

From Sketchnotes to Think-Alouds: Addressing the Challenges of Social Studies Text

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As our students enter the classroom, they come with a wide range of experiences with text. Even those students who love to read can experience difficulty when they engage with informational texts in social studies. Why is it that our primary students who can easily read and talk about Barbara Park’s *Junie B. Jones* chapter books, and even older students who can retell by heart the storyline of their favorite Roald Dahl’s book, struggle with informational texts encountered in social studies?

First of all, we have to consider the types of texts with which our students have experience. Poetry, fiction, and even historical fiction are very different from the informational social studies text we use with our students.¹ In fact, the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards² emphasizes the literacy skills demanded by social studies. Students who walk through our classroom doors may not have a great deal of experience with informational text written on social studies topics, and this experience is critical for building vocabulary, evaluating sources, strengthening social studies knowledge, and being prepared for civic life.

This article offers five methods that teachers can use to help students successfully learn to navigate informational text so that they can deepen their social studies knowledge. Each method addresses challenges that our elementary students experience as they engage with informational text tied to social studies.

1. Approaching Text and Graphics to Gain Information

A key difference between informational social studies text and other text is the way the reader must approach it. When students approach fictional text, they are often reading for enjoyment and want to become part of the story experience (aesthetic reading).³ There’s nothing like seeing goose bumps on a student’s arm as a scary story is read or watching a student try to stifle a laugh while reading a humorous book. We all enjoy seeing our students read aesthetically, but that stance won’t work with informational text on “Indians of the Woodlands,” pollution sources, or even land forms.

In fact, texts students encounter in social studies are full of information that students must read critically and remember. Therefore, our students need to realize that reading to take

away information (efferent reading)⁴ requires a very different approach than they typically use when reading to become part of the story experience. By getting our students to approach social studies texts with an efferent stance, we can strengthen their social studies content knowledge.

One strategy that can help our students better understand how to approach informational text is a think-aloud.⁵ While a think-aloud is a common strategy to use with fictional text in language arts, it can be just as useful, if not more effective, with informational text. According to a third grade teacher, students need lots of modeling so that they know “how to read text with a lot of words on the page and pull out the important information.” She feels as if her use of think-alouds in social studies is helping her students better understand the dense text.

With a think-aloud, teachers orally explain their thinking as they read a short passage in a text. The think-aloud serves as a model of how a “good” reader reads a text. Here are a few suggestions for using a think-aloud with informational social studies text:

- Choose an informational text that ties to a unit of study. Think about how students will need to approach the text in order to read it efferently. Read aloud the title, skim the table of contents if available, talk aloud about what you are thinking as you get ready to begin reading the text.
- Consider reading aloud the About the Author section in a book, and explain why this section gives you confidence (or lack of confidence) in the author’s knowledge of the topic.
- As you read, demonstrate how you monitor your comprehension. If something doesn’t make sense or sound correct, note how you can cross-check information that is in the book. If loaded language is used, point out how it makes you, the reader, wonder whether the author is trying to force you to think a certain way rather than using reason and persuasion.
- Model how graphics (e.g., maps, tables, timelines, photos,

and art such as drawings or full-color pictures) in the text help you better understand the information in the chapter. Often students skip over graphics on a page, not realizing their importance.⁶ Research, however, emphasizes the important role that images and graphics play in comprehending content as we read.⁷

There's no cookbook formula for the perfect think-aloud. Modify the social studies think-aloud to meet the needs of your students. In some more advanced classes, only a small group of struggling students may really need the experience of a think-aloud. You might also consider having some of the upper elementary students "model their thinking" for primary students. Regardless of how it is used, a think-aloud is an excellent opportunity to model how to approach a social studies informational text in the most beneficial manner.

2. Documenting Key Information

Along with understanding how to approach informational text, students must be able to document important information. Few of us would dream of curling up on the couch with a romance novel or a mystery and then reaching for a pen and piece of paper or grabbing a highlighter out of our pocket to note important points. However, students at all grade levels need to be aware that social studies text is dense. The text will contain many important points, and they will need a way to document that information. Explicitly teaching note taking is important and has been shown to be even more valuable for struggling readers.⁸ Both writing or taking visual notes about what students read can reinforce the information in texts.

With third grade and older, we can often use the two-column notes, or Cornell notes.⁹ Through this strategy, students write notes throughout the reading. Typically, students write key information from the text in the left column, and write their personal response to the material in the right column. While this type of note taking is popular with more advanced readers and writers, it is becoming more and more common to also teach elementary students to take visual notes.

With even very young students in grades k-1, we can introduce "sketchnoting"¹⁰ as a way for readers to create visuals to help them remember important information and see relationships between concepts. Through research, we know that the act of drawing can help students retain content information, so explicitly teaching students to take sketchnotes can be a valuable use of time.¹¹

- Begin by selecting a short informational social studies text to use.
- Emphasize that students can use color words, symbols, and pictures to show meaning and relationships between ideas.
- Read through the text and pause at points to sketch symbols

and pictures of important information.

- Discuss your finished sketchnote with the class.
- Ask students to create a sketchnote on an informational text and to share their drawing with peers.

A first-grade teacher chose to help a struggling reader comprehend the meaning of urban and rural through sketchnoting. The teacher began by having the child skim through the headings, pictures, and other text features of two short digital texts on rural and urban life so that the child could talk about the important information she would likely find in the texts. As the student read through each text stopping at key points, she documented what she was reading/learning in visual sketches.

Figure 1 and 2 shows the student's completed sketchnotes.



Figure 1. A student's sketchnotes.

Through the talking and drawing, the teacher feels the child better understands the text and retains more information. While the child typically has a great deal of difficulty remembering basic terms and information she reads, even after time passed, the child could talk about details regarding urban and rural life. Sketchnoting is not just for young children, but it can be an especially useful form of note taking for children still working on writing connected text.

Take time to introduce various types of note taking to students and when possible, offer them the choice of how they

want to take notes. Through this process, our students learn to document important information and reinforce the content in the text. Offering choice can also serve as a point of discussion if students try a specific type of note taking and realize that perhaps a different type of note taking might have helped them to better remember the information. The ability to reflect on their learning and make decisions about how they best learn is a valuable activity and can impact future social studies learning.

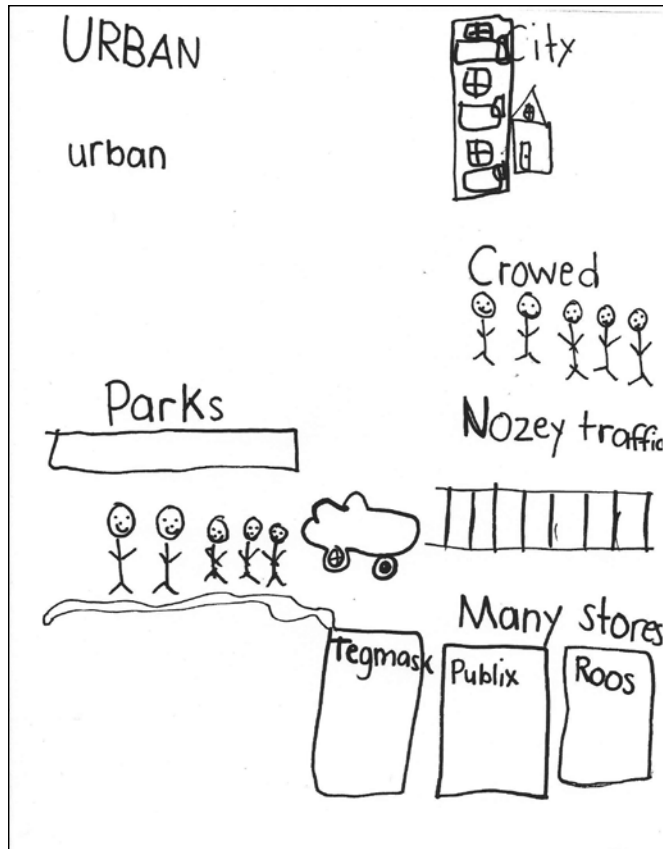


Figure 2. A student's sketchnotes.

3. Comparing Information from Multiple Sources

With social studies topics, it's important to be able to compare information that comes from multiple sources. Dimension 3 of the C3 Framework refers specifically to the necessity of students being able to evaluate and use evidence that they find. Through the use of an I-Chart, (inquiry chart), even our k-1 students can learn to record information from diverse texts on a topic.¹²

While upper elementary students might record their information on individual I-charts, primary students can be introduced to the strategy by completing one on a large sheet of butcher paper.

- Teachers of k-1 students can find several diverse sources on a social studies topic under study and present these to students. Teachers of grade 3–6 students may ask students to find their own sources to use. (Regardless of age, encourage students to use diverse texts such as the class textbook, an informational trade book, and a digital text.)

- Make columns down a piece of paper corresponding to the number of questions students want to answer, and list each question to answer about the topic at the top of each column.
- Brainstorm with students at least three sources that could be consulted, and create a row for each source down the left side of the paper. There may not be answers for every question from every source, but students can list any information they find in the correct row and column.
- As a class, compare and contrast information students find within the various texts.

While an I-chart can serve as a way to compare multiple sources of text and introduce diverse texts, it can also help students to understand that everything in print is not accurate, and that different sources will provide different perspectives. As we use more and more technology in the classrooms, it is easier and easier for authors to “publish” material online. As students encounter “facts” that conflict in multiple sources, talk about what can be done to determine whether or not a source is accurate. Model through a think-aloud, as discussed earlier, on how to analyze author credentials and the website on which information is posted.

4. Using Text Features to Unlock Information

Informational texts also contain unique text features that students often don't see in fictional text. Think about the chapter headings, subheadings, glossaries, table of contents, highlighted terms, side notes, and other features that students encounter in social studies text. If students just read through the text ignoring these features, then students aren't benefiting from them. Authors use text features for a purpose. They help readers to successfully navigate through the text so that they can more easily understand the information. We have to help students realize the potential that exists within text features:

- With k-1 students, start by sharing both a fictional text and an informational social studies text and going through the texts as a class in order to compare the differences and similarities between the texts. Older students can work together in small groups to find the text features in a passage of digital or print text.
- Brainstorm a list of the unique features students find in social studies text. **Figure 3** shows some text features that might be mentioned.
- Ask students to orally share the purpose of the different features they find. Are some features more common in social studies texts than others? Why is this? Get students to think about the use of text features, and encourage the use of text features in their own future writing.

Figure 3. **Examples of Text Features Commonly Found in Social Studies Text**

Afterward	Electronic Menu	Map and Key
Appendix	Flowchart	Page Number
Author's Acknowledgment	Fonts (Bold, Italics)	Photos/ Drawings
Caption- Photo/Picture	Further Readings and Websites	Pronunciation Guide
Chapter Headings/ Subheadings	Glossary	Sidebar
Chapter Title	Graph/Chart	Table of Contents
Colored Print	Hyperlink	Table
Copyright Page	Icons	Timeline
Diagram and Labels	Index	Title Page

5. Recognizing the Importance of Academic Vocabulary

Think about the terms students encounter in a chapter of a favorite fictional text they read for enjoyment, and compare those to the terms they encounter in a chapter of a social studies text. The difference in vocabulary the reader is expected to know is often very great. Perhaps students are reading about geography and see terms such as “hemisphere,” “equator,” “meridian,” or “latitude.” Maybe they are learning about the Native Americans and encounter “coup stick” or “travois.” How many of these terms will our students already know or encounter in daily living? Our students are going to encounter many terms in social studies text that will impact their ability to understand the content.

Consider using a list-group-label¹³ as a pre-reading strategy (to introduce terms and build prior knowledge) or as a post-reading strategy (to review terms and assess student understanding).

- Introduce the social studies topic, and have students brainstorm 25 terms they think of when they hear the topic.
- List the words on the board, and then read through the words and discuss the terms so all students can hear the words, say them, and have a general understanding of them.
- Divide the class into small groups of students, and ask each group to place the 25 listed terms into smaller groups of three-to-five words. The students can create any group of terms as long as they have a descriptive title for the category. Terms may also be in more than one group of words.

Through this strategy, students expand their knowledge about the terms and see relationships between terms. In fact, if students put more than five words in a group, I ask them to refine the title for that group of terms so that only three to five of the words on the list fit in the group. The goal is for students to place each of the 25 words in one or more of the word groups. After students complete the strategy, let each group of students share their favorite category.

Students can further reinforce their new vocabulary knowledge through the creation of “word clouds.” Students can type—in a cluster—terms from a text they write about on a social studies topic, or they can create a word cloud at the end of a unit using all of the terms they have learned about a topic. One upper elementary teacher stated that she only allowed students to include words in a word cloud if they could define each word. After creating the word cloud, students shared their word clouds with a partner who could ask their partner questions about the terms. **Figure 4** contains free websites and ipad apps that students can use to create word clouds.

Figure 4. **Examples of Free Websites and Ipad Apps for Creating Word Clouds**

Websites:	
ABCya! Word Clouds	www.abcya.com/word_clouds.htm
TagCrowd	tagcrowd.com/
Wordle	www.wordle.net/
Tagxedo	www.tagxedo.com/
Tricklar	tricklar.com/cloudgenerator
WordClouds	www.wordclouds.com/
WordItOut	worditout.com/
Wordart (formerly called Tagul)	wordart.com/
Ipad Apps:	
Tag Cloud	Visual Poetry
Cloudart	Wordsalad

Consider having students create a word cloud at the beginning of a social studies unit and again at the end of the unit to show their growth in vocabulary knowledge.

In Conclusion

Regardless of the grade we teach, our students need to be able to access social studies content found within the texts we use in our classrooms. Our elementary students not only need to know the best way to approach the texts, but also to be aware of how to document the information they encounter and strengthen their vocabulary. Since the informational text we use in social studies is unique, we can't expect our students to automatically read and comprehend the text without teaching them specific strategies. As teachers, we must not only be aware of the challenges social studies text presents, but also provide our students with strategies to address those challenges. 🌐

Notes

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