

A Strategy for Reading Informational Texts

By **Brenda Benedict**



A previewing reading strategy helps a middle school makes gains in literacy.

Hopkins (MI) Middle School has been invaded by THIEVES (Manz, 2002) for three years, and administrators, teachers, and students couldn't be happier. Students' informational text reading scores have improved, and we have gained a common vocabulary in all content-area classes that students and teachers are able to use to discuss reading selections.

THIEVES stands for title, headings, introduction, every first sentence of every paragraph or section, visuals and vocabulary, end of selection questions, and summary and represents a strategy for previewing informational text reading selections. We ask our students to use THIEVES to "steal" information from their textbooks and other informational texts.

Our staff chose the THIEVES strategy for several reasons. Assessment data showed that our students had more difficulty comprehending and remembering informational text than narrative text. Students could also readily remember the acronym, and it allowed the staff to have fun with the concept of thieves and stealing information.

The strategy was not difficult for teachers to learn and integrate with their current class materials. We did not have to purchase additional materials or go to training sessions outside our building. All teachers were able to teach THIEVES along with their current curriculum.

The THIEVES strategy is powerful because it activates prior knowledge and helps students set a purpose for reading—research-based steps that have been shown to increase reading comprehension. It is also versatile and can be used successfully in a one-on-one tutoring situation or with whole class instruction. It is especially helpful for students who are overwhelmed by assignments that require a great deal of reading.

Although we teach the strategy as a pre-reading strategy, it can also be used when a student does not have an opportunity to read the entire selection. The simplicity of the strategy also makes it possible to implement quickly if a student is not already familiar with it.

The steps of THIEVES listed below include some explanation and rationale for each step and additional questions to consider from the West Virginia Department of Education).

THIEVES: A Strategy for Previewing Textbooks

Title. There is valuable information to be gained by looking carefully at the title of a selection. The title sets the topic and sometimes the context of the selection. After

discussing the topic, I ask students to write down what they already know about the topic to help activate their prior knowledge.

Some questions students could consider when thinking about the title are:

- What do I already know about this topic?
- How does it connect to the previous chapter?
- How can I turn this title into a question to focus my reading?

Headings. Headings often provide an outline of the selection by naming the specific topics covered. It can be helpful to turn the headings into questions to help students set a purpose for reading.

Some questions that the students may ask while looking at the headings include:

- How does this heading let me know what I will be reading about?
- What topic will be discussed in the paragraphs below this heading?
- How can I turn this heading into a question that can be answered when I read this section?

Introduction. The introduction is sometimes clearly labeled “Introduction” but authors frequently use other labels, such as “Key Points.” There is a difference between the introduction and the attention-getting paragraph. The introduction lists the topics to be covered in the selection. Once you have determined how the introduction is labeled, you can use this to teach the text features of a specific textbook because it is usually done the same in each chapter of a textbook series.

Some questions that students may ask when previewing the introduction include:

- Is the introduction marked or do I have to locate it?
- Does the first paragraph introduce the chapter?
- What important information will I find in the introduction?
- Do I already know anything about this topic?

Every first sentence in every paragraph or section. First sentences are often the topic sentences of the paragraph. Students can get the main idea of the information contained in the section by reading the first sentence. I have found it too cumbersome at times to read every first sentence of every paragraph, so we have adapted this step to sometimes include only the first sentence in every section. I make this decision based on the length and complexity of the reading selection. It is sometimes necessary to read the second sentence as well to get a complete thought.

Visuals and vocabulary. The pictures, charts, tables, maps, and graphs have valuable information that is crucial for a deeper understanding of the information in the text. This step reminds students to look carefully at the visual elements and to read the captions to ensure their understanding.

Some questions students may ask about visuals include:

- How do these visuals relate to the content of this chapter?
- What can I learn from them?
- How do the captions help me understand the visual?

Vocabulary is often the key to understanding content-area material. Students need to be taught to identify the vocabulary that the author thinks is important. Vocabulary may be identified as key words. It might be highlighted or italicized in the text.

Some questions that students may ask about the vocabulary include:

- Is there a list of key words and are they defined in the glossary?
- Are there important words in boldface or italics?
- Do I know the important words?
- Are there other words I don't know?

End-of-chapter questions. These questions emphasize important points and concepts from the chapter. Just reading these questions will help students target information that is important in the text and establish a purpose for reading. It can be helpful to have students predict where in the text they may find the answers to questions. It can be helpful to have them write the question on a small sticky note and place it in the area they predict will hold the answer. This step is powerful in establishing a purpose for reading.

Some questions that students may ask about the end-of-chapter questions include:

- What do these questions ask?
- What information will be important in this chapter?
- How do I locate this information in the text?

Summary. Many texts contain a summary at the end of the chapter. Students can read the summary to activate prior knowledge and give them an idea of the important concepts included in the chapter.

The strategy was developed by Suzanne Liff Manz (2002), an educational therapist and instructor at Nassau Community College in Garden City, NY. Many additional resources are available on the Internet, such as PowerPoint presentations, bookmarks for students, hand-outs, and THIEVES graphic organizers that can be adapted for specific content areas such as social studies or history. Some teachers have designed graphic organizers and outlines specifically for their textbooks in math and science. We have also designed a THIEVES poster that was placed in every classroom throughout the school to remind students to consistently use the strategy.

Author note: *The suggested questions for each step of the strategy are from the West Virginia Department of Education website (wvde.state.wv.us [doc]) and are used with permission.*

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References

Manz, S. L. (2002). A strategy for previewing textbooks: Teaching readers to become *THIEVES*. *The Reading Teacher*, 55, 5.