

PRINCIPLES

Exchanging information is an activity enjoyed by almost everyone. Think of all the time we spend listening to radio and TV, talking and listening to neighbors and friends, and the tremendous amount of exchange that occurs in our jobs. It's reasonable to think that the better we are at this the more effectively we will run our lives.

Before we became a people with a written reality who understood the world in terms of printed words, our reality was based on an oral tradition. We understood the world from talking about it. This had its limitations, but it did allow people to communicate face to face and clarify points by asking each other questions. After the invention of the printing press, and until very recently when we began to understand our world electronically, the giver of information and ideas had to speak to a listener/reader from a great distance in this very intimate relationship. The giver of information could no longer speak directly to the listener/reader; there had to be created a "voice," called the narrative voice, which spoke with the black marks (letters) on the page.

Telling a story then became a matter of translation. The reader and this narrative voice had to create the story as they worked together. This may sound strange, for it would seem that words on the page mean very specific things. It is true that the writer, when using the symbols in our alphabet to represent sounds and ideas, has a meaning clearly in mind. This meaning is structured by the experiences and feelings about the concepts presented.

The reader, when interpreting these symbols, brings to the page a different set of experiences and feelings for the concepts being read about, and can only make sense out of the story in terms of these different conditions. Thus, meaning is created as the translation occurs from black marks to sounds and ideas.

For this reason it is unusual for two people to read the same story and understand exactly the same things from it. And for the same reason, the author and the reader usually don't understand any piece in exactly the same way. Likewise, there is little assurance that the reader of fiction can know just exactly what the writer had in mind when writing. This makes it hard for a teacher to say that an interpretation of a story is wrong or that the reader doesn't understand the piece.

Because all readers create as they read, what they understand from their reading is, in a very personal way, their reality. Of course the reasonableness of their reading will be structured by their ability to understand the generally accepted meanings of words, and they must have some training to follow the ideas and images presented.

A teacher, in this most complicated process, must have a clear understanding of the general goals in the reading exercise. "What do I want my student to know or experience from our work together?"

You, as the teacher, might now think about what you want your student to "get" from the reading you will be doing together. What does your student want? Of course, very young children will not be able to articulate these ideas as you will, but still children will "want," and this should be taken into consideration. If these goals are similar to yours, you're in luck and your teaching will be easy. Sometimes, when adult and child goals are at odds, reading becomes a chore.

As a teacher/parent you must think about what kind of an adult you would like your student/child to become. It's then your responsibility to give that youngster the experiences which will encourage development along those lines. Reading is one of the important steps children take becoming adults, and the reading they do helps determine the types of people they will grow into.

You will find selecting goals that will be compatible with your child's goals easier if you give some organized thought to what you want. Some structure to the problem may help you select answers that will please both you and your child.

Of course, there are no wrong answers to these questions. The right answers are what you and your child want and should not be dictated by other people. What you select should be determined by the values held by you, your family, your community and your religion.

For most children, the fun of reading is dependent on its effects on their ways of thinking. If the reader cannot relate to the character in a story or to the situation that character is in, or if the reader doesn't care about these things, that reader will not enjoy the narrative. If the young reader can get involved in the lives and situations of the characters, then this experience will be very satisfying.

Reading can become such a rich and rewarding part of life that it's very important that teachers/parents do whatever they can to ensure that children learn to love it.

To that end the staff at National Writing Institute suggest the following:

1. A beginning reader must have fun reading. It cannot be seen as a punishment or as work. The time spent reading each day should be looked forward to with great eagerness, and it is the responsibility of the adults in that child's life to see that this is so.
2. Young readers must observe, as role models, older children, parents and teachers enjoying reading. If the new reader sees this going on, there will be a desire to join in this pleasure.
3. Young readers should see their role models talking about what they're reading. They should see them read bits and pieces to each other from newspapers and magazines. They should see the excitement of this sharing. They will then want to join in and share with others what they read.
4. Young readers need to have others show an interest in what they're reading and what this makes them think about. It may not be intellectually stimulating for an adult to discuss at length the ideas in a child's see and say book, but watching that young mind develop is one of the most exciting things that can happen to any adult.
5. Young readers need to talk about what they've read. This insures that they think about the ideas in the stories, that they remember the actions, and that they can feel the excitement of sharing the stories with others. It's when we talk and write about ideas that we really begin to understand them.
6. There are not many other things that a parent/teacher might give to a child that would be more important than a love of books. This gives not just the books but the world of ideas. It makes possible adventures and intellectual challenges found in no other place. It gives the child "rooms" to think in, areas of thought that can be entered in no other way. This child now can have conversations with all of the great minds of history. What a precious thing you have chosen to give.

It is our hope that your selection of *Reading Strands* will help you with the process of giving to someone else access to this wonderful world of ideas.

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