

3 Bucciarelli Lane, Norwalk, CT 06850, USA.

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A strategy for previewing textbooks: Teaching readers to become THIEVES

Suzanne Liff Manz

It's ironic that so many acronyms are easily forgotten. After all, they are suppose to be mnemonic devices. The plethora of acronyms designed to identify and sequence steps for organized and meaningful study are particularly vulnerable. Even if a student manages to retrieve the trigger word, the chance of recalling the meaning of each letter component of an acronym is slim.

As an educator for almost 30 years, I plead guilty to having devised some very forgettable memory enhancers.

Allow me, however, to share one that has stood the test of time, and supported students in their pursuit of meaningful textbook reading, from upper elementary grades through college classrooms.

To effectively and thoroughly preview texts, students are encouraged to be THIEVES. Yes, direct your students to sneak into the chapter and "steal" information ahead of time. Tell them to be greedy...to take as much as they can. THIEVES identifies the elements of the textbook chapter that should be thoroughly surveyed, perused, and pondered in advance of actual reading. This enhances access of prior knowledge, as well as expectation and purpose. Subsequent reading will become more relevant and meaningful. It will also be more readily recalled (Wassman & Rinsky, 1997).

Here are the survey elements identified by THIEVES. Following each are suggested questions designed to stimulate metacognitive processing.

T—Title. Often skipped entirely by students, the title is the entrance into a chapter. Most often it states the topic and establishes a context. In texts with chronological significance, the title may offer a location within a continuum or timeline. In essays, it often unlocks the entire thesis. Though "you can't tell a book by its cover," students can garner a great deal from its title.

What is the title? What do I already know about this topic? What does it have to do with the preceding chapter? Does it express a point of view? What do I think we will be reading about?

H—Headings. Headings are the gateway to the important general subject areas within chapters. They are the visible organizers of the content. Students can discern specific topics and establish a purpose for reading by turning headings into questions. In some cases, students can string headings together to generate a summary of a chapter before reading it. In texts with lengthy narratives, students may be directed to add headings or subheadings in their annotation of the text, making the work more user friendly for review.

What does this heading let me know I will be reading about? What is the topic of the paragraph beneath it? How can I turn this heading into a question that is likely to be answered in the actual content?

I—Introduction. The introduction typically provides a framework into which the chapter content may be placed. It offers a background and setting for the text. Chapter goals and objectives are often stated in the introduction. To enhance learning, these may be personalized by integrating "I will...." with the related objectives; for example, "I will identify the underlying economic conditions leading to the Depression." Notify students that sometimes introductions are not labeled, and that the writing following the title but before the first heading may introduce the chapter. In texts with few headings, the first or second paragraph may be an introduction.

Is there an opening, perhaps italicized? Does the first paragraph introduce the chapter? What does the introduction let me know I will be reading about? Do I know anything about this already?

E—Every first sentence in a paragraph. For a very thorough preview, students are asked to read the first sentence of paragraphs. These are often the topic sentences. Older students may find this particularly helpful in gleaning a sense of the entire chapter when time is at a premium. From this aspect of the preview, students may choose to eliminate some portions of the text. This should be done prudently.

V—Visuals and vocabulary. Maybe there's not time for a thousand, but a picture can be worth many valuable words. Perusing photographs, charts, graphs, maps, or tables provides a segue into the reading. For visual learners, it is an opportunity to integrate an important processing sense. Translating the visual presentations into words enables students to begin learning about the topic before they have even begun to read.

Are there photographs, drawings, maps, charts, graphs? What can I learn from them? How do the captions help me better understand the meaning?

Vocabulary terms help unlock the meaning of the chapter. Highlighted words are keys to important concepts. Their integration and use enable students to comprehend and to express their understanding in a meaningful and intelligent way.

Is there a list of key vocabulary terms and definitions? Are there important words in boldface

type throughout the chapter? Do I know what they mean? Can I tell the meaning from the sentences in which they are embedded?

E—End-of-chapter questions. Culminating study questions often flag important points and concepts. Reading them carefully within a preview alerts students to significant points, whether or not they are to respond to every question. Knowledge of the questions ahead of time helps direct and establish a purpose for reading. For older students, marginal notetaking and annotating can then reflect the location of information in preparation for formulating a response.

Students are intrigued to learn that they can derive a good deal of information from a question even if they don't know the answer. "Why" questions are particularly informative; for example, "Why did many Americans oppose the war in Vietnam?" Before reading, students may not know the reason, but from the question they do learn that many people opposed the war. From this they could answer a simple true-or-false question or a "who" or "what" question.

What do the questions ask? What information do they earmark as important? What information do I learn from the question? Let me keep in mind the questions I am to answer so that I may annotate my text where pertinent information is located.

S—Summary. Typically at the conclusion of the chapter, students are encouraged to read the entire summary as part of their preview. (Don't try this one with a mystery novel!) Summaries provide a general frame of reference for the detailed content of the chapter. Students are apt to concur that they can more easily understand and recall information about subjects when they have some prior knowledge than when the topic is unfamiliar.

In the classroom, I typically introduce THIEVES early in the school year. It culminates a unit of study in which students learn a range of reading warm-up activities and understand individual differences and preferences related to

the reading process. As a group, we survey the textbooks to be used in class to become familiar with their format and broader features. We are then ready to approach our first textbook chapter. Invariably, a hush moves over the classroom when I announce to the students that they are to become thieves. For younger students, anticipation may be enhanced by offering a fable about right and wrong or posing the question, "Is it ever all right to steal?"

After discussion, the acronym is presented on the chalkboard or as a transparency on the overhead projector. Once it is identified as a strategy for previewing, students are challenged to discern the meaning of the component letters. They are encouraged to peruse the actual chapter, looking for clues. As the elements are identified, I list them or configure a semantic map or web. Details are added, appropriate to the level of the class. We then practice the first application of THIEVES as a group, typically with the chapter we are about to encounter. Self-directed worksheets may be created to support students in their early application of THIEVES. The application of THIEVES becomes an integral step in reading textbook chapters and other expository selections throughout the course of the year.

During preliminary applications of THIEVES, students are encouraged to highlight what they preview. This intensifies the process, adding an active sensory component. It also enables the teacher or professor to monitor student application, even when the preview is completed independently within a large group.

Recently, a student in my college reading class credited his perfect score on an exam in his criminal justice course to THIEVES. He had applied the strategy toward his independent reading of assigned textbook chapters during the previous weeks. He beamed when he noted the irony of being such an adept "thief" in a class that focused on the law. He explained how he had to overcome some initial resistance to applying the tech-

nique because he didn't want to take extra time. Fortunately, his new-found commitment to his studies enabled him to get past that concern. This was the first time he had ever read and digested the content of a textbook completely on his own.

In another venue, THIEVES may be presented as an individualized learning tool for students. Recently, a fifth grader with whom I work privately entered a session with biology text in hand and a grimace on his face. How he hated to read that book...and two sections were due the next day. It was the perfect opportunity to teach and apply THIEVES. The student then went on to complete the reading and write responses to questions. His familiarity with the chapter enabled him to move efficiently and accurately through his assignment. As he was leaving, he commented, "Man, that went fast...and I actually think I know what I'm talking about! I won't tell anyone how great it was to be a thief!"

Students from middle elementary levels to young adults in college-level reading courses have learned and applied THIEVES. The strategy embodies the essential components of an intensive reading preview and is readily applicable to a wide range of expository material. THIEVES is enjoyable to teach, and it is gratifying to watch students independently apply it and benefit from its use throughout the school year. I suspect it may well be the only time we find ourselves professing the benefits of a criminal mind to our students.

Liff Manz is an educational therapist and instructor at Nassau Community College (Reading and Basic Education Department, North Hall, One Education Drive, Garden City, NY 11530-6793, USA).

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