

“WHY ARE THEY TELLING ME THIS?”

Reading Non-fiction for Understanding in the Early Elementary Grades

We have all read research papers by well-intentioned students, instructed to “write in their own words,” often producing reports that are distanced only far enough from the original text to avoid the accusation of *plagiarism*. Many of us may have followed the same credo when “writing in our own words;” mash a few sentences together, change the word order, insert a few new adjectives or descriptive words and voila! I certainly have been guilty of this, after all it takes the least mental effort. But how long does this mish mash of words and phrases stick with a student after the report is over? And why do we write reports? I would like to think that the report writing process can be more than reading something on one page and neatly (or not so neatly) transferring this same information to another page. Rather it can be a place to gather the habits of mind and thought that will prepare students to dig deeply into their future intellectual endeavors and to be thoughtful, critical and deep thinkers while gaining access to new information.

My research interest started in non-fiction report writing. However, it soon became clear to me that quality writing is difficult to achieve if deep and intentional reading and comprehensions habits are not in place first. It is hard to write originally about something you do not understand deeply and personally. I began to wonder how we can we help even the youngest readers pull meaning from nonfiction texts and take ownership of this new information in a way that sticks and makes sense to them. This led me to the even more perplexing question: how can we as teachers offer instruction and gain insight into what is happening in students’ minds during this deeply internal process of reading and synthesizing non-fiction?

This lack of interaction with the text became clear to me in a number of ways in our own 2nd/3rd grade classroom. When John is asked to explain what he just read, his response is often, “Uh, I don’t know.” When Sarah writes the main idea of a text, her approach is often to find one sentence she can copy word for word. When Greta attempts to summarize what she has read, she will often zoom in on one, usually inconsequential, word or phrase. Even Tara, a highly advanced reader, when asked what she learned from reading a page on Iroquois housing, responded, “Umm, I don’t know, I am just bad at remembering things.”

We have a broad spectrum of readers in our classroom. Our advanced readers can easily process texts, however meaning often seems to wash over and off them. Our emergent readers are leaving the decoding stage of their reading careers and beginning the exciting new stage of “reading for meaning.” As they journey through this new terrain, they get lost and often don’t want to admit it. Both groups are generally able to discuss and comprehend concepts beyond their reading ability. I have seen both groups exhibit the same behaviors:

leaving a text with no new information or knowledge, and copying sentences when asked to write about a text.

Reading for understanding is not easy. In reality, thorough and thoughtful reading is something that most of us prefer to avoid (Anyone skim their readings in college? Are you reading this carefully now?). Taking the time to pause and think is not a natural human habit. Daniel Willingham in his book *Why Don't Students Like School?* (2009) explains that people are not naturally good thinkers and will avoid thinking. He states, "Humans don't think very often because our brains are designed not for thought but for the avoidance of thought. Thinking is not only effortful, it is slow and unreliable" (p. 4). He argues that unless the cognitive conditions are ideal, we will avoid thought as we are "biased to use memory to guide our actions rather than to think" (p. 7).

Processing, synthesizing and thinking deeply about text is hard work. It takes time and effort and it can be slow. In contrast, memorizing fragments of writing or copying words is easier and most likely how we will choose to work when given the option. This is not to say that all reading need be effortful and slow. We read for a multitude of reasons, sometimes for pleasant leisure, sometimes to skim for information, but when researching and acquiring new information for a purpose, I argue that we need to slow down and think to understand.

Close Reading

So if our brains don't naturally want to slow down and do the heavy thinking, what should we do? Much of my research was inspired by the idea of Close Reading, for which students "need more than just exposure to texts in order to become proficient readers; they also need the right kind of instruction from excellent teachers," who will lead them towards the goal of "making text analysis a habit of practice" (Lapp, Moss, Grant & Johnson, p. 4). The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) gives the following

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. (PARCC, 2011, p. 7)

definition of close reading:

The practice of Close Reading aligns closely with the new Common Core standards in English Language Arts which underscore that "as students advance through grade levels, they need

systematic, focused, and purposeful instruction in order to develop and refine their analytical skills and comprehend increasingly complex texts” (Lapp et al., p. 3). Close Reading is most commonly discussed in the contexts of older grades, however, if we want our readers to own these habits of close and careful reading, I believe we should start building good habits in the early elementary grades.

My research in non-fiction reading began with experiments in Close Reading, practicing the basic concept of ‘the main idea.’ We began doing weekly Close Reading exercises where I gave my students short, complex texts and asked if they could find the main idea of what they read. For many, this was a difficult task. We also practiced answering text-dependent questions that required an understanding of the text. When a student was confused or uncertain, I instructed them to read it again, and more often than not, this would lead them in the right direction. I wondered how often students quietly read a text without pulling any meaning from it while we teachers miss this lack of comprehension.

Classroom Practice: Differentiated Texts

In order for Close Reading to work with both the most emergent and the most advanced readers, I found that using differentiated texts was crucial. I began differentiating by simply reading texts aloud to the more emergent readers. I soon found that they needed more time to process what they heard and to learn the necessary background information and vocabulary. Even when I read aloud to them, I changed the text to a shorter and simpler format. I also began to frontload important new vocabulary words. Now, any time I give emergent readers a text, I re-write it to be short and simple.

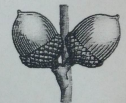
According to Willingham (2009), “because thinking is so hard, the conditions have to be right for curiosity to thrive, or we quit thinking rather readily” (p. 7).

Differentiated texts work to make the cognitive challenge of reading appropriate for each student. If the reading is too easy, it is likely that a reader will not give it

Differentiated Texts

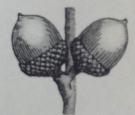
Name Sofia

Acorns were a plentiful and important food source for many Native American peoples, including the Kalapuya. Acorns kept for long periods of time and were used in many ways. The nutmeats and the flours and oils made from them provided nutrition during the lean time of year. Women and children harvested the acorns in September and October, gathering them in bags made from soft animal skins. The Kalapuya used a complex process to remove the poisonous and bitter tannins found in raw acorns.



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Women and children harvested the acorns in September and October, gathering them in bags made from soft animal skins. Processing this fruit was an intensive process, as the poisonous and bitter tannins found in raw acorns had to be removed first. This could be done in two ways. In one method the nuts were first ground into meal using a mortar and pestle, and were then placed in water or steamed in a basket. The water dissolved the tannin, leaving behind mush. The other method began by baking the acorns on hot rocks, then burying the baked nuts in clay. The water in the clay dissolved and absorbed the bitter tannin. In winter, the Kalapuya dug up the nuts, washed them, and safely ate them.



Examples of a close reading texts for both emergent and advanced readers on how the Kalapuya used acorns.

much thought. If it is too difficult a reader may tune out (or experience the “roll around on the floor” effect). In Willingham’s words, “Curiosity prompts people to explore new ideas and problems, but when we do, we quickly evaluate how much mental work it will take to solve the problem. If it’s too much or too little, we stop working on a problem if we can” (p. 10). Having multiple differentiated texts available also allows students to move up or down text complexity as they are ready. Arnold recently summed up the need for differentiated texts at quiet reading, while showing me a non-fiction book meant for young readers, “Look how many words are on each page! Seriously, look at how many words are on each page. I don’t know when I will ever be able to read this! Maybe when I am like ten?”

Reading Habit #1: Self-awareness of Understanding

We read for many reasons, and as a reader a crucial habit is to know when you need to understand a text and demand comprehension. I am often guilty of racing through texts, only to realize at the end that I barely have any idea of what I just read. It takes time and effort to notice this, and then go back and re-read with intention. For many students the goal of reading a text is to finish it. Once they get to the end, their work is over, whether they have taken anything from a text or not. As a habit, I want students to not accept leaving a text with no new knowledge or basic understanding of what they have read.

In thinking about how to help students with this habit of mind, I first thought that it is useful to occasionally pause and consider what you are reading. After some practice in finding the overall main idea of a text, we began to practice repeating back (summarizing, giving the gist, etc.), what we read every few sentences. When you cannot even recall what happened in the last three sentences, you know it is time to slow down and re-read. I also began to consider what motivates students to understand as they read, and how we can foster the desire to pull meaning from a text.

Classroom Practice: Reading Partnerships

I began experimenting with reader partnerships in order to make the reading and comprehension process visible to me as a teacher, as well as to provide students with practice in pausing to consider their understanding. With time I found that these partnerships succeeded in helping students slow their reading into a more intentional process. It also offered students an opportunity to discuss their reading with a classmate.

Initially, I placed an advanced reader with an emergent reader. The advanced reader was given the job of ‘whisper reader’ while the other partner listened closely and summarized what the whisper reader read, every 2-3 sentences. The whisper reader was then given the job of adding any information to the spoken summary that they believed their partner missed. If the summarizer was not sure of what they heard, the ‘whisper reader’ would re-read the text.


From our very first ‘whisper reading’ session, the classroom was an incredible place to be. A hushed, productive buzz filled the room, and as a teacher I could either rotate throughout the room listening in on conversations, or help a partnership of struggling readers. During this first ‘whisper’ reader session I read out loud to a partnership of two emergent readers and the conversation they began to have was truly exciting. Violet, who sometimes misses things during group discussions, was making thoughtful inferences and connections as she repeated back what she understood. “Well it said that the door was small. That was probably to keep the cold out, since it was their winter house,” in response to a text describing how the Kalapuya built their winter homes. Not only was every student engaged and thinking (as they each had a job), but the reading that happened during this period, built comprehension that lasted through the weeks that followed.

Reading partnerships encouraged students in the habit of slowing down, actively thinking about what they read and noticing breakdowns in understanding. They became a natural place for partners to think out loud about the text, especially valuable for those students who are sometimes lost in larger group discussion. It also gave emergent readers access to texts beyond their reading ability, but well within their comprehension ability. The reading partnerships are a strategy I continue to use when I want students to read a text carefully and with understanding and/or if I want to hear their understanding as they read.

Classroom Practice: Ask Students to Show Understanding in Multiple Ways.

Asking students to show what they understand in multiple ways has been another interesting experiment in driving understanding. Completing concrete tasks, such as a drawing or a building project began as a useful way for emergent reader/writers to show what they understood. As a bonus, I found that these tasks motivated students toward deep understanding.

While studying the Kalapuya, each student was given the task to build their own Kalapuya style home. Before we began, every student read or listened to a text on how the Kalapuya built their houses. Advanced students read and summarized a complex text with a “whisper reader” partner while emergent readers listened as I read aloud and practiced summarizing as a group. Every student then drew each part of the building process as they understood it, which required them to stop and question parts they did not understand. You cannot draw an “upright forked stick” if you don’t understand what one is. However, you could certainly copy the phrase into a final report. House building in the woods showed great evidence of



“We went about collecting forked logs for framework. When we had enough, we started driving them into the ground, then started getting crosspieces and started getting grass. We layed the crosspieces don on the forks. Then we covered our crosspieces with super-long grass.....We covered the grass with mud for insolation.”

Juliette’s Kalapuya house building journal entry

their understanding as students excavated before building, drove upright forked sticks into the ground, built frame-works using crosspieces and used dirt for insulation. This knowledge also made it into many Kalapuya house building journals, which students began writing ten days after the building process.

Reading Habit #2: Self-awareness of Vocabulary/Syntax That Gets in Your Way

Once readers have started to slow down and pay close attention to what they read, this is no guarantee for understanding, as they can easily be stopped short by an unknown new word or turn of phrase. For young readers, who are used to not knowing a lot of words, an essential habit is to notice when these words or phrases are affecting their ability to understand a text. We have spent significant time in class practicing the act of simply noticing the words or confusing moments in a text that are getting in our way. I see this as the first and foundational step in the long metacognitive journey of noticing breaks in understanding, where they happen, and how to fix them.

Classroom Practice: Underline Unknown Words

I have begun to ask that students underline or circle words they do not know as they read. Many times they will come to me saying they have read a piece of text and understood it, but then I will see key words underlined, which are necessary for understanding. This helps me as a teacher notice the words that are tricky for students and help explain them, so that they can understand their reading. It also allows us to go back through the text and practice habits such as using context or picture clues to find the meaning of new words.

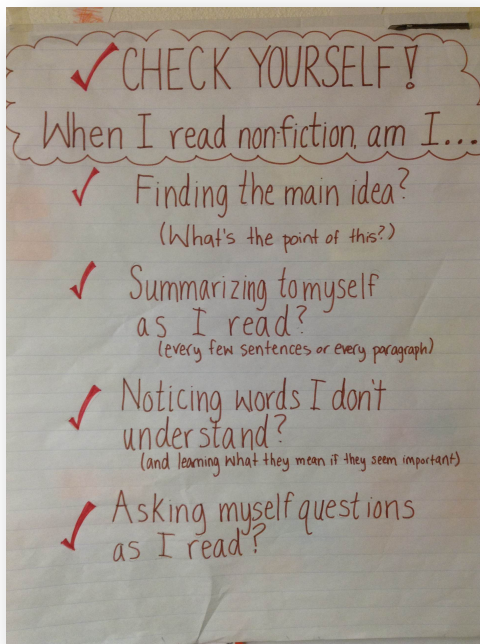
Reading Habit #3: Ask Questions While You Read

Out of all the habits I tinkered with during this research process, I have found the practice of wondering and asking questions while you read to be the most exciting. In order to formulate a question, students need to pause and think enough about a concept to have a novel, independent thought. They need to synthesize what they have understood in the context of their background knowledge, and wonder how this new information connects. Question asking also helps me as a teacher know where confusions lie, and then address these confusions. Finally, asking questions and wondering about a text is more engaging than memorizing or copying lines; it can make reading more fun.

Classroom Practice: Write questions as you read.

As an example of question-asking in progress, I recently gave three emergent readers photocopied pages from a non-fiction book (rather than a simplified text I had written) to see how they would do. Andrew sat down, quickly read through it and proudly announced he was finished. He also said that he wasn't quite sure about what he had learned, so I asked

him to read it again, this time writing at least one question on every page. He came running back a bit later with a question sprawled across every page, including the question, “*Why are they telling me this?*” next to the very first paragraph. The text described a pickup truck racing down a dirt road next to a shepherd walking his flock, to illustrate that both old and modern ways of life exist side-by-side among the Navajo. Once I learned that he had not understood this main idea, we spent some time decomposing and understanding the text together and then shared it with the group. This example has become a landmark example of the idea of old and modern ways of life existing together for Native American populations today. Without his written questions, a key piece of text and comprehension would have been easily lost, with neither Andrew nor me the wiser.



Habits Applied: Non-fiction Reading During a Report Cycle

All of the close reading activities leading up to our Native American research projects demonstrated to me that reading closely, synthesizing and understanding what you read is a complex and slow process. This made me want to slightly change the nature of how our research projects were done, with a continued focus on careful, thoughtful reading. To me this meant that students might read and write fewer pages and study fewer topics compared to previous research experiences. It also meant that I would be very careful about letting them loose with a bunch of non-fiction books, where we would likely lose many of our close reading practices and begin the ‘copy information directly from this page into my report’ cycle. It also

meant that students would likely not gather all their information from this rather intensive style of reading. To make things feasible for this age group and keep good reading habits in place, information gathered would also come from read-alouds, videos, images, stories and music.

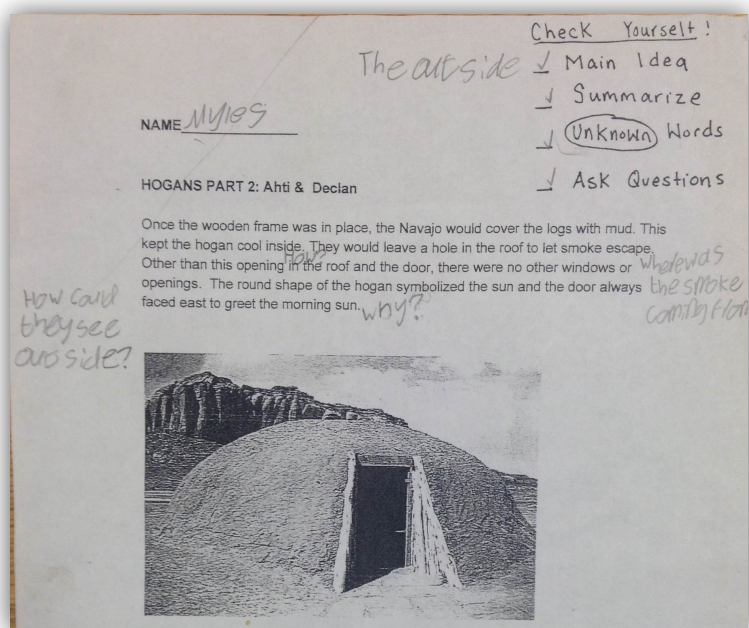
Given that I wanted to keep the focus on our thoughtful reading habits during this particular project, this meant that we would spend less time on other non-fiction report writing skills, such as locating information in books, note-taking, or the general writing process. This is not to say that these skills are less important, just that I believe reading and understanding what you read is such a foundational part of the process, that we should first spend a significant amount of instruction bolstering this part of the research cycle. Once the class has the ability to slip into the good habits of non-fiction reading, future research cycles can focus on other

important parts of the research process. The more I work with young researchers, the more I see how complex each stage of the research cycle is, each warranting its own in-depth focus.

While working with a group of students studying the Pueblo and Navajo Indians, I have continued to use 'whisper reading' partnerships and to focus on four big habits: the main idea, summarizing, noticing unknown words and asking questions. When we read carefully for meaning, I have continued to provide specific differentiated texts, on the topics we are studying. To keep reading pieces shorter and comprehensible, I have also experimented with splitting a topic into small sections. For example, Pueblo and Navajo 'expert pairs' taught the rest of the group a different step of their group's house building process. All photocopied pages have a little checklist at the top, where students can check off each habit after they have done it, and students are expected to underline words they do not know and write questions in the margins.

During our Native American research projects, another fruitful scenario asked students to read for meaning in order to create a model of the houses their tribes lived in. As with the Kalapuya houses, these models inspired students to tackle complex texts and work to understand them. They were excited to build houses and motivated to learn how it was done by real people. Evidence of the information that students gained from doing close readings on both of these house building processes was evident in multiple places throughout the classroom, from conversations as to how they should go about the building process to the many small details added to make their models realistic.

Asking questions with each new reading has been an essential, and fun part of our research process. We began to really dig into question asking while studying Pueblo and Navajo houses and how they were built. During a read aloud, when I was modeling our four habits, I asked the group to help me think of questions while I read. No hands. Then I said that I wanted everyone to think of at least one question as I read the text one more time, eyes began to squint in concentration and bit by bit, a sea of hands appeared. Connor asked, "Why would they want to waste food?" in response to hearing the Pueblo spiritual practice of outlining a house foundation with cornmeal. This high level question connected to a conversation from the day before about how the Pueblo paid their workers with food, causing them to have as few workers as possible to save food. "Why was it so hard to grow food?" we wondered in response. It also led us into a quick conversation about the idea that



their spirituality must have been pretty important if they were willing to waste food for it. Question after question followed, “*Who was raiding the pueblo?*” “*Why did the woman own the house?*” “*If women owned the homes, where did the men go?*” and soon our board was full of wonderings. We then paused to wonder about each question as a group. It was an animated, engaged time on the rug. Even Matthew who started the class grumbling in the back row left the circle at the end loudly announcing, “Well, that was fun!”

In previous research projects, I included question asking at the start of our research projects. We would create a ‘what I know’ and ‘what I want to know’ poster together, and use some of our ‘want to know’ thoughts as guiding questions for the research cycle (which I still think is a great practice). The questions would generally remain the same and we would work diligently to answer them. However, I have discovered that the more students learn, the better their questions become. At the start, they might wonder more topically about food or weapons or houses, vague “what” questions that might align with certain interests of theirs (“*What did they eat?*” “*What were their weapons?*”). However, I am coming to realize that deeper curiosity and questions come after students understand a new concept. Then the questions become higher level, they start asking more “why” or “how” questions (“*Why would they waste food?*” “*How did they know which foods were poisonous?*”). However, getting to this point took careful, thoughtful and somewhat guided information gathering. It took access to quality, leveled texts, good reading habits and a little outside structure, where continued question asking was a required part of each student’s research.

BIG QUESTIONS I STILL WONDER ABOUT

Throughout the research process, I have struggled with how tightly I should hold the group and their habits, versus sending students off to work. I have struggled with how many things can be going on at once, how much complexity to allow in the report process and how to allow for students to follow interests. This very basic habit of working to read carefully has caused a lot of wonderings, some of the big ones I outline below.

Why do we write reports?

I sometimes wonder if I am making too much of all of this. Perhaps, a perfectly fine place for elementary students to be is learning how to gather information. However, part of me feels that information is something that we have plenty of access to in our current society and learning to think deeply is a better direction to head. But how does this change the classic, ‘learn something and write what you know’ structure of a report? How much synthesizing and critical thinking can we really expect from beginning researchers who are just figuring out how to read and write?

Role of Topic picking/ curiosity/ student interest

When I began our Southwest Indian study, I planned for the entire group to study the Pueblo tribes. We had a lot of great books on the Pueblo, including texts at a variety of levels, and I planned to provide information to the group in a variety of ways (read-alouds, etc). However, a group of boys heard that the Navajo were ‘raiders,’ which captivated their imaginations. I

hesitatingly agreed to let some in the group study the Navajo and some study the Pueblo. It turned out to be challenging to have two groups going at once, especially because we did not have as many Navajo resources.

This process led me towards a slightly altered stance on the idea of curiosity 'leading' research projects. While some boys were curious about the Navajo as raiders, we actually did not have a lot of information on this specific topic. Once we began to learn more about the Pueblo, interest eventually veered toward the Pueblo. Mark, who started the whole thing, even wrote his report on both the Navajo and the Pueblo. The curiosity formed by the deeper understanding of the studied topic was, in many ways, more enticing than the boy's original curiosity about weapons and raiders. Is it possible that understanding leads to interest more than interest leads to understanding?

Summarizing vs. Memorization vs. Main Idea

Asking students to summarize as they read, led to a very interesting group discussion one day when Sarah asked about the difference between 'memorizing' something and saying 'what you remember.' When asking students to summarize, I will often ask them to summarize what they remember from the text (ie: don't just read to me from the text, tell me all the main points you remember after reading and thinking about it.) She had been frantically looking for a good section to 'memorize' so she could tell me what she 'remembered.' We entered into a discussion about some important metacognitive thinking, questioning if you have to memorize something to remember it. How do you help students clear the fuzziness between 'remembering' and 'memorizing'?

This then made me wonder if had been creating an artificial distinction between finding the 'main idea' and 'summarizing'. Am I teaching too broad a concept of main idea? In the future, when they hear main idea, should it actually be more of a summary? Would asking them to practice just one of these two habits suffice for these beginning researchers?

Assessing Student Understanding

In my experience with Tara last year, she wrote beautiful reports, full of artfully arranged phrasings and somewhat complex understandings, usually copied from the most recent text she read. I think, for this reason, we need to be careful with how we are assessing student understanding. Is the true evidence of thinking always in the final written format? Some of my youngest readers and writers have great understanding of what we studied, though they struggle to write it down. How well can a student talk about a topic, outside of memorized or copied phrases? Can they make something based on their understanding? If a student has a less elaborate report, how can we let parents/readers know how much the student has learned?

When do all of the questions get answered?

If students are constantly questioning as they read, and moving towards more high level questioning, how hard should we work to answer all of these questions? Is it enough that the

thinking has happened and the questions have been asked? Can we ever fully answer Connor's question "Why would they want to waste food?" or Quinn's question, "How did they know which foods were poisonous?" in our brief report cycle?

How quickly should we let loose the reigns?

After practicing careful reading habits, students will eventually have to pick up a book, find the information they are looking for and read it. How long should we spend on these guided reading practices before letting students loose in a sea of information? How long should they read and annotate photocopied/re-written pages before looking for information in books? I wonder if it is more a of a 'let them loose, come back together and practice, let them loose, come back together and practice' cycle. I wonder if steering them towards choices from a selection of appropriately leveled texts would be a good intermediate step. I did witness during this research cycle, that as soon as some students began gathering information from books on their own, the 'copying lines' habit began again almost immediately.

How can we tell when metacognitive habits have begun to stick?

During this process, I have asked students to make many internal habits externally apparent, by having students read and summarize aloud, underline words and write and ask questions. When students are sent off on their own, these habits become harder to see. How can we tell if they are reading carefully enough to pull meaning from a text? I imagine evidence may come in the form of the questions they ask, in their writing after reading (if they make connections, synthesize information) or in their ability to talk about a text they have read. Finally, if annotating readings becomes a habit, this can be great evidence of thinking on paper.

IN CONCLUSION...

"Memory is the residue of thought" (p. 42). This simple line from Willingham's (2009) book has deeply affected how I think about teaching. I see its importance in all parts of our classroom, including reading. If we want our students to remember what they read, they must be thinking as they read. As teachers, we have the job to help our students develop the habits to interact with texts in a thoughtful way, or it is likely that they will choose the easier and quicker route. When all is said and done, "If you don't pay attention to something, you can't learn it!" (Willingham, p. 43).

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