

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Every teacher knows that when introducing a new concept to students, we must begin by connecting the new to the known. Students need to start with their own background knowledge as they assimilate new information. All students, young and old, understand new concepts more easily when they can relate them to something familiar. When reading, good readers make connections from the text to their own lives, to other books they've read, or to what they know about the world around them. When readers make these connections, they understand the text more deeply, see it with new eyes, and – most important – remember new information because it resonates with something they already know.

Successful readers are aware of the connections they make as they read. The most natural connection is to relate what we read to our own lives. This is called a text-to-self connection. When readers relate what they read to something that has happened to them, an event in their lives or a person they know, they are able to comprehend deeply. Making a connection helps readers to empathize with a character, understand motives and decisions, and make plausible inferences and predictions. When readers relate a story to their own lives, it becomes more memorable.

Readers also make connections to other books (and all forms of text) that they have read. When readers say to themselves, "This reminds me of the other book I read," they are making a text-to-text connection. Sometimes readers notice that authors have a certain style or theme that permeates all of their writing. When students make an observation about the common characteristics of text, they are making text-to-text connections. Wide reading experiences help students become more adept at making these connections.

Finally, readers make connections between what they are reading and what they already know about the world around them. This is called a text-to-world connection. For example, when reading about the culture of a Native American tribe, students might make a connection to other cultures they know or have learned about. Text-to-world connections help students remember important information by linking it to learning and experiences that are familiar.

Successful readers make connections to help them identify with the text, remember important information, and understand what they read at a deeper level. Good readers know that thoughtful connections are key to enhancing their understanding. When they make connections, readers say things to themselves like, "This reminds me of ...because ..." "This part is like ... because..." I remember a time like this when...and it helps me understand what I'm reading now because..."

Making meaningful connections takes a lot of practice. Often when beginning to use the strategy, readers will make trivial connections that do not deepen understanding. They may also make connections that are not clearly related to what they're reading. However, when readers know that the goal is to more fully understand the text, they will begin to distinguish thoughtful from trivial connections. Showing students what a meaningful connection sounds like will help them differentiate between surface connections and the connections that truly deepen understanding.

MAKING CONNECTIONS LESSON

LESSON INTRODUCTION

Explain what the strategy is and explain how, when and why readers use this strategy. Pick a picture book, poem, or short excerpt to model this strategy.

Today we will learn how to make connections when we read. Making connections to things we already know helps us understand what we are reading and relate to the characters and events more deeply. Successful readers are aware of the connections they make as they read. They also know that the purpose of connecting with text is to help use what we already know to understand new information.

When you are reading and you think to yourself, "This reminds me of ...", you are making a connection. Sometimes we are reminded of something we have experienced in our lives. This is called a text-to-self connection. It's the easiest and most common type of connection that we make as readers. When we relate what we read to something we've read about before, we call this a text-to-text connection. And when we connect what we read to something we know from the world around us, we call that a text-to-world connection. We can understand and remember what we read best when we can connect the new information to something that we already know.

MODELING THE STRATEGY

Demonstrate how you use the strategy while reading a sample text that you can closely relate to in all three areas (your own life, what you have read, and what you know about the world) so that you can model all three connections clearly. A separate focus lesson on each type of connection would be most effective. Explain to students that you will be sharing what you are thinking as you read. This lets your students see and hear the invisible, cognitive processes of reading.

Now I am going to model how I make connections while I read. I want you to listen for how what goes on in my head as I do this. I will read the text aloud and I will stop reading at certain points to tell you exactly what I am thinking as I read. It will be like a tape recording has captured my thoughts so that you can hear them.

First, I'll show you how I relate what I read to something from my own life – a text-to-self connection

Begin reading and stop periodically to point out connections. Connections can sound like, *"This reminds me of ...because ..."* *"This part is like ... because..."* *I remember a time like this when...and it helps me understand what I'm reading now because*

It is also helpful to give students examples of meaningful connections and examples of trivial connections. Explain that meaningful connections are those that help deepen understanding. Showing readers what a meaningful connection sounds like will help them differentiate between the surface connections and those that truly deepen understanding. As you think aloud, it is important that you share how the connections help you understand the text better.

Trivial examples include: *“I have a sister, too.” “My dog is also named Sadie.” “I have a red sweater just like the character’s.”*

Meaningful examples sound like: *“I can tell how the character feels about being new at school, because this reminds me of the time my family moved to a new house. It is hard to make new friends at first and it can be lonely. This connection helps me understand what the character is going through because I have had a similar experience.” ...* If you consistently include “because” in your modeling, you will help students learn to link the new information with the familiar.

As you model, be sure to articulate what you are doing insider your head. Be as specific as you can so that students hear not only *what* you are doing, but also *why* it helps you as you read. This is the most critical component of modeling.

An effective way to make your connections concrete is to write them on sticky notes and code them (T-S for text-to-self, T-T for text-to-text, and T-W for text-to-world). This provides students with an effective tool to capture their own connections.

GUIDED PRACTICE

After you have explicitly modeled the strategy, guide students to practice. For this part of the lesson, use an overhead transparency or provide a copy so that all students can see the text. Guide them to share what the story reminds them of and how their connections help them understand more deeply. Students can think in pairs or small groups and then share their ideas with the entire class.

Just as you demonstrated in the modeling, the purpose of guided practice is to guide students to use the strategy as well as to be able to think aloud about what they are doing in their heads.

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Provide an opportunity for students to practice this strategy on their own. The class should all be using the same text so that you can informally assess how they are applying the strategy. Teach students how to code their connections and note them on sticky notes (T-S for text-to-self, T-T for text-to-text, and T-W for text-to-world).

These coded sticky notes will give you valuable assessment information. You can easily determine which students are making a range of connections or which students might be overusing text-to-self, the easiest and most basic connection. This will help you plan for additional instruction.

Additional teaching tools and lesson ideas:

http://classes.seattleu.edu/masters_in_teaching/teed521/professor/Literacy/stratinstruct.html

DEBRIEFING

Ask students to explain the strategy in their own words. See if they can explain why they need to use it and how they use it while reading. In the debriefing, it is important for students to be able to articulate what they say inside their heads as they use the strategy.