

Using Genre to Help Students Learn from What They Read

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"The title of the book we'll be reading today is *The Puffins Are Back!*" I told my 4th grade readers. "What do you think we'll learn from this book?"

Silence fell as my students frowned. Because they had no topic knowledge, they couldn't generate meaningful predictions about what they might learn from the book.

Then I showed them the cover of the book. "This book is about a kind of animal called a puffin," I told students. Suddenly the mood changed. Hands shot up and a buzz of conversation began. "Puffins are birds!" one student said. "I bet we'll find out what they eat," said another. "I wonder where they went?" another student mused. A student whose family speaks no English ventured shyly, "Mrs. Kissner, it looks like informational text."

Once my students realized that we were reading an informational book, they generated a wide range of predictions and questions. Although they did not have background knowledge about puffins, they did have background knowledge on informational text about animals. They used their understanding of a familiar genre to help them learn from a new text. More specifically, students were relying on what is called a "textual schema"—a generic understanding of what to expect from various forms of discourse (Anderson et al., 1983).

An understanding of text genre can help students in every grade learn from text. Even better, genre discussions can happen in every content area. How can teachers help students understand and use genres to learn from text?

Teach the Word "Genre"

What is genre? Simply put, a genre is a form of text that uses a particular format and structure (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003). From the primary grades, students need to know that there are different kinds of texts, each with its own features, purposes, and conventions. Even very young students can learn that narrative text tells a story, persuasive text is written to persuade a reader, and informational text is written to give the reader facts. Using the word "genre" gives students a way to organize and talk about their observations.

Help Students Recognize Different Genres

Once students know that there are different genres, they need to find out how to navigate through each kind of text to find the information they seek. In my classroom, groups of students became experts on various nonfiction genres and then taught their peers how to recognize and use the genre. In this way, they learned that

- How-to text often includes a list of materials and a list of steps.
- Biographies are usually organized in chronological order.
- Persuasive text often has eye-catching features to attract a reader's attention.

Learning about the features of different genres helps readers recognize what they are reading and quickly

adjust their reading styles. When I gave my class an article about how to make a layup, Brandon said, "This is giving me directions, so I need to read it more slowly." He was using his knowledge of the genre to plan how he could read the text for maximum benefit.

As students become more skilled, they can use the features of different genres to help them learn information quickly and efficiently—for example, using headings to get through informational text.

Teach Students to Cope with New Genres

Genres are constantly changing, evolving, and appearing in new forms. I can't even imagine the genres that students will encounter five, 10, and 15 years from now, and there is no way that I could teach these genres directly. But when students learn how to recognize and use genres, they are building the background they need to cope with new and unfamiliar texts.

In real life, readers often come across novel forms and genres. To help students learn how to deal with a new genre, I use real classroom documents. As a homeroom teacher, I have to hand out official correspondence—it only makes sense to use it for instruction!

One great example of this happened a few months ago, as I gave students a memo regarding H1N1 vaccines. They knew about the H1N1 virus and were curious about it, but they had little experience with reading memos. I asked students, "What is this text? What does it remind you of? What do you think the author is trying to do?" Using these questions, students were able to figure out what they were reading and how it was important to them.

When students know that a text is created by a writer for a certain purpose and look for features that will help them understand that purpose, they can easily learn new information from the text. Teaching students how to cope with new genres will prepare them for a lifetime of reading.

References

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