

# The Reading Strategy Organizer

1 Support an opinion...

## What-Why-How

Opinions are like children: they're easier to have than they are to support. Most of the time we don't think too much about our opinions as we read, but they're with us all the time: "This is boring; This is cool; This character is interesting; This character is not;" and so on. To communicate an opinion, all you have to do is open your mouth. But to support an opinion you have to open your mind. In serious discussions (the kind we try to have in school), it's not enough to just say what you think, you've got to think about what you say and why you say it.

To support an opinion thoroughly, you need to answer three basic questions:

### What do you think?

Just tell what's on your mind as simply as you can. Often a single sentence will do.

### Why do you think it?

Opinions don't just pop up out of nowhere for no reason at all. If you've got an opinion, you've got a reason for it, and often more than one. Can't think of a reason? Maybe your opinion isn't really what you think. (But then, that's just my opinion!)

### How do you know?

As the saying goes: "Everyone's entitled to their opinion." But are you really? Where's your proof? What examples can you find within the text to make your point? For every reason you should have at least one example.

2 Analyze fiction...

## The 5 Facts of Fiction

❶ **Fiction is all about character.** Who are the important characters? Can you describe their personalities? How did they get to be this way? The more you know about the characters (especially about why they do the things they do), the more you will enjoy the story.

❷ **Fiction is all about what characters want.** What do these characters want? Why do they want it? The more important something is to someone, the more he or she will do to get it, and the more interesting a story will be.

❸ **Fiction is all about how characters get or do not get what they want.** Are these characters successful? Or do their quests end in failure? What obstacles do they encounter? What solutions can these characters craft to meet the challenges of their story?

❹ **Fiction is all about how characters change.** How do these characters change as a result of what happens to them? What do they learn? What might a reader learn from reading their story?

❺ **Non-fiction is all about THE world; fiction is all about A world.** What kinds of people, places, and things does the world of this story contain? What successes, disasters, and conflicts arise in this world? Complete this sentence: "This is a world where..."

❶ Main character   ❷ Motivation   ❸ Plot   ❹ Main idea   ❺ Setting

3 Analyze any piece of writing...

## The 5 Big Questions

❶ **What makes this writing good?** What do you like about this writing? Why do you like it? What techniques is the writer using to make the story work? Use the language of your classroom criteria to talk about your feelings.

❷ **What would make this writing better?** Is there something missing? Is there something wrong? Could this writing be improved? What would make you like it more? Use the language of your classroom criteria to talk about your feelings.

❸ **What's the one most important thing the author wants you to know?** What's the author's message? What does he or she want you to think about after you've read this? What is the main idea? And which details in the writing support your interpretation?

❹ **Why did the author write this?** The author could have written anything else but intentionally chose to write this. Why did the author write this particular piece? What was the author's purpose?

❺ **What do you need to know to understand and enjoy the text?** What are the key pieces of information in this piece? Has anything been left out? Does anything make you wonder? Has the author included information that you don't really need? How do you think the author decided what to include and what to leave out?

4 Develop expressive reading skills...

## What is Expressive Reading?

When I was in school, most of us read like little robots, droning on one word after another. I don't know which was more embarrassing: reading out loud myself or having to listen to everyone else. I knew that expressive reading was what my teachers did when they read to us. But I didn't know how to do it myself because I didn't know what good readers did to read expressively:

- **They change pitch.** Expressive readers make their voices go up and down. They go up at the beginning of a sentence and down at the end (up slightly if it ends with a question mark). They also go up and down to differentiate the words of a speaker (often high in pitch) from those of the narrator (usually lower).
- **They change rhythm.** Expressive readers speed up and slow down when they read. They also take appropriate pauses—big ones at the end of a sentence, smaller ones in between, after commas, and also between the logical parts of phrases.
- **They change volume.** Expressive readers say some words louder than others. In general, little words are said softer than more important words.
- **They change tone.** Sometimes readers use a soft, warm voice; sometimes their voice is cold and hard. They do this to communicate different feelings—soft and warm usually means nice, calm, or even sad; hard and cold can mean scary, angry, or excited.

Think carefully about the words as you read them. What do they mean? How do you feel? How should you change your voice as you read to capture the right expression?

5 Assess and improve comprehension...

## How Do You Know What You Know?

(And how do you know you know you know it?)

The point of reading is to understand what you read. And while that sounds simple, it's not. When you start a book you may think you understand it, but as you get farther along, and things get more complicated, you may begin to realize that you don't. So how can you be sure you understand everything you read? Well, there are no guarantees, but if you think about these five things you'll probably be able to figure things out no matter how complicated they get. You know you understand what you read when...

- **You can read all the words.** It's the big words that are usually the hardest to read, but often these are the words you have to understand.
- **You know what all the words mean.** Once again, big words are usually the ones you need to pay attention to.
- **You can picture the story in your mind as you read it.** Close your eyes and try to imagine what the story would like if it were a movie or a TV show.
- **You can explain it to someone else who hasn't read the book.** You might feel that you understand it yourself and still not be able to help someone else understand it because they don't understand you.
- **You can read it expressively in a way that makes sense to you and to other people listening.** This may be the hardest of all. It takes a lot of time and practice. But it's worth it.

6 Improve book group interactions...

## Book Group Role Play

It's reading time and your teacher tells you to get into your book groups. You find the other kids in your group, you move your chairs into a circle, you open your books... Now what? Someone starts reading, everyone listens, the next person reads, everyone listens, and after a while everyone's bored. Are there other things you can do in a book group? There certainly are. Each person can take on a specific role. Then everyone has something special to do. Try these ideas:

- **"Six Traits" Book Group.** Each person in the group monitors a particular trait. The roles are: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions.
- **"Five Facts of Fiction" Book Group.** Each person in the group takes one of the five facts. The roles are: Characters, Motivation, Plot, Main Idea, and Setting.
- **"Five Big Questions" Book Group.** Each person in the group handles one of the five questions: The roles are: Good things, Bad things, Main Idea, Purpose, and Audience (or Details).
- **"Understand Everything" Book Group.** Each person in the group takes one of the five criteria for good comprehension. The roles are: Decoding, Defining, Visualizing, Explaining, and Expressive Reading.

Pick one of these options and trade roles each day until everyone has had a turn at each role.

7 Analyze any piece of writing...

## CPA

When people need help figuring out their taxes, or businesses need to know where all their money is going, they hire a Certified Public Accountant, or CPA as they are called. CPAs are trained so they can literally "account" for every detail of your financial life. Books have a life, too, and readers need to account for what happens. As a reader, you are accountable to three things: 1) The book: you have to read and understand the words; 2) The author: you have to understand the author's message and purpose; and 3) Yourself: you have to try to make sense of your reactions. To accomplish all this, you need a CPA of your own, but not a Certified Public Accountant. You need a different CPA:

- **Content.** What is this book about? What's the one most important thing the writer wants you to know? Which details tell you you're right?
- **Purpose.** Why did the writer write this piece? What is the writer's purpose? What makes you feel the way you do?
- **Audience.** Who is this book written for? What kind of person would like it and find it valuable? How can you tell who the writer is writing for? What do these people want to get from this book?

When you can answer these questions, you can account for just about anything in the book you're reading. And when you can account for anything in a book, reading becomes a lot more interesting.

8 Perfect expressive reading skills...

## Advanced Expressive Reading

Take a look at this sentence:

On a bitter cold winter morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of simple means but evil intention, left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised, and set off on the dark errand he'd been preparing for all his life.

You can see that it is made up of several parts. There are four kinds of sentence parts to watch for:

- **Main Parts.** These parts usually contain the main action of the sentence: "Malcolm Maxwell... left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised..."
- **Lead-In Parts.** These parts often introduce a main part: "On a bitter cold winter morning..."
- **In-Between Parts.** As the name implies, these parts go in between other parts. They feel like a slight interruption: "...a young man of simple means but evil intention..."
- **Add-On Parts.** These are extra parts that convey additional information about any of the other parts: "...and set off on the dark errand he'd been preparing for all his life."

Experienced expressive readers change pitch when they change part. MAIN PARTS should be spoken at a middle pitch level. INTRO PARTS are often read at a higher pitch level. IN-BETWEEN PARTS are usually read at a level lower than the parts they are in between. And ADD-ON PARTS should be spoken at a slightly lower level than the part they follow.

# The Reading Strategy Organizer

**9** Explore the author's ideas...

## What's the Big Idea?

Books are full of big ideas. All you have to do is figure out what those ideas are. It's kind of like a detective story. The writer sprinkles clues up and down the pages and the reader finds them and tries to figure out what they mean. One way to make this process easier is to know what you're looking for ahead of time. When you want to understand an author's ideas, look for these things:

- **An important main idea.** What's the one most important thing the author wants you to know? Why is it important?
- **Interesting details.** Which details are the most interesting? How do they help you understand the main idea?
- **Showing, not just telling.** Where does the author use "showing" details? How does the "showing" help to improve your understanding and enjoyment?
- **A clear purpose.** Why did the writer choose to write this particular piece? Why is this a good reason to write something?
- **Something unusual or unexpected.** What makes the writing unusual or unexpected? How does this writing differ from other things you've read?

Reading can be just like playing a game. And like any game, it's more fun when you're playing well. It's not like sports, board games, or card games. You don't keep score, and anybody who tries wins, but that's because reading is a special kind of game, it's a game of ideas. Be a player.

**13** Look deeply at the language...

## Wordsmithery

Wordsmithery? What's that? Well, a "smith" is someone who works with something: a "silversmith", for example, is someone who works with silver. Some people work with words. These "wordsmiths" work hard to find the right words for the right effect. If you want to find out if the writer you're reading is a real wordsmith, look for these things:

- **Appropriate language.** Are the words the author has used appropriate for the audience? Are there any words or phrases that are too casual, too formal, too hard to understand, or possibly offensive?
- **Strong verbs.** Where has the author used strong verbs? What makes them effective?
- **Specific and precise adverbs and adjectives.** Where has the author used adjectives and adverbs to make the writing more specific and precise? How do these adjectives and adverbs make the writing better?
- **Memorable words and phrases.** Which words and phrases do you remember? Why are they so memorable?
- **Well used words.** Where has the author used unusual words effectively? Where has the author used common words in new ways?

The English language is one of the largest languages in the world. With more than 490,000 words to choose from—and new ones being added every day—writers have a lot of freedom to say what they want to say exactly the way they want to say it. But with that freedom comes responsibility. Words are powerful. Use them wisely.

**10** Analyze organizational structure...

## Get Yourself Organized

As a kid, my room was always a mess, and now as an adult, my office isn't much better. I have the same problem when I write; I just try harder now to clean up my messes before anyone reads them. Since I hate to study organization, I think the best way to learn about it is to read good writing and see how it's put together. Look for these things:

- **Catches the audience's attention at the start.** How does the beginning catch the audience's attention? Why would the audience want to read more?
- **Feels finished at the end; makes the audience think.** How does the ending make the piece feel finished? What does it make the audience think about?
- **Arranged in the best order.** How could the author move things around to make the piece better? What would the author need to change in order to do this in a way that made sense?
- **Spends the right amount of time on each part.** Why does the author spend more time in some parts than in others? Are there places where the author moves ahead too quickly or hangs around too long?
- **Easy to follow from section to section.** How does the author move from section to section? How do these transitions work?

Some people think that good writers start with a pre-planned organizational structure, but that's not often true. The best writers concentrate on their ideas and the needs of their audience. When you do that your writing organizes itself.

**14** Explore sound and rhythm...

## Life Sentences

Most of the time we don't think about the way words sound or how phrases feel as we read along from sentence to sentence. But great writers think about this all the time. To serious writers, every part of every sentence has to sound and feel just right, and every sentence has to flow smoothly, one right into the next. If you're interested in how writers add life to their sentences, look for these things:

- **Different sentence beginnings.** What are some of the different ways the author begins sentences? Do you notice any patterns?
- **Different sentence lengths.** Where does the author change sentence lengths? Do you notice any patterns?
- **Easy to read expressively.** What are the most expressive parts? What is it about how they sound that makes them so much fun to read out loud?
- **Uses rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and other "sound" effects.** Where has the author used rhythm, rhyme, alliteration or other effects to make the writing sound interesting? How does this improve the piece?
- **Sentences are put together in ways that make them easy to understand.** How does the author use connecting words and punctuation marks to make sentences easy to understand? How does the order of sentence parts make the writing easy to understand?

It's hard to investigate an author's Sentence Fluency unless you read the writing out loud and with a lot of expression. Try it. You'll be surprised by what you discover.

**11** Get a glimpse of the person behind the words...

## Hearing Voices

Voice is the personal quality in a piece of writing. It's all the things that tell you about an author's personality even when they aren't writing about themselves. When you want to understand who authors are—behind the words they write—look for these things:

- **Makes the audience care.** Which parts are most effective at making the audience care about what the author is trying to say? Why are these parts so effective?
- **Respects the needs of the audience.** Which audience is the author trying to reach? What do these people need to know to understand the author's message? How do they want to find out about it?
- **Strong statements; honest feelings.** Where are the author's strongest statements? How will these parts help achieve the author's purpose?
- **Plenty of personality, but always appropriate.** What makes this writing different, unusual, or unique? What does the writing suggest about the writer's personality? Are there any parts that might offend the audience?
- **Energy under thoughtful control.** Which parts show energy? Is there anything that might distract the audience or make them feel uncomfortable?

Some people say that voice is choice. But what does that mean? A person's identity is what makes them unique. And what makes us unique often has to do with the choices we make. You can find evidence of an author's voice every time you notice a conscious choice being made in the writing.

**15** Learn how conventions really work...

## Master Mechanics

When I was in school, we studied the conventions of writing by reading English books. We studied, yes, but we didn't learn very much. If you want to learn about conventions, don't go to an English book, go to a real book and see what real writers do. Look for these things:

- **Capitalization.** Has the author used capital letters in ways that make sense to you? Is it easy to tell where new ideas begin? Has the author capitalized the names of people, places, and things that are one of a kind?
- **"Ending" punctuation.** Has the author used periods, question marks, and exclamation marks in ways that make sense to you? Is it easy to tell where ideas end?
- **"Inside" punctuation.** Does the author's use of commas, colons, dashes, parentheses, apostrophes, quotation marks, or semicolons make sense to you? How does the author's use of these marks help make longer sentences easier to understand?
- **Paragraphs.** Has the author grouped related ideas into paragraphs in ways that make sense to you? Has the author started a new paragraph each time a new person starts speaking? Has the author indented or skipped a line to show where new paragraphs start?
- **Spelling.** If the writing has spelling mistakes, do these errors make the piece difficult to read and understand? How does the author's spelling affect the way you feel about the writing and the person who wrote it?

Almost every book you read contains almost every rule of writing. All you have to do is look and learn.

**12** Recognize writing conventions in print...

## Conventions Reading

Read this:

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat." He was talking to General Henry Knox (they called him "Ox" for short). There's a painting of George Washington where he's standing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for Redcoats. I always thought he just wanted a good view. But I guess the reason he was standing was because he didn't have a place to sit down.

Now read this:

[NEW PARAGRAPH] [INDENT] [CAPITAL] on a dark [CAPITAL] december night in 1776 [COMMA] as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy [CAPITAL] delaware [CAPITAL] river [COMMA] [CAPITAL] george [CAPITAL] washington said [COMMA] [QUOTE] [CAPITAL] shift your fat behind [COMMA] [CAPITAL] har [HYPHEN] ry [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] but slowly or you [APOSTROPHE] ll swamp the darn boat [PERIOD] [QUOTE] [CAPITAL] he was talk [HYPHEN] ing to [CAPITAL] general [CAPITAL] henry [CAPITAL] knox [PARENTHESES] they called him [QUOTE] [CAPITAL] ox [QUOTE] for short [PARENTHESES] [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] there [APOSTROPHE] s a painting of [CAPITAL] george [CAPITAL] washington where he [APOSTROPHE] s stand [HYPHEN] ing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for [CAPITAL] redcoats [CAPITAL] i al [HYPHEN] ways thought he just wanted a good view [PERIOD] [CAPITAL] but [CAPITAL] i guess the reason he was standing was because he didn [APOSTROPHE] t have a place to sit down [PERIOD] [END OF PARAGRAPH]

Pretty weird, huh? But it's also pretty interesting if you ask me. That's what you're really reading every time you read. Even though we don't say the conventions out loud, or even quietly in our own heads, we do read over them every time we read. But we don't pay much attention to them, and that's where we miss some valuable learning. For example, in that single paragraph, we encountered:

- **48 conventions:** not including the spelling of 95 words and the use of 94 spaces.
- **10 different conventions in addition to the space, including:** new paragraph, indent, capital, comma, quote, hyphen, period, apostrophe, parenthesis, and end of paragraph
- **The following rules:** Indent for new paragraph; Period at end of sentence; Capital at beginning of sentence; Capital for proper noun; Capital for the word "I"; Parenthesis for an aside; Quotation marks for dialog; Quotation marks for a nickname; Comma to separate clauses; Apostrophe for contraction; Hyphen to break a word at a syllable boundary for a line ending.

Not bad for a single paragraph from a 5th grade research paper. As you can see, there's a lot you can learn about conventions from your reading if you take the time every once in a while to pay close attention to what's going on.

Is this a good way to read? Hardly. It's very slow, and it's hard to understand what you're reading. But it's a great way to learn about conventions. And it's kind of fun, too.