

Understanding Informational Texts

(Originally titled “Points of Entry”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (San Diego State University) suggest a number of strategies to help students master informational texts – that is, materials that teach about the physical, biological, or social world. Frey and Fisher don’t include literary nonfiction (biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs) and hybrid texts (for example, *The Magic School Bus* series) because these have narrative structures that make them more like fiction.

What makes informational texts difficult for so many students? Unfamiliar vocabulary, different grammatical structure, and densely packed content. “Teachers need to help students find access points that enable them to gain entry to complex informational text and then trek their way through to a successful conclusion,” say Frey and Fisher. Their suggestions:

- *Establishing purpose* – Teachers must provide some kind of “hook” that increases motivation so students begin reading with a clear idea of what to expect. Teachers should also alert students to tricky parts and encourage them to use illustrations and graphics to understand the content.

- *Close reading* – “Close reading requires a skilled teacher who can resist the urge to tell students the correct answer at the first sign of confusion,” say Frey and Fisher. “In fact, struggle is an essential part of the learning process; it provides an authentic reason for rereading and discussing the text.” This means scrutinizing a text, identifying central ideas and key details, investigating vocabulary and structure, and putting it all together to get the meaning. Students should annotate, answer text-dependent questions, and develop the habit of rereading.

- *Collaborative conversations* – Students need to interact with each other using concepts and academic language. Book clubs, reciprocal teaching, and Socratic seminars are good formats for placing the text at the center of rigorous discussions.

- *Wide reading* – “In the push to increase the complexity of the informational texts that students read, there is a risk that students will actually read less,” say Frey and Fisher. “Complex texts take time to understand, and close reading slows students down as they reread and annotate.” Teachers need to give students time every day to read high-quality, appealing texts in class, as well as encouraging them to read outside of school. Frey and Fisher believe students shouldn’t be required to write logs and reports on this kind of reading, but instead engage in ungraded follow-up activities to share their ideas.

“Points of Entry” by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher in *Educational Leadership*, November 2013 (Vol. 71, #3, p. 34-38), www.ascd.org; the authors can be reached at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu and dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.