

How to tackle Informational Text on the STAAR Reading Test

Teaching nonfiction traditionally focuses on teaching students to ascertain the main ideas and supporting details of the text. To do this well, students learn how to select certain features and delete and ignore others. Teachers, however, have learned that determining main ideas is not easy for children.

We teach students to find the topic sentence and that is often the first or last sentence...but not always. We say that nonfiction writers use writing structures to convey ideas and concepts such as cause and effect or description among others. We say that writers of nonfiction often use more than one structure when writing about a topic that is of interest to them. But... do we connect these teaching strategies to how students are tested for nonfiction on the STAAR Reading Test?

This paper offers teaching structures, strategies, and ideas that are directly connected to teaching nonfiction as it is tested on the STAAR Reading Test. The STAAR tests informational text and narrative nonfiction.

The 5WH Strategy

Teach students to ask these questions when reading: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. Teaching students to identify these elements seems simple and straight forward. Not so. Students often find ways to ignore the 5WH strategy. The main reasons are that they are distracted or actually become anxious when they are confronted by titles of selections found on the STAAR test that are unfamiliar and/or daunting. Also, some titles are misleading. Students can immediately be traumatized or misdirected because they must read a text that they know nothing about. Moreover, some selections actually begin with confusing introductions that further exacerbates the student's entry into the reading.

For example, on the 2018 third grade test one of the informational selections was entitled *Star Parties*. The opening paragraph reads as follows:

As cars travel on the long road up the hill, their drivers shut off the headlights. Passengers jump out, chattering excitedly. They walk slowly to join the crowd on the hill. All around, the land is quiet and dark. No streetlights or house lights glow. Everyone gazes up at the night sky. This is a star party.

The title suggests to many students that the text is about movie or music stars having a parties. Uninformative and misleading? You bet!.In this instance, the opening paragraph created a reading dissonance that is often difficult for students to overcome.

The second paragraph in the selection is much more explicit and contains the information that helps students quickly get the gist of the selection. This information is the “Jump Out” information needed to make sense of the topic.

The “Jump Out”

The first strategy to teach students before applying the 5WH strategy is to teach them to relax because somewhere in the selection is a “Jump Out” sentence, paragraph, or section that conveys the information needed to understand the topic. The information they need will generally be presented in a way that “jumps out” to the reader. Students must first locate the jump out then reread from the beginning to make sense of the selection.

Teaching Moves Before Reading

The first move is to search for clues in the text. Title, heads, graphics tell a story that help build background knowledge. Carefully model how to find and think about the clues.

Next, demonstrate with a think-aloud, how to find the jump out sentence.

The informational text selections found on the STAAR Reading Text are of two types: those with heads and subheads and those without.

Informational Text With Heads and Subheads

Begin teaching the 5WH strategy with selections that have heads or subheads. Teach students to convert the title and heads into questions using one of the 5WH stems. For example, for the title of *Star Parties teachers model by asking* “What is a Star Party?” then read to find the jump out. Each subsequent section is also converted to a question and answered. This strategy is generally learned fairly quickly by students and can be taught as a whole class lesson using STAAR Test Selections. Some students will need more work in small group.

Informational Text without heads or subheads

Teach using 5WH for selections without heads after students have shown you that they understand how to apply the strategy with selections that have heads. This work is more challenging. Teach students to apply the same questioning process using the 5Ws and H as they move through the text. Teach note taking when they have found answers to their questions. Notes should be short and in students own language not copying verbatim from the text.

Teach students to have confidence that text without heads is often organized along the 5WH structure. As they read, they must learn to group the paragraphs into sections using 5WH as a guide.

Text Structure

Most STAAR nonfiction selections are “chunked” in sections of 2-3 paragraphs. And, many, but not all, STAAR informational selections follow a progression.

The paragraphs in the initial section of the selection answers how, when, or why questions about the event or discovery-sometimes all of these questions are answered. Accordingly, teach students that more than one question may be answered in a section of the text. They need to be alert for any or all of these.

How questions are generally addressed in middle sections. Specifically, How things evolved or changed and Why.

The final sections bring things up to date.

Model how the structure works and the type of questions that may be answered.