

## Reading for Learning

If you are seeking information, you cannot wait for someone else to find it for you and flash it on a television screen. You may learn from TV programs, but they can't answer questions as you think of them. You need the ability to make use of information resources that exist in forms you can find yourself whenever you need them.

The early experiences that children have in reading and the variety of materials they have studied are crucial in their development of attitudes toward learning on their own. Education is, largely, a process of learning to learn, and ability to use printed sources for information is surely the most essential skill that a learner can acquire. This issue, then, is about helping young people develop the general and specialized skills they will need in reading for information.



### Content Reading

The phrase *content reading* is an umbrella term that covers just about any reading connected with a specific subject taught in school. The term also implies that this is reading that is done not for its own sake. It is reading done to increase the knowledge of the reader. Since an increase in knowledge is what we associate with learning, content reading might also be called "reading to learn."

Looking at content reading as "reading to learn" helps us to realize the close connection between reading subject materials and the kind of informational reading that people do in everyday life. In both instances, the reader is hoping to gain something from the reading that will help him or her perform more effectively in some important area of living. In school, learning is central, and so subject reading plays a role in the child's life similar to that of newspapers, magazines, informational books and other such material in the adult's.

Because children grow up in a world where it is usual to consult printed sources for information, they may actually have read about a topic long before they must formally study it. They are usually glad to share what they



know from non-school reading. A parent can stimulate this sense of reading by discussing things they themselves are finding out from what they are currently reading. If regular sharing of information is done by the parent, the youngster will be more likely to participate also.

### Working with Books

By using schoolbooks as a topic of discussion, a parent can often find out what the child


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knows about the information in those books. The discussion can be centered on the format *or* the contents. If the reader indicates that he or she sees little means of getting information from those books, the parent needs to discuss other sources with him or her. Periodical publications such as newspapers and magazines, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other reference books, as well as the Internet, show children how much information is available from reading materials.

In the middle grades and up, children need practice in using common informational materials, such

as, store catalogs, the yellow pages of the telephone book and television guides for finding and checking information. These offer practical experience in using indexes, alphabetical order, and chronological order in finding things out. These kinds of books can also be used in problem-solving activities from their daily life, such as finding someone to do a repair job or deciding on an item to purchase. Catalogs from department stores are very interesting reading to children and a good supply around the house will tempt the most reluctant reader to find information in them. 

### General Study Skills

**M**iddle grade students, especially, need to realize that they already have many skills used to read for information.

Responses that they have learned in their earlier reading experiences—the sense of order, keeping events and ideas in a time sequence, and following a series of ideas to a conclusion—all apply to content reading just as they are to the reading of stories. Many students fail to realize that over the years they have the need to get information independently. Sometimes all it takes is to have the parent remind them that their earlier learned reading skills are valuable tools for understanding textbooks, or to reassure them that the more specific content reading skills will be learned gradually, just as the general skills for

reading were acquired with practice.

A good illustration of how early content reading begins is a piece called *Animal Friends* by

Alma Whitney, intended for advanced first graders. Take a look at the sample of the text to the left.

**Animal Friends**

Here are two animals that live in the water.  
They don't look very much like each other, do they?  
But they are friends.  
The little one is called shrimp.  
The big one is an eel.  
This eel is not a friend to other fish.  
Sometimes he likes to eat them.  
But he will not eat this shrimp.]  
This shrimp takes tiny animals off the eel.  
The eel gets cleaned up and the shrimp gets his lunch!

(Source: Smith and Wardhaugh, Macmillan Series R, Level 10, pp. 72-73.)

This pattern of information is repeated in descriptions of other odd pairs of animals so that the young reader is led to develop the concept of “symbiosis” years before he will be exposed to the term. How-

ever, even as a first grader, he knows this kind of reading is not a story, he knows that it is “telling” him something else. Thus he learns from the very beginning that “telling” can be done with print.

# A Basic Procedure for Study Reading: The PARS Approach

**A**ny job seems easier and more organized if we follow a procedure in doing it. For a younger student who is just beginning to find ways to tackle study reading, the four-step **PARS** approach provides a helpful way to organize the task. This approach involves the following steps:

- ◆ **PURPOSE:** Decide *why* you are reading.
- ◆ **ASK:** Constantly raise questions related to the purpose.
- ◆ **READ:** Find answers to the questions you have raised.
- ◆ **SUMMARIZE:** Write answers and record information in your own words.

## PURPOSE

The first step in the PARS process is to decide *why* to read something. Most students will say they are reading because they have to. Though this may be true about school work, it's not very helpful. A student has to get beyond the feeling of being required to read and begin to ask, "What can I get out of reading this assignment?"

At first, your child will probably need help in figuring out reasons for reading something. One way you can help is by describing your own reasons for choosing to read certain books. What do *you* expect from those books? If you were the child, how would you expect to benefit from reading the assignment? Be a good role model for finding a purpose for reading. For example, you can show your child how to use chapter headings and subheadings to help focus a purpose.

When your child is first learning to set a purpose for reading, encourage her to talk to herself about what she finds interesting or helpful in this article. Although we want young learners to come up with their own reading purposes, remember that

children are inexperienced and may need a little guidance at first.

A preschooler, of course, will not have study-reading assignments, but asking young readers to set purposes sets the stage for later work. Consider concept books, such as a read-along book like *Circle, Triangles and Squares* by Tana Hoban. Before reading, you can help the child think about a purpose just by asking, "What do you suppose a triangle is? How do you make a square?" This kind of introduction will help your child realize that she can read to find an answer to a question.

Primary-grade children like to learn about dinosaurs. To encourage further study, you might pick up a book entitled *What Happened to the Dinosaurs?* The title is a question itself, so talk to your child about this purpose for reading: to find out what happened to the dinosaurs. Begin by asking, "What do you already know about dinosaurs? Did you know they all disappeared long ago? What do *you* think might have happened?" Now your child is drawn into the book; it isn't just a pile of pages to turn.

One of the best ways to set a purpose is to have your child speculate and make predictions based on a book's title. For example, *I Sailed on the Mayflower* by Roger Pilkington suggests all sorts of questions



## A Basic Procedure for Study Reading: The PARS Approach



and speculations. What was the Mayflower? Where did it come from? Where was it going? Much of this information will become clear as you read along. But more questions arise along the way. Who was on the ship? Why were they leaving their homeland? Even if none of your child's predictions turn out to be accurate, they serve a valuable purpose because your child has started a conversation with the book.

When your child reads in content areas such as history or science, it is easy to overlook the most important purpose of all: to find specific facts about the subject. If the title of a section in a science book is *The Discovery of Radiation*, the purpose of reading the book is to find out what radiation is and when and how it was discovered.



### Ask

After setting the general purpose for study reading, the next step is to formulate specific questions that will guide your reading. It's usually helpful to jot down these questions or to list key words to remind you to look for things that are personally interesting or are clearly related to the reading assignment.

Usually these specific questions arise from a quick overview of the article or chapter. Subheads, bold-face words, and illustrations can stimulate the questions, as can directions from a teacher in making the assignment. For example:

- *Why did people leave their homelands?*
- *How many immigrants were there?*
- *What was the effect of all these new people on the United States?*

Remind your child that it is often helpful to turn

subheads into questions. In that way the child has a helpful technique for creating advance questions. An effective reader always asks himself questions as he reads. In doing so he not only has a clearer focus but also establishes an attitude that keeps him actively involved in learning.

As a parent, you can discuss these advance questions with your child by remembering the kinds of questions that teachers might ask about the chapter, for example:

- *What is the main idea or theme?*
- *Are there major claims being made?*
- *Which are the most important facts?*
- *What conclusions does the author draw?*
- *What two or three personal questions come to mind?*

This process of establishing questions does not happen automatically. It requires practice and reminders from you. Here are a few sample subheads that you may want to use to show your child how the **Ask** step in the **PARS** procedure works. To make sure that the concepts and readability level are appropriate for your child, the best practice exercises will come directly from the textbooks and reading assignments that your child brings home.

- *Religion influenced medieval thought about the universe*  
(How did religion influence medieval thought about the universe? *What* were the beliefs at that time about the universe?)
- *European history affects certain trends*

(*What* were these trends? *How* did European history affect them? Exactly *what* is the connection between events in history and the trends discussed?)

### ■ **Internal combustion engines**

(*What* are internal combustion engines? *How* do they work? *Who* invented them? *How* did they develop?)

### ■ **Building a unified paragraph**

(*What* is a unified paragraph? *What* makes it unified? *How* do I write one?)

### ■ **Arctic exploration**

(*When* was the Arctic first explored? *Who* explored it? *How* did they do it?)

### ■ **Amphibious animals**

(*What* does the word *amphibious* mean? *What* makes an animal amphibious? *How* did amphibious animals develop?)

As you see, even a short heading such as *Amphibious Animals* can generate a whole series of questions that direct our reading. Once your child realizes that headings can carry meaning and can arouse his curiosity, you can point to illustrations, boldface words, and chapter summaries as other sources to stimulate advance questions.

## READ

Your child now has a plan (his questions) for taking in information and ideas. By following the plan, he will be more active and positive than if he had just started reading with no clear direction. Having a structure laid out in advance encourages your child to remember and to build meaning as he goes.

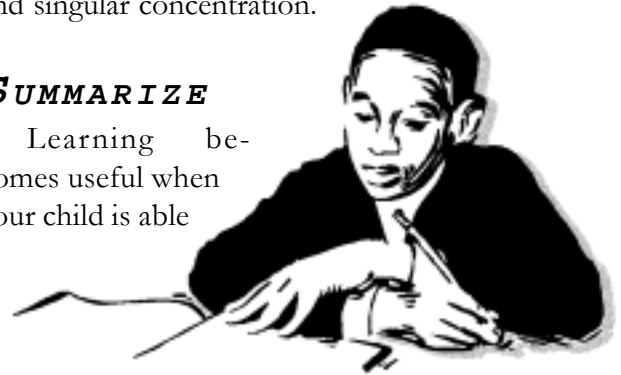
While reading, your child should talk to himself about what he is learning, about the things that are

not clear, about answers to the questions he raised earlier. This can be done by *taking notes*, or by highlighting important terms and ideas while reading. He is regularly monitoring his own learning.

When we read a novel, a letter, a newspaper, or a recipe, we fit the information to our own interests and needs with little or no conscious effort. Study reading takes more planning. Work with your child to map out an approach to study reading. This kind of planning may lead your young learner to prepare for a reading task with paper, pencil, reference books, and singular concentration.

## SUMMARIZE

Learning becomes useful when your child is able



to put ideas into her own words. This is what we mean by *summarizing*, which is the final step in the PARS process. Help your child wrap it all up by saying how the purpose that she set for the reading has been achieved, and how her questions have been answered. She should be able to tell what the main ideas are, what they mean to her, and how she would give someone else a bird's-eye view of what she learned.

The form in our minds that reading material takes on as we read *is* the summary. Learners can write a summary of two or three sentences as a means for recalling the important ideas—perhaps as a review for a test—and as a way to bring the work to a satisfactory conclusion.



# Becoming an Efficient Reader

**H**elp your child practice speed-reading and skimming. These techniques can make a difference, even when practiced only a few minutes each week. It's easy to tell how fast your child reads. Give her a page or two to read and clock how long it takes to finish. For children in the upper-elementary grades, start with passages of no more than 1000 words. As the reading speed increases, use longer readings. Here's the formula for figuring out reading speed:

$$\frac{\text{words read}}{\text{time in seconds}} \times 60 = \text{average words per minute}$$

(Number of words in the passage, divided by the number of seconds it took to read it, times 60 equals reading speed in words per minute.)

Of course, it is most important for your child to *understand* what she is reading. Ask questions about the reading material or have her summarize what she read. Keep track of the reading speed, and also record the "comprehension score" (how many questions about the reading were answered correctly).

Encourage your child to practice skimming by looking for specific bits of information in a passage. Find an article and give your child two or three tasks to finish within a limited time. In an article about manned space flight, for instance, you might say, "Let's see how long it takes you to find the year when the first jet-propelled airplane flew," or "Find the names of as many pioneers of flight as you can, and why each one is important." Then let her know how many seconds it took to report back. This kind of drill will

make a game of finding information as quickly as possible. Your child may ask how she can improve her skimming techniques. Success with these drills will build your child's confidence and will help her learn how to adjust reading to a purpose.

Use the following checklist with middle schoolers to review the skills that are helpful for efficiency reading.

## Efficiency Reading Checklist

	not sure	never	sometimes	usually	always
1. I can read fast and understand what I read.					
2. When reading quickly, I look for main ideas.					
3. Before reading, I preview to see how fast I should read.					
4. I change reading speed depending on what I'm reading.					
5. I skim when looking for a single fact or other item.					
6. When skimming, I try to get meaning from context.					
7. I read silently without saying the words.					
8. I read groups of words rather than one word at a time.					
9. I do not look back at what I've already read.					
10. I try to keep increasing my rapid-reading speed.					

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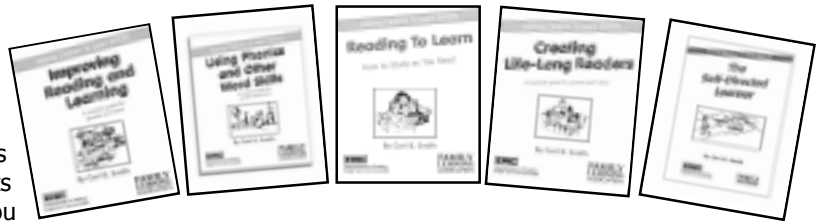
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## Following Written Directions

It's a good idea to start very young children with written directions that involve only one step before moving to more complicated exercises. Remember that a child must be advanced enough in reading to understand and comply with written instructions. Begin with examples that pose simple tasks.

Instructions such as those given below can be written on cards or on the top of the paper on which the answers will be written. For the sake of variety, include exercises calling for physical acts. Keep in mind the limits of your child's vocabulary and reading skills. Here are a few samples:

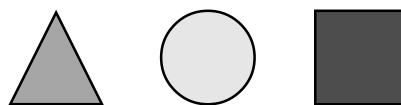
- ◆ Tap your foot three times.
- ◆ Draw two circles and one box.
- ◆ Write your name with a red crayon and circle it in yellow.

Second graders usually are able to handle written instructions involving three steps. The examples below have three steps, but can be adapted to two- or four-step drills. For exercises requiring the drawing of shapes, you may want to review how a circle, square, and triangle are shaped. Be sure to stress that only by

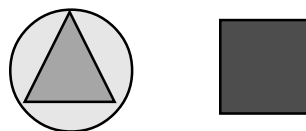
reading the directions carefully will the child be able to place the various shapes on the page.

The following exercises require only paper and red, yellow, and blue crayons. The illustrations are for your information; your child should see only the written instructions.

- ◆ Draw a yellow triangle. Draw a red circle to the right of the yellow triangle. Then put a blue square to the right of the circle.



- ◆ Draw a blue circle. Put a red triangle inside the circle. Draw a yellow square to the right of the circle.



You can come up with other exercises that require your child to write down answers.



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