

FIGURING OUT WHAT IS IMPORTANT

Proficient readers are able to determine what is most important in the text. This means that after reading a passage or story, successful readers can identify the main ideas that the author is trying convey. Less successful readers have a difficult time telling the difference between major ideas and less-important (though sometimes very interesting) details. Figuring out what is important is about making decision on what a reader needs to remember. Readers cannot possibly remember everything they read, so this strategy helps them separate what is crucial from what is merely interesting.

Think of a tree with many branches and leaves connected to the trunk. The details, examples and descriptions are the branches and leaves of the tree. The trunk of the tree is the main idea or the most important ideas that the author wants you to know. Sometimes readers may be so distracted by the amazing details that they do not pay attention to the most important ideas. Authors do not always tell you exactly what is important, so good readers use this strategy to better understand what they read – and so they remember the information long after they close the book.

Figuring out what is important is a strategy readers use when they read fiction and nonfiction. When reading fiction, readers identify the important events and characters that are crucial for understanding the story and identify the important themes the author wants to express. When reading nonfiction, readers must extract the most important ideas from the rest of the details. Nonfiction is a good genre to use when teaching this strategy.

Considering that the majority of reading that we do is nonfiction -- such as reading the newspaper, a cookbook, or a magazine – it is important to be able to make sense of nonfiction. For our students, reading in content areas such as social studies and science requires them to use this strategy if they are going to be successful at reading to learn.

Teachers need to help readers sift through information and make decisions about what is important to remember. This is important because readers cannot remember everything they read, so their minds must act as a filter. Picture a coffee filter full of coffee grounds. The filter keeps the big things from draining through. Our minds are the same. Our mind must hold onto the important details and let the rest of the details go. This strategy is about making decisions in our mind's "filter."

Here are the steps to determine what is important in the text when reading nonfiction:

- Preview the text. Notice headings, pictures, types of fonts and other text features that give you clues.
- Make predictions and ask questions about the text.
- As you read, ask yourself if what you are reading makes sense.
- Reread when you are not sure if you understand.
- Think about what you read.
- Make a decision about what is most important to remember.

IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT INFORMATION 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 are going to learn how to figure out what is important in what we are reading. Determining importance means that after reading a passage or story, a reader can identify the main ideas that the author was trying to convey. Have you ever heard someone tell you that they saw a great movie over the weekend? If you asked them what it was about, they would usually tell you the main points, but not every little detail. For example, they might tell you the main events of the story, but they might leave out details that do not matter as much (like what the actors were wearing). If they just told you the parts of the movie that were most important to understanding it, then they have figured out what was most important in the movie.

Readers also need to be able to find the important ideas when they read. Sometimes readers get so distracted by the amazing details that they do not pay attention to the most important ideas. Authors do not always tell you exactly what is important, so good readers use this strategy so they can better understand what they read and remember the information long after they read.

Good readers use this strategy when reading fiction and nonfiction. When reading fiction, readers identify the important characters and events that are crucial for understanding the story. They also identify the important themes the author wants them to know. When reading nonfiction, readers must extract the most important ideas from the rest of the details.

Good readers make decisions about what is important information and what are just interesting or unimportant details. This is important because readers cannot remember every little thing that they read, so their mind must pick the most important ideas. Picture a coffee filter full of coffee grounds. The filter keeps the big things from draining through. Our minds are the same – we have to hold onto the important ideas and let the rest of the details go.

This strategy is about making decisions. Here are the steps to use when you are figuring out what is important when you are reading nonfiction:

- 1. Preview the text. Notice headings, pictures, types of fonts and other text features that give you clues.*
- 1. Make predictions and ask questions about the text.*
- 1. As you read, ask yourself if what you are reading makes sense.*
- 1. Reread if you are not sure that you understand.*
- 1. Think about what you read.*
- 1. Make a decision about what is important to remember.*

MODELING THE STRATEGY

Demonstrate how you use the strategy while reading the sample text and stopping to think aloud as you read. 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. Select a piece of nonfiction such as a trade book or a newspaper or magazine article for kids, such as *Scholastic News* or *Time for Kids*.

Now I am going to model how I figure out what is important when 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 look at the features of the text. I look at the title, captions, bold words, and pictures. For example, when words are written in bold, larger print or in another color, I know that the author is waving a red flag to tell me THIS IS IMPORTANT! When I preview the text, I look for headings and subheadings that might tell me what the text is going to be about. I also look at the photographs and diagrams to see if I get a sense of what I might read about. I use my background knowledge and these features to make some predictions about what information the text will give.

Now I will read the text and I will stop when I think that I have come to something that is important. I will write that down on a sticky note and place it next to that part. [or whatever teaching tool you are using, such as the Key Word Strategy – see Independent Practice below].

As you model, be sure to articulate what you are doing inside 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.

Stop at crucial points and make notes, continuing to think aloud to explain why you stopped where you did and why you think the information is important.

After I finish reading, I think about what I will want to remember. I can't memorize the whole text, so I have to make decisions about what is most important. I can think back to the idea of telling someone about a movie. I would only want to include the main points. Now, I think to myself, 'What do I need to remember and what can I ignore?' I have to make a decision about what the important ideas are in this text.

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 students to help you with the strategy. They 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.

You can use a variety of “teaching tools” to help students refine their ability to figure out what is important when they read:

CODING: Teach students to code text on sticky notes:

I = Important idea

L = Learned something new

***** = Interesting and important detail

Aha! = Big idea surfaces

S = Surprising

S!!! = Shocking

FACT/QUESTION/RESPONSE: See below

TOPIC/DETAIL/RESPONSE: See below

KEY WORD STRATEGY: See below

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.

FACT - QUESTION - RESPONSE

FACT	QUESTION	RESPONSE

TOPIC - DETAIL - RESPONSE

TOPIC	DETAIL	RESPONSE

**KEY WORD STRATEGY:
FINDING AND REMEMBERING IMPORTANT IDEAS**

Readers need to find the important ideas when they read. Good readers think as they read and ask themselves -- “What is important?” – to find main ideas and important details. One way to find out – and remember -- what is important is to look for **KEY WORDS**: words that signal the main ideas and important details.

DIRECTIONS: READ “FEELING THE HEAT” WITH A PARTNER.

1. Read the title first to get an idea about what you will learn.
2. Read each paragraph. Look for words that give you details that will help you remember the main idea.
3. Write the key words in the box for each section. Be ready to tell why you think those words tell about important ideas.

Introduction Paragraph #1	Paragraph #2	Paragraph #3	
A Bear of a Problem Paragraph #1	Paragraph #2	Paragraph #3	Paragraph #4
To Protect and Save Paragraph #1	Paragraph #2		