approach to texts (Reis *et al*., 2004). Reiss *et al*. also cite advanced language skills as an important characteristic of an advanced reader which suggests the importance of the social aspect of reading. Reading is not a solitary activity but one which demands that we discuss ideas, challenge each other in terms of knowledge held, argue, debate and rationalise our thoughts. Indeed, according to Cremin *et al*. (2014, p5) *the act of reading remains profoundly social*. If we also consider Aidan Chambers’ work around ‘Booktalk’, the impor­tance of being able to articulate thoughts and co-construct knowledge through a shared response is another obvious indicator of a higher level of reading. As teachers, we must enable our pupils to become advanced readers by providing opportunities to build the aforementioned characteristics while teaching the skills to achieve this. The following chapters will examine the rationale behind this approach and offer some practical teaching, learning and assessment strategies to develop this effectively within your own classroom.

**Developing high-level reading skills: the challenge**

There are a number of challenges when developing high-level reading skills with children which need to be explored in order to be able to effectively address this within the classroom. Some of these have already been explored above.

**Challenging texts**

As previously stated, not all schools and pupils have access to an endless supply of good quality texts although solutions have been proposed as part of Tom’s case study. This is further compounded by a lack of texts which are challenging yet age appropriate in terms of content. According to Shanahan *et al., just as it’s impossible to build muscle without weight or resistance, it’s impossible to build robust read­ing skills without reading challenging text* (Shanahan *et al*., 2012, p52). The importance of providing challenging texts is crucial in continuing to enhance comprehension skills and so these should be chosen wisely. According to Fang and Pace (2013), text difficulty may be determined through the application of five linguistic sources of complexity:

1. *vocabulary* – the inclusion of more complex vocabulary: tier 2 or 3 words (Beck *et al*., 2013);
2. *grammatical metaphors* – atypical ways of representing meaning which can be abstract;
3. *cohesion* – where sentences do not link explicitly and there may be ambiguity;

*lexical density* – a prevalence of content words with a number of expanded noun phrases;

• *grammatical intricacy* – long, complex sentences with multiple clauses.

Complexity may also be determined through the themes that are introduced and the level of criti­cality necessary to fully explore the text. This is examined in more detail in Chapter 9. The only successful way of knowing the right texts to use is by reading the text before introducing it to your class and by knowing your pupils and their backgrounds. You, as the teacher, are best placed to judge the suitability of content and themes.

**Finding the Main Idea**

Not all sentences within a paragraph are equally important. In fact, there are three levels of importance:

Most important: the main idea

Less important: primary supporting details

Least important: secondary supporting details

As you read a paragraph, you should be sorting ideas according to their relative importance and paying more attention to some than to others. Here, you will learn how to identify these levels of importance as well as how ideas fit and work together in a paragraph.

A paragraph can be defined as a group of related ideas. The sentences are related to one another and all are about the same person, place, thing, or idea.

The common subject or idea is called the topic—what the focus of the entire paragraph is about.

**Identifying Topic Sentences**

Often, but not always, one sentence expresses the main idea. This sentence is called the topic sentence.

To find the topic sentence, search for the one general sentence that explains what the writer wants you to know about the topic. A topic sentence is a broad, general statement; the remaining sentences of the paragraph provide details about or explain the topic sentence.

In the following paragraph, the topic is stereotypes. Read the paragraph to find out what the writer wants you to know about this topic. Look for one sentence that states this.

**Finding an Implied Main Idea**

Although most paragraphs do have a topic sentence, some do not. Such paragraphs contain only details or specifics that, taken together, point to the main idea. The main idea, then, is implied but not directly stated. In such paragraphs, you must infer, or reason out, the main idea. This is a process of adding up the details and deciding what they mean together or what main idea they all support or explain. Use the following steps to grasp implied main ideas:

1. Identify the topic by asking yourself, “What is the one thing the author is discussing throughout the paragraph?”

2. Decide what the writer wants you to know about the topic. Look at each detail and decide what larger idea each explains.

3. Express this idea in your own words.

**Recognizing Primary and Secondary Details**

Supporting details are those facts, reasons, examples, or statistics that prove or explain the main idea of a paragraph. Though all the details in a paragraph support the main idea, not all details are equally important. As you read, try to identify and pay attention to the most important, primary details. These primary details directly explain the main idea. Secondary, less important details may provide additional information, offer an example, or further explain one of the primary details.

**Making Inferences as You Read**

Reading in college requires you to go beyond what authors *say* and be concerned with what they *mean.* This reasoning process is called “making an inference.”

**Distinguishing Between Fact and Opinion**

Facts are statements that are verifiably true. Opinions are statements that express feelings, attitudes, or beliefs that are neither true nor false.

**Identifying the Author’s Purpose**

Writers have many different reasons or purposes for writing. THIS MAY BE TO INFORM, INSTRUCT, PERSUADE OR ENTERTAIN

**Evaluating the Data and Evidence**

Many writers who express their opinions, state viewpoints, or make generalizations provide data or evidence to support their ideas. Your task as a critical reader is to weigh and evaluate the quality of this evidence. You must examine the evidence and assess its adequacy. You should be concerned with two factors: the type of evidence being presented and the relevance of that evidence.

**Is the Author Fair or Biased?**

We expect other forms of writing to be honest and forthright; otherwise they present a biased point of view. You can think of bias as a writer’s prejudice. If an author is biased, then, he or she is partial to one point of view or one side of a controversial issue.

**Reading argumentative texts**

**Prescriptive Vs descriptive writing**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Prescriptive writing** | **Descriptive writing** |
| Author’s purpose  Subject  Main idea body of writing  Body of writing | To persuade, to prescribe  Issue  Point of view/ position  Supporting arguments | To inform, to describe, to instruct  Topic  Main idea / thesis  Supporting details |

Prescriptive-------------------------------------persuasive

Descriptive--------------------------------------informative

**To outline or represent the key point in a argument, follow this template.**

1. issue: whether or not ……………….

2. author’s point of view:

Supporting argument 1

Supporting argument 2

Supporting argument 3

**Facts Vs opinions**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Facts** | **Opinions** |
| Can be proved or verified  They may be statistics ( but their I terpretation is opinion) | Are someobe’s interpretations of facts  Involve a value judjment  Are signaled by words and phrases like: the truth is, I think, we ought to, we should, etc. |

**Types of support for arguments**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Fact** | | **Opinion** | | | **Fact or opinion** | |
| **Facts** | **Reasons** | | **Examples** | **Testimony** | | **Counterarguments** |
| Numbers  Statistics  Verifiable events | Informed opinion  Logical arguments  Reasoned conclusions | | Lists in support  Names  Dates  Events  Specific cases | Expert witnesses  Expert opinion | | Laying out the other side’s points and finding fault with them |

**Is the support effective?**

Ask the following questions

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Facts | Reasons | Examples | Testimony | Counterarguments |
| Are the facts verifiable?  Are the statistics interpreted and, therefore, part opinion? | Are the arguments logical?  Are the conclusions reasonable? | Are the lists or other examples directly relevant to the point being proven? | Are the experts qualified to pass judjement? | Are the opponents’ points clearly disproven? |

**Bias and tone**

1. **Attitude and tone**

Answers to questions like these will indicate the author's ATTITUDE (how the author feels):

1. What are the author’s personal feelings about the subject?

2. How does the author feel about the readers?

3. Is the text directed toward mental inferiors, superiors, or equals?

4. Is the author trying to impress the reader with his/her knowledge?

The TONE (the way the author chooses to express himself/herself) can be recognized by answers to questions such as these:

1. What is the tone of the author (e.g., serious, light-hearted, humorous, ironic, sarcastic, logical, emotional, condescending)?

2. What connotations (underlying meanings) do the author’s word choices carry?

**2. Bias**

An author's INTENT, ATTITUDE, and TONE will often indicate whether the author is BIASED or objective. Answers to the following questions will help you recognize an author's bias in writing:

1. Considering the topic as a whole, what, if any, factors contain bias?

2. Does the author appear to be one-sided about any of these?

3. Is the author being objective or subjective?

4. Is the author stating fact or opinion?

5. How well are the author’s opinions supported? Or are they unsupported?

6. Does the tone of the writing suggest that the author may be biased?

**Loaded language**

Heavily biased words and phrases are to as **loaded language**, or words and phrases that an anthor chooses to convey a point of view and that reveal bias. A word or phrase is considered loaded if it suggests strong connotations (wether negative or positive), beyond its strict dictionary, or denotative, definition. Loaded language reveals a great deal about the author’s tone ( you can tell whether he/she is angry, frustrated, ….from his diction/choice of words.

**Looking at language critically**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Connotation** | **Denotation** | **Loaded language** | **Tone** | **Bias** |
| The suggested implications of a word or phrase either positive or negative based on cultural conditioning or personal experience | The dictionary or literal interpretation of a word without symbolic or emotional load | A word or phrase carries connotation, either positive or negative associations beyond its strict denotative meaning | The author’s underlying attitude or emotion toward the subject as revealed by words or writing style | The author’s side on an issue as revealed by choice of words and tone. |