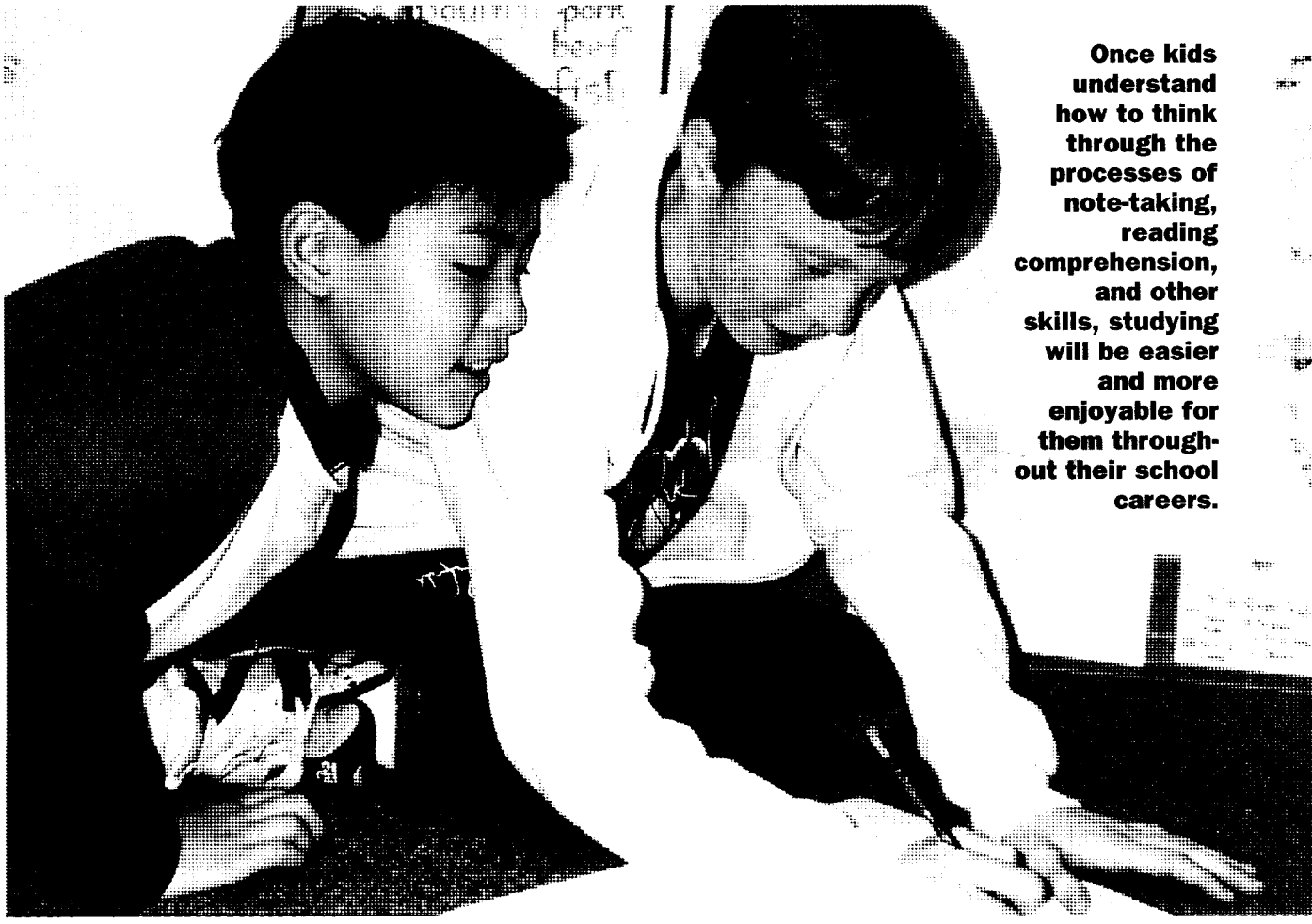
Step-by-step mini-lessons for modeling comprehension and note-taking

Build the Study Skills Your Students Need Most



Once kids understand how to think through the processes of note-taking, reading comprehension, and other skills, studying will be easier and more enjoyable for them throughout their school careers.

Reading comprehension and note-taking may be the most important study skills your students need to master. With these skills under their belts, they'll have an easier time learning to write paragraphs, develop stories, compile research, and so on. But how do you teach these skills in a way that engages kids?

We developed a series of mini-lessons based on two ideas: 1) It's important to teach these skills when students display the need—not in isolation; and 2) The best way to teach these skills is by modeling the process with relevant content—a novel, a student's essay, and the like.

The lessons you'll find here are designed to be used throughout the school year and across the curriculum.

Adapted from *Ready-to-Use Language Arts Mini-Lessons* by Joan Clemmons and Lois Laase (Scholastic Professional Books, 1995)

Reading Comprehension

I've found that the most powerful tool for improving reading comprehension is developing in kids an awareness of the thought process involved. I model it by verbalizing as I read aloud—my questions and hypotheses, the steps I use to solve a problem, and so on. Children literally hear me work through the text. —*Lois*

PREPARING

I begin by flagging passages in the book that call upon various reading strategies. The flags remind me to think out loud the strategy I am using. I also make a checklist of the strategies I want students to use (below), distribute a copy to each student, and make a transparency to refer to during the demonstration.

I explain that as I read aloud, I will be thinking out loud. To help students understand the technique, we discuss how sometimes we talk to ourselves as we work though a problem. A student might share how she prepares for school by reciting the items she needs to bring. I point out that we often think aloud when solving a math problem or working through a science experiment.

MODELING

I explain that as I read and think aloud, I want students to identify the strategies I am using, then check them off on the transparency. Here's how the dialogue went as I read from *Pigs Might Fly* by Dick King-Smith (Scholastic, 1980):

Mrs. C: I have chosen to read *Pigs Might Fly* by Dick King-Smith. I know that pigs can't really fly, so this must be a fantasy since that is the type of literature that has ani-

STRATEGIES GOOD READERS USE

BEFORE READING

- Look at the title, author, and pictures and think about what I already know about the topic or story.
- Based on these items, I make predictions about the story before I start reading.

WHILE READING

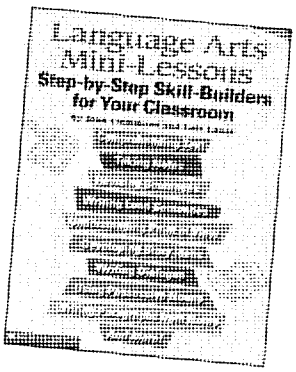
- I stop and ask myself questions about the text, and look for answers to the questions.
- Throughout the story, I guess or predict what will happen next, check my predictions, revise them, and make new ones.
- As I read, I think about how something in the text is like something I already know.
- If the text doesn't make sense, I reread those parts. I think about what the words really mean.
- When I come to a new word, I try to figure out what it means. I use words around it, or read on and use the text to figure it out.
- I sometimes stop to check my understanding by retelling the part of the story I've just read. If I can't retell it, I reread it.
- I make pictures in my mind of what I am reading. I visualize the characters, the settings, and the events.

AFTER READING

- I summarize or retell the important things in the text.

BOOK GIVEAWAY

We are giving away ten copies of *Ready-to-Use Language Arts Mini-Lessons* by Joan Clemmons and Lois Laase (Scholastic Professional Books, 1995). To win, send a postcard to Mini-Lessons Contest, Instructor, 555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-3999. Entries must be received by August 31, 1995. To order a copy of the book for $16.95, call (800) 325-6149.



mals or objects talking and doing things they can't really do. I also know that pigs are supposed to be rather intelligent animals. From the picture on the cover, I see that a pig appears to be flying over a farm. Maybe the pig is the main character and imagines he can fly. I predict that he will use that fantasy to help him solve the problem in the story. (By this time many hands are raised. I invite students to tell me which strategies they hear me using.)

Carly: You thought about what you already knew about pigs and stories. You also looked at the picture and predicted what the story will be about. (Carly then checks off the first two strategies on the transparency.)

Mrs. C: Chapter 1 is entitled "Taken Away." Who is taken away? I can see in the picture a tiny pig in a pen with a large hog. Is one of them going to be taken away?

Brian: You asked questions. (He then places a check next to this strategy, and I begin to read.)

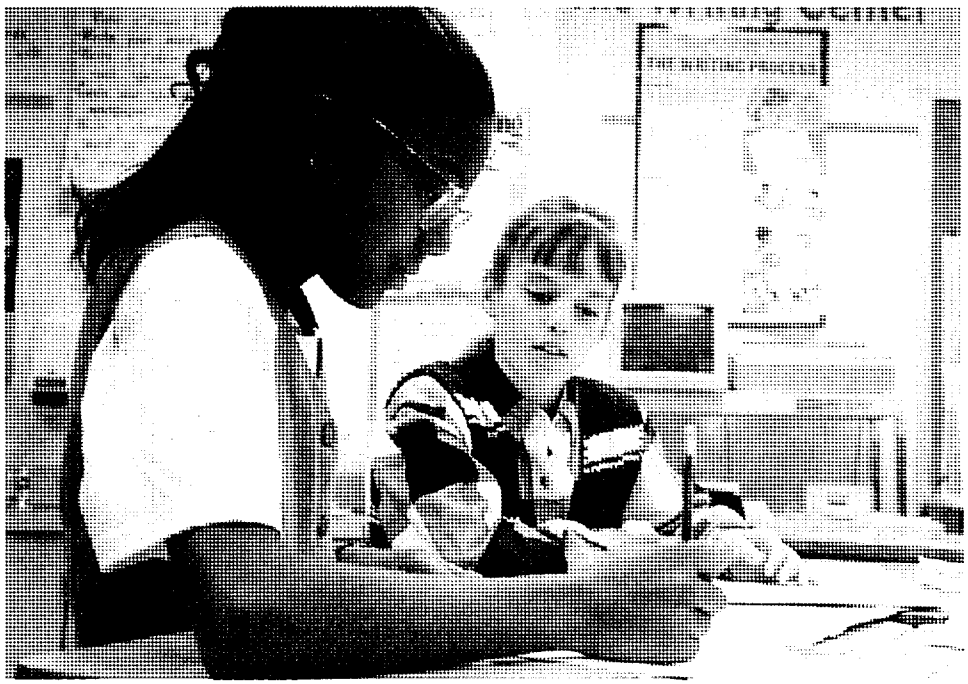
Mrs. C: *"Oh, no!" cried Mrs. Barleylove miserably. "Oh, no!" "What it is, dear?" came the voice of Mrs. Gobblespud next door. "One dead?" "No," said Mrs. Barleylove. "Not yet anyway."*

The little pig must be the one that is going to be taken away.

Elena: You guessed and predicted what will happen next. (She places a check in the appropriate spot.)

Mrs. C: *Mrs. Barleylove was a pedigree Gloucester Old Spots, a flop-eared white pig spotted with black*

JOAN CLEMMONS *is a fifth-grade teacher at Rolling Valley Elementary School in Montclair, Virginia, as well as a language arts consultant, lecturer, and workshop leader. She and* LOIS LAASE, *a teacher at Wingate Elementary School in Grand Junction, Colorado, have collaborated on many projects.*



After I've modeled reading-comprehension skills with the whole class, students practice what they've learned in pairs.

blobs of color, as though a giant had flicked his paintbrush at her.

I can picture this large black-and-white sow with a curly tail, grunting as she walks around the barnyard.

Julie: You described the picture in your mind. (She checks it off.)

NOW IT'S THEIR TURN

When we've finished this modeling exercise, I explain that I want students to be able to use these strategies when they read silently, but that first they'll practice out loud. I divide the class into pairs and ask students to take turns—one reads aloud for ten minutes, stopping periodically to think out loud, while the other checks off strategies.

As they work, I observe, encourage, and announce when it's time to switch. If a student has trouble verbalizing, I'll prompt her with questions like: What do you picture in your mind now? or What do you think will happen next? I encourage the listener to ask questions, as well.

At the end of the session, students agree that this exercise helped them better understand what they read.

FOLLOW-UP

The next day and then periodically throughout the year, I model this process again and have students practice it using a variety of reading materials, including nonfiction and periodicals. You can also adapt these strategies to help children get more out of textbooks. For example, I often ask students to survey a lesson before reading it by looking at the pictures, maps, graphs, heading, questions, and summaries. I encourage them to ask questions and look for answers as they read. I model a think-aloud as I read a textbook assignment, then give students a chance to practice with partners. Eventually students will begin to incorporate these strategies as they read silently on their own.

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"When modeling note-taking, I make transparencies of sample paragraphs from nonfiction books related to our current unit of study."

> "Linen, made from flax (plant fiber) provided clothing materials for everyone in ancient Egypt. The earliest picture of a loom in Egypt is on a pottery bowl dated to c. 3000 B.C., and flax was used for thousands of years after that. A pharaoh would have exceptionally fine linen; workers wore loincloths of coarser fabric. The Egyptians had clever ways of reducing wear on linen clothes—soldiers would cover the rear of their kilts with leather netting; domestic servants wore nets of cheap but colorful beads over their dresses. The basic courtier's kilt consisted of a linen cloth wrapped around the waist and secured by a knot, often elaborately tied. Cloaks gradually developed for use as overgarments. Women wore long, close-fitting dresses, often with beautifully pleated cloaks. There are still only vague ideas about how the Egyptians put pleats into their clothes—perhaps they used a board with a grooved surface. The number of pleats is probably exaggerated in many statues. The Egyptians learned the art of dyeing their clothes in colorful patterns from the Middle East, but the technique was never widespread."
>
> —from *Ancient Egypt* by George Hart (Knopf, 1990)

Note-Taking

Do your students copy verbatim from the text? Mine sure did. This is what inspired me to develop this lesson on note-taking skills. —*Joan*

PREPARING

As with the reading strategies, I've found the best way to model note-taking skills is to think aloud as I read. This way students can watch as I decide on the main idea and supporting details of a particular paragraph.

To prepare for the lesson, I select and make transparencies of sample paragraphs from nonfiction books related to our current unit of study. I begin the lesson by writing the objective on the board: "Today you will learn how to write summary notes." This is to help students stay focused on the lesson.

Then I ask students what they know about taking notes. I may have to prompt them with questions like: What is a summary? or How do you take notes on a topic you're researching? I record their responses on chart paper.

MODELING

During our unit on Egypt, I place the paragraph (below, left) from *Ancient Egypt* by George Hart (Knopf, 1990) on the overhead and I hang a sheet of chart paper on the board.

After reading the paragraph aloud once straight through, I go back and read each sentence, saying what I'm thinking. For example, after reading the first sentence I might say: "This sentence is about clothing in ancient Egypt"; after reading the second sentence I might say: "This sentence mentions a loom used in weaving cloth." I continue this for the whole paragraph. Then I think aloud: "Since every sentence in this paragraph is about clothing in ancient Egypt, that must be the topic of the paragraph. Therefore, I will write the topic—Clothing of Ancient Egypt—at the top of my paper."

Next, I explain that I am going to reread the paragraph, underlining important details about the topic. I think aloud and explain why certain words are important and why others are not. For example, I might say: "*Flax, 3000 B.C., pharaohs,* and *fine linen* are important words because they refer to ancient clothing. But words like *provided, pottery bowl,* and *clever* do not refer to ancient

Joan Clemmons helps a student with her note-taking skills with text from their Ancient Egypt study.

clothing so I will not underline them."

On the notepaper, under the main idea, I jot down the underlined details, explaining that I am putting the ideas

Clothing of Ancient Egypt

- linen woven from flax as early as 3000 B.C.
- pharaoh's clothes of excellent linen
- workers' clothes of rough cloth
- soldiers' clothes protected with leather nets
- servants' dresses protected by beads
- courtiers' linen kilts tied at waist
- women had long dresses and pleated cloaks

into my own words. Students can compare what they see on the transparency with what I write down.

Next, I put up another paragraph from the book and ask kids to help me through the process. We discuss each sentence, and when students agree on the main topic, I write it on the board. We reread each sentence and students tell me what to underline. Then they take turns writing a supporting idea on the board in their own words.

Finally, we take another look at the list students generated about note-taking. Together, they add new guidelines. Giving kids the responsibility of revising the guidelines really helps them understand the concept. I post this chart so students can refer to it whenever they are taking notes.

NOW IT'S THEIR TURN

I divide the class into small groups to practice their new note-taking skills. With a large sheet a paper and a paragraph about Egypt in hand, students work through the process together. I circulate through the room, noticing their individual needs. Later, I regroup students with specific needs and reteach.

I hope these mini-lessons will provide you with some new ways of using literature to teach skills. Take our ideas and refine them to fit your needs. We know your students will find them as helpful as ours did. ■

What We Know About Note-Taking

- **It's what the book is about.**
- **It is short.**
- **I write down what is important.**
- **I use my own words, not the author's words.**
- **I reread the paragraph and write the topic.**
- **I write the important ideas that tell about the topic.**
- **I make sure my notes are organized by topic.**
- **I do not copy the author's sentences.**