

Handouts

Literacy Tasks Students Do (Not You!): Foundational Activities That Build Independent Readers and Writers

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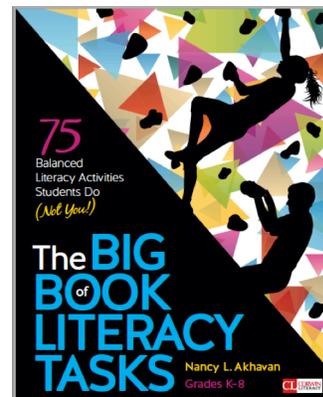
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Banned Boring Connections

Excerpt from *The Big Book of Literacy Tasks* by Nancy Akhavan

Akhavan, N. (2018). *The Big Book of Literacy Tasks, Grades K-8: 75 Balanced Literacy Activities Students Do (Not You!)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.



Your Instructional Playbook:

Name it: Start by talking about how when you read you make connections to things you know about the world, or about life in general. In this task, you are going to learn to make connections to things you know about the world.

What You Might Say Next: “When we are reading sometimes we can connect what we are reading about to something we know, or saw on TV, or learned in school. Making a connection between what you know, and what you are reading about will help make the text easier to understand. It also helps you grow smarter as you will be adding to information you know.”

Model/Do Together:

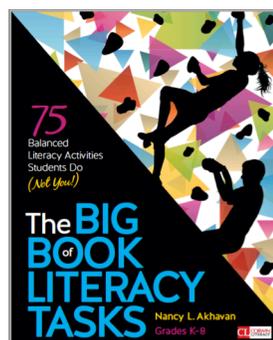
Read passages from various nonfiction texts and talk a lot about what details seem critical to understanding the text. Share lots of examples of your thinking. Encourage students to share their experiences when they were reading along and the topic or something in the text reminded them of something they knew. Use prompts like those that follow to encourage students to connect the text to what they know. Create a teaching chart with the

students, discussing and recording the definitions, and maybe samples of each from texts. You want what is recorded on the teaching chart to be a class-created definition, not just your definition written out for ease. *It is the conversation you have with your students that helps them learn this for their own.*

Tweak: If their connection is far afield, don't shut it down, but talk about it: ask them why they think there is a connection.

- Have you ever heard or read about this information (or idea) before?
- Do you know anything about (*information in the text*)?
- What do you think about the big ideas in the text?
- How would you connect what you know to what you think the text is about?
- How does what you know, or what you heard or learned somewhere connect to what this text is about?

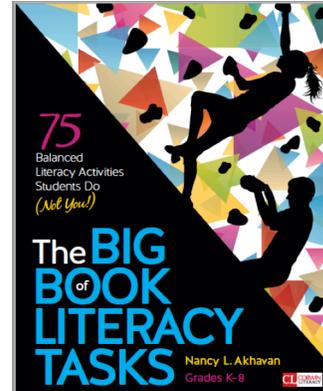
Release: Using sticky notes, have students record connections they make between what they are reading and what they know. It is better if they just put one connection on each sticky note so that they don't get confused about what they were thinking about. They can add a page number to refer them back to the text. Invite students share their sticky notes and post the sticky notes on a teaching chart or recording wall.



Create a Structured Outline of a Text

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Your Instructional Playbook

Name it: In nonfiction texts, information flows from point to point. In this task, you are going to learn to notice the important facts and details and organize them from beginning to end, which will help you see how the piece flows from point to point.

What You Might Say Next: Project an image of a river, and say something like, “Imagine seeing a river from above; you can see how it flows, bends, and notice big rocky points or evergreen trees or other features along its banks. In nonfiction, the author’s main points are like those major rocks or trees, and all the facts and details flow like water into them.

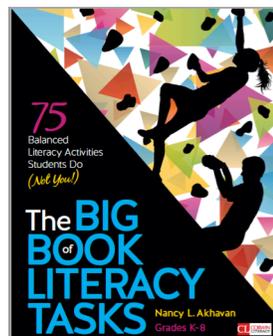
“When you are reading a nonfiction text, it can be hard to tell which are the major facts to hang on to as you keep reading, and which are not. But here is a trick that helps me. When a fact interests me, I look to see if there are other details that tell *more* about the fact or not. When there isn’t additional information, then I decide it is a cool thing to know, but it is not an important fact. Authors give weight to the important points.”

Model/Do Together:

Start outlining the text by skimming, and looking for facts and details worthy of bulleting out in order on a chart (or use a document camera to project). If the text is long, don't outline the entire piece; pick a part that has meaty engaging information. Use these steps:

- Identify three important facts from the text, or section of text. Write these down in bullet points leaving space between them to add more later.
- Identify 1-3 details that support each important fact. Write these down in bullet points beneath the important fact they connect to.
- Help students think through the main points by asking questions of the text to ensure they have picked important details for the outline and not just cool stuff to know. Model asking yourself “Is this a point I think is really cool?” “Does the information repeat in the article, or does it appear in the text only once?” “Do I see details that give more information (explain) the fact?”
- “What makes this a detail? How is it connected to the important fact?”

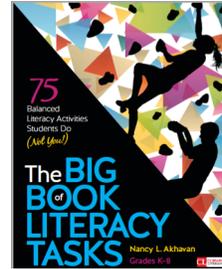
Release: Using a different text that students can read on their own, encourage them to create their own outlines of the text focusing on a few important points and three details to back up each important fact. Young children can create pictures and label their pictures in a linear timeline to indicate the beginning, middle and end of the text.



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Your Instructional Playbook

Name It: An investigation is when we dig into a topic of our choice through books, texts, articles and multimedia sources. In this task, we are going to decide on what we want to investigate, and learn how to shape our question(s) so it helps us do our research.

What You Might Say Next: “When we get ready to investigate a topic that interests us, we first come up with questions that help us focus our research. We need to ask questions that don’t result in yes or no answers. We ask questions by thinking about what we want to know, and then we think about, *what if? in which way? or how?*”

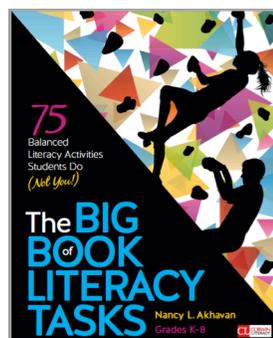
Model/Do Together: Talk with students about setting themselves up for an inquiry. Talk with them about what they might want to investigate on their own. They can start by brainstorming ideas and writing a few questions as a brainstorm that could guide their inquiry. Think aloud your process for honing a few questions. For example, from “Are humans polluting the oceans? (too broad) to “What is threatening the coral reefs, and how are people working to protect them?” (more manageable). Push students to design questions at an interpretive level; that is, those for which you can’t merely look up information and record it, but you have to interpret it. For example, in the coral reef inquiry, a student couldn’t merely focus on the ingredient in sunscreens as the sole culprit; instead, her research would lead her to entertain sunscreens and other causes, and bring her own interpretation as to the chief cause, or even address the reality that even scientists disagree. Also, don’t focus on students having a large quantity of questions to launch, rather focus on the quality of questions. Maybe the best inquiry a student will design has only one big question that starts like, “What do we know about.... and what if....” or “How would ...be different if...”.

Have sentence strip cards ready for students to plan out their inquiry. If they write on steps strips or some type of index card, they can write down the steps and reorganize it in a way that makes the best sense, then staple the strips together and refer back to the strips as a guide. Organize notebooks and notecards so that students can create inquiry notebooks or inquiry cards to write down all their findings, take notes, and gather information sources. If using a notebook, students might need to go through and highlight information that will go in different sections of their inquiry report. If they write on notecards, they can put the cards in stacks based on the sections of the report. Invite students to write out their reports in sections to help them stay organized.

Release:

As students are looking up information, taking notes, and drafting, they are going to need encouragement—but ask questions and redirect, rather than tell them exactly what to do. Remember, it isn't your report, it is theirs. When they are done and ready to share, ask them to comment on what kept them going; learners love hearing that their peers caught the fever of some aspect of their topic. Point out that real scientists and researchers face the same formidable slog, and it's their curiosity about at least one thing in particular that kept them going. One fourth grader beamed as she talked about investigating whether all newborns—human and mammal—prefer sweet tastes. She had a new baby brother at home, and that was her “spark.”

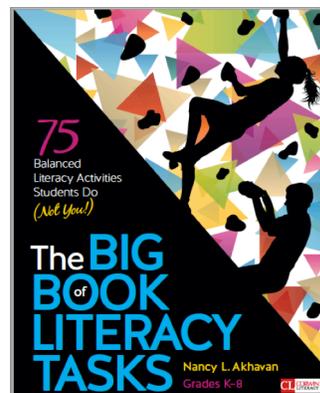
Young readers can participate in an inquiry as well, but you might not have them keep inquiry journal. They can write different information sources, and then put together their short reports without referring to notes. Also, younger readers can do this in small groups, keeping notes together and creating a group inquiry.



Sentence Strip Statements

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Your Instructional Playbook

Name it: In this task, using sentence strips, you are going to brainstorm possibilities for main ideas and write them out in full sentences, discussing with a partner to identify the actual main idea.

What You Might Say Next: We need to be really good thinkers when we are reading. Good thinkers reflect on what they are reading, and one of the things they think about is the main idea of the text they are reading. The main idea is the point or information that is the center of the text. We are going to learn to figure this out by writing down our ideas.

Model/Do Together: The idea is for students to write out facts from the text they are reading and then work in a group to decide which fact is the main idea. They can write the facts out on a sentence strips so they can move the sentence strips around as they decide what facts make up the main idea. Having students be able to manipulate the sentence strips is helpful for them to make their thinking concrete. Don't tell students what the main idea is; they need to work this out on their own.

If your students need demonstration first, model how to brainstorm what might be a main idea of a short text you all have just read. Write down a few ideas, one idea each on a sentence strip. Then, discuss with the class, putting one sentence strip up at a time on a whiteboard or in a pocket chart, each idea and refer to the text to determine

whether the fact/idea written on the sentence strip is the main idea. Once the main idea is determined, put that sentence strip on the board first, and place the remaining sentence strips below the first one. Help students understand that the main idea is the fact/idea/point that is the emphasis of the text they read. Do not focus on tips or tricks, like the main idea is the first or second sentence in a paragraph or section, as this isn't always true, and tips and tricks undermine students ability to think.

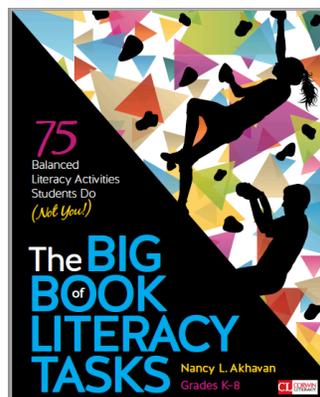
Release:

Once students become more accustomed to talking through finding the main idea with a partner, they can move to just writing out their ideas on paper and skip the sentence strips.

Watch Fors and Work Arounds

Students fill out multiple sentence strips about a text read, but do not figure out the main idea.

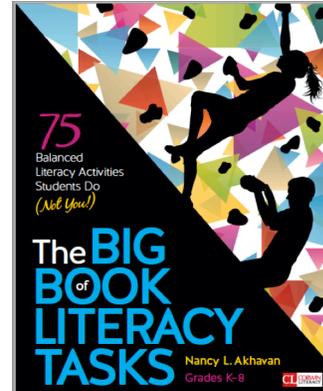
Encourage the students to go back and look the text, and clues that can help the figure out the main idea (the title, or the repetitive topic in each paragraph). Then, have them check and see if they have any sentence strips related to what they think the main idea is, they can add one if needed.



Yesterday's News

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Your Instructional Playbook

Name it: In this task you will write a news story to another student explaining the most important points to know from the text read the day before.

What You Might Say Next: Check out this news story I found in our local paper. (Read it to the class). The news tells us all sorts of things that happened, usually the day before, because by the time the reporter gets the story written up, and the paper is printed and delivered, or put online, it takes about one day for us to see it. The news keeps up to date on our town, our country, and our world. We are going to stay up to date with our reading in class by writing news stories about what we read so we reflect and others can learn.

Model/Do Together: Bring in short news stories—local newsfeeds provide a plethora of news you could download and share in class. For example, in the news today in the Fresno Bee (2017) is an article about Seven Earth-sized planets orbiting a star. It starts like this, “Read the article or any article you choose.”

Next, model writing a short, one paragraph news story, or newsflash about this newsclip (which is actually much longer; I am using a short text here to illustrate). *Seven Earth sized planets found in a galaxy far away. They might have life on three planets.*

Practice creating short news stories with the students so they get the idea before you jump into creating news stories about books and texts students are reading in class.

Jump into creating news stories about the text read the day before to jog students' memories about what they read. It is fine to refer back to the text as needed for support, but the more you can write the news story from memory, the better. At first, work with students and do this together then once students have worked with you a few times to write up news stories, have them write up their own news stories. The stories can be really short – the key is to have the students have fun with showing their understanding of the text.

Release: If students had not referred to the text to write the news story, have them check what they wrote against the text for accuracy. Share thinking and possible revisions with the class. The key here is the *reflection*. You want your students to reflect on what they read, write it up, and then reflect on their writing to see how well they remember what they read.

