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Reading Non Fiction.

Children learn to read stories. The pre-school infant is read bedtime stories; this often constitutes his or her first contact with a text. The Reception class settles down to "Story time" with their teacher at the end of the day. Further up in the Infant Department, children are enticed by the Oxford Reading Tree scheme, in which a "magic key" opens the door to a succession of beguiling narrative stories. Ask a child in Year 2 to choose you something good to read from the book corner – it is far more likely to be "Topsy and Tim go to the Circus" rather than, say, a book about magnets.

The same is true of children learning to develop their writing skills. Open a primary school child's writing book, and you will find pieces of work such as "My Weekend News" or "The Story of Christmas". Teachers set writing tasks which match the story style of the books the children are learning to read.

In short, children are inundated with opportunities to read and create narratives. Even if they are dealing with factual information, it is overwhelmingly likely to be presented to them in the narrative form. This dominance of one literary style (particularly at primary school level) means that the children become increasingly familiar with a narrow concept of textual form.

The child may begin to develop certain preconceptions about reading; that to read a book, for example, is to start at the beginning and read all the text through to the end. The expectation may start to be that a book will always be entertaining in some way, with a clearly defined sequence of events leading up to a satisfying end.

These assumptions are obviously going to be unhelpful to the child when he is faced with text designed for reference and research, for example in his science lessons, further up the school. The concept of "dipping in" to a text to retrieve pertinent information is foreign.

It isn't just a question of children needing more opportunities to apply their reading skills to non-fiction texts. The problem is compounded in that when they are required to use such a text, it will often be in a much less closely supervised situation. The teacher may request, for example, that the children go off to find information on a subject, from a library or from home, and then bring it with them to the next lesson. Accustomed to reading aloud to the teacher or a parent, the child is suddenly expected to be able to skim or scan a piece of text alone, and find the useful parts of the information provided.

It can be seen that the close monitoring and assessment of children's fiction reading skills does not easily transfer to the non-fiction context. The child, however fluent a reader, will quietly struggle with the unfamiliar layout, conventions and technical terminology with which he is faced. Even if relevant material can be identified, the child will often resort to copying out chunks of information word for word, doing little to foster his grasp of the material. This in turn presents a whole set of problems for the teacher, almost before any effective teaching can commence.

Nearly all the subjects of the National Curriculum require the ability not only to read and

write, but also to process different types and styles of text. The acquisition of these flexible literacy skills will also have a profound effect on the child's understanding of a subject.

To extend children's literacy beyond the familiar narrative genre is to facilitate reading and writing skills across the curriculum. It also gives the teacher the opportunity to introduce children to the different forms of writing they will meet in real life, and the strategies they will need in order to interact with them.

Teaching non-fiction.

The different forms of non-fiction can be usefully arranged in the following matrix:

instruct	recount	explain
inform	persuade	discuss
review	evaluate	analyse
description	appreciation	interpretation

It can be seen that each horizontal line reads across from left to right, in terms of the features of the style in increasing complexity. A good example of this is the top line (instruct, recount, explain), which might be applied to a scientific experiment.

At its most basic level, the text would provide instructions as to how to proceed with the experiment. Going one stage further, it would recount the expected outcomes of following those instructions. The third part of the text would be likely to include an explanation of what is going on during the experiment, what might go wrong, and how the desired results are produced.

Newspapers offer perhaps the most plentiful and varied resource in terms of finding good examples of different forms of non-fiction to use in the classroom.

When reading the text, attention should be drawn to the following:

Layout

What is the significance of where the text has been placed in relation to the other things around it?

Does the layout of the text invite the reader? If so, how?

Are there any pictures? If so, look at the content and the impression they give. Why have they been chosen?

Whole text

What are the features of the text?

How is it structured?

How do the different parts of the structure relate to one another?

At whom is the text being aimed?

What is the purpose of the text?

Sentences

Note the length and the degree of complexity. Why has the writer made these choices?

Look for features within the sentences such as voices, modal verbs, and grammatical choices.

Words or Lexical Choices.

What sort of language is being used?

Is it formal or informal, technical or emotional, and how does this affect the tone?

How do the lexical choices help with the purpose of the text?

Once one or two good models have been studied, it is possible to draw up a checklist of the notable features of each literary style. The pupils can then use this, both as a point of reference for writing their own examples, and later for the purposes of revision.

Useful Reading:

Extending Literacy by David Wray and Maureen Lewis (Routledge, 1997)