

## Strategies for Middle School Success: Organizing & Questioning

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### Power Thinking

#### What Is Power Thinking?

Power Thinking is an alternative system for outlining information that is hierarchical in nature. In other words, the information can be grouped according to main ideas, subtopics, and details. It considers information according to which level it belongs on, and we use numbers to signify those levels.

#### How Does It Work?

- Power 1: main idea, thesis, topic
- Power 2: subtopic, category of Power 1, detail of a Power 1
- Power 3: detail or subtopic of a Power 2
- Power 4: detail or subtopic of a Power 3

...and so on...

#### Can You Show Me What a Power Thinking Outline Would Look Like?

##### 1: TV Shows

- 2: Dramas
  - 3: E.R.
  - 3: Pretender
  - 3: Law & Order
- 2: SitComs
  - 3: Fresh Prince of Bel Air
  - 3: Kramer
  - 3: Everybody Loves Raymond
- 2: Soap Operas
  - 3: All My Children
  - 3: As the World Turns
  - 3: Young & the Restless

What might Power 4s be? (Perhaps characters on those shows.) Power 5s? (Traits or characteristics of those characters.)

### Selective Underlining

#### What Is Selective Underlining?

Well, there's underlining, and there's underlining selectively. [By the way, even though I'm using the word "underlining," you can feel free to know that that also means highlighting.] The way to make underlining useful as a tool for comprehension is for it to be strategic, selective, and purposeful. The underlining must be undertaken toward particular ends.

Do you remember how wonderful it was to discover the highlighter, perhaps when you were in college? I know that for me, I was more likely NOT to read the stuff I was highlighting. For some reason, that's the effect that a highlighter had on me. Or maybe I'd look back at the selection and find I'd pretty much colored the whole darn thing yellow. With selective underlining (and highlighting!), the idea is to underline ONLY the key words, phrases, vocabulary, and ideas that are central to understanding the piece. Students should be taught this strategy explicitly, given time and means to practice, and reinforced for successful performance.

## How Can I Teach My Students to Selectively Underline?

There are several ways to go about it. You may be saying, "Selective underlining is all well and good, but have you eggheads up in the university forgotten that we use textbooks, and that our kids only get to use them for the year, but we have to use them at least five years??" That's a fair question, so how can you teach this strategy anyway?

1. First of all, let's realize that not every single bit of text you have students read is in a textbook and untouchable.
2. Second, consider seeking out appropriate content sources, such as newspapers, that students can indeed learn this strategy with while still pursuing meaningful social studies goals.
3. Third, think about how you can get around the problem of textbooks that can't be marked in. For instance, in order to teach the strategy, you might photocopy a page or two out of the text that students use and distribute it to them. Make an overhead of that selection for yourself. Model for them and guide them in practicing the strategy on the photocopies. Alternatively, if you have enough of the materials available to you, give each student a sheet of transparency film, some paperclips, and some overhead pens. Let them practice directly on their texts by using the transparencies.

Think about how this strategy would work when combined with power thinking. Students might put a box around Power 1 ideas; an oval around Power 2 ideas; and an underline under Power 3 ideas. Students might also use different colors in their underlining. Power 1s could be blue, Power 2s could be red, and Power 3s could be green.

Practice selective underlining for different purposes: underline key vocabulary and its definitions or explanations, and use this as an opportunity to focus on how authors reveal the meaning of new terms within the context. Or have students underline cause and effect. Or ask them to underline the facts and concepts that support a particular viewpoint, as might be useful with a strategy such as Opinion-Proof. Remember, you're limited only by your own imagination with teaching and applying selective underlining.

## Graphic Organizers: Power Mapping

### What Are Graphic Organizers?

You can call them graphic organizers, pictorial organizers, webs, maps, concept maps, or whatever other name you wish to give them...but graphic organizers are basically visual ways to represent information. You can create maps that arrange information:

- according to main ideas, subtopics, and details
- in sequence
- to show the relationships between the different parts
- according to the similarities and differences between two or more concepts
- by its components, as in the elements of a story  
...and lots of other ways

There are literally dozens upon dozens of versions of graphic organizers; there are almost as many books, manuals, and guides, not to mention websites, that can give you a whole range of examples. For our purposes here, I only want to show you how graphic organizers can be simply an extension or adaptation of the Power Thinking strategy. KEEP IN MIND: it's the making of the graphic organizer when students attach relevance and meaning to the information. Don't get stuck in the rut of having students fill out pre-made versions...

### How Do They Work?

Since you know that some of your students are visual learners, and that a picture is worth a thousand words, then you should have in your toolbox some ways to organize ideas, facts, and concepts graphically. Graphic organizers are just the thing. Using boxes, circles, ovals, rectangles, and other shapes, not to mention lines for connecting, students can show information according to its level (main ideas, subtopics, details or elaboration, and so on). They can show how two ideas compare to one another (as in a Venn Diagram) or Comparison-Contrast Chart. They can trace the order or sequence or stages of a process. They can show how characters in a story, or officeholders in a government, work with and relate to one another. In economics, that time-honored Circular Flow Diagram is an example of a graphic organizer.

## Column Notes

### What Are Column Notes?

Some of you will think, Gosh - this sounds like the old Cornell note-taking system. Column notes share characteristics in common with the Cornell system: information is grouped according to its type, and then arranged in columns. We'll begin with 2-column notes, but you should quickly see that the number of columns one uses is dependent upon the type of information you are dealing with and what your purpose for engaging in it is.

### How Do Column Notes Work?

The column notes format lends itself to many variations. It may be that students would use it as a note-taking guide for their textbook reading; if so, then main ideas or headings would be listed in the left column, and details or explanations for each would be written in the right column. Alternatively, you might have students reading for cause and effect; if so, then causes can be listed in the left column and the effects in the right column. Students might list key vocabulary in the left column and definitions, examples, or sentences in the right. It may be as simple as reworking your typical question worksheets so that questions are on the left and answers are put on the right.

The Cornell system recommended that the left column be one-third of the page, and the right column two-thirds. It really doesn't matter much; students may find it much easier simply to fold their notebook paper down the middle to create the two columns neatly. Using the folded sheet can be a great study aide: students can quiz themselves or each other with the answers safely hidden on the other side of the folded sheet, but they can also check back and forth between questions and answers. This format becomes a very handy tool, but it also shows the organization of information more clearly, more dramatically, and certainly in a more visually-useful manner.

## Question-Answer Relationships

### What Are Question-Answer Relationships?

Raphael created Question-Answer Relationships as a way to help students realize that the answers they seek are related to the type of question that is asked; it encourages them to be strategic about their search for answers based on an awareness of what different types of questions look for. In short, there are four QARs:

1. right there
2. think and search
3. author and you
4. on my own

### How Do QARs Work?

1. **Right There.** The answer is usually contained in a single sentence, and the words used to create the sentence are often also in that one sentence.
2. **Think and Search.** The answer is in the text, but you might have to look in several different sentences to find it.
3. **Author and You.** The answer is not in the text, but you still need information that the author has given you, combined with what you already know, in order to respond to this type of question.
4. **On My Own.** The answer is not in the text, and in fact you don't even have to have read the text to be able to answer it.

## Authentic Questions

### What Are Authentic Questions?

As students read, they have questions that occur to them. Perhaps these questions are about things they do not understand. Or perhaps they are things they want to know more about. Sometimes students have questions about how an idea in a current selection fits with or contradicts something else they have read. Authentic questions invites students to pose the questions they come up with as a basis for paired, group, or class discussions.

### How Do They Work?

Have students use notecards or sticky notes. Tell them to write down one or two of the questions they have as they read. Explain that having questions while one reads is a sign of someone who monitors his or her comprehension,

rather than an indication that one is failing to comprehend the text. In the early going, students may need prompting about the types of questions to be asked: suggest they ask a question about words they don't understand, why the subject of an article acted as he or she did, what caused a situation to occur, what might happen next, or how ideas relate to other things the students have learned. After reading, have students pair up and share their questions with one another. The pairs can pair up into groups of four and discuss the questions and how they might be answered. Call on each group to share the question they found the most provocative, or the one that generated the most discussion among them. Use those group-selected questions as part of a full class discussion.

## Sticky Note Discussions

### What Are Sticky Note Discussions?

A means for active engagement with text, sticky-note discussions are a way to have students responding directly to text as they read it. Simple office sticky (Post-It) notes are used for students to record questions, thoughts, comments, reactions, and notes directly on the text where they feel provoked in their thinking.

### How Do They Work?

Sticky Notes are a means for purposeful reading of text. Students can use sticky notes for a variety of purposes, ranging from note taking to question-asking to personal reaction. The sticky notes can be used extremely well in conjunction with Power Thinking: imagine having students putting sticky notes where they find Power 1s (main ideas), Power 2s (subtopics), and Power 3s (details). Or maybe they just jot notes down about key ideas as they encounter them, which they will subsequently arrange into categories or groups. Perhaps you would build an outline on the board at the front of the room by having students come up and place their sticky notes into the appropriate outline. The sticky note activity can be open-ended (very little direction) or a very directed activity (answer these five questions on your sticky notes at the point in the text where you find the key information). Students may complete outcome sentences on sticky notes (also called JumpStarters, such as: "I learned that..." "I would ask the author...")

## Questioning the Author

### What Is Questioning the Author?

Questioning the Author is a protocol of inquiries that students can make about the content they are reading. This strategy is designed to encourage students to think beyond the words on the page and to consider the author's intent for the selection and his or her success at communicating it.

The idea of "questioning" the author is a way to evaluate how well a selection of text stands on its own, not simply an invitation to "challenge" a writer. Students are looking at the author's intent, his craft, his clarity, his organization...in short, if the author has done well, students can say so, and they can identify why they say so. Likewise, if students are struggling over a selection of text, it may be because it hasn't been written very clearly. Students can see this, and say so, but then they are invited to improve on it.

### How Does It Work?

The standard format involves five questions. Students read a selection of text (one or more paragraphs, but generally not as much as a whole page), and then answer these questions:

1. What is the author trying to tell you?
2. Why is the author telling you that?
3. Does the author say it clearly?
4. How could the author have said things more clearly?
5. What would you say instead?

As developed by Margaret McKeown, Isabel Beck, and Jo Worthy, Questioning the Author becomes a tool for recognizing and diagnosing inconsiderate text. Sometimes, as we know, students struggle with content not because they are failing as readers but because the author has failed as a writer. It is this notion of the "fallible author" that McKeown et al wish students to become aware of. When they think a failure to understand is their own fault, students often pull away from their reading. But if they will approach text with a "reviser's eye," as McKeown and her colleagues put it, they can shift from trying to understand text to making text more understandable.

# ReadingQuest: An Online Resource

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/>

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This Handout Supplemented a Session on  
Strategies for Middle School Success: Organizing & Questioning  
Stone Middle School  
Centreville, Virginia  
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