

Social Studies Literacy Q & A

1. I do not teach English, and students in my classroom already know how to read and write (or they should). Why should I focus on these things when it is not my content area?

There are a number of reasons for teaching students to read and write in Social Studies. Here are just a few:

- a) **Experts in history, economics, geography, civics, and so on, read and write.** Think about the job of a practicing historian for example. She searches for, reads, and analyzes documents and artifacts such as political cartoons, artwork, and advertisements, reads the work of other historians, interviews key informants, and writes a version of history created through her analysis. She engages in this work based upon her knowledge of certain principles of historiography gained through reading. The economist develops his theoretical approach to the economy and his knowledge of the field through reading. He uses quantitative literacy in order to make sense of past and current trends. Experts in the social studies, indeed, spend almost 100% of their time reading and writing. It makes little sense, then, to refrain from teaching students the reading and writing that is necessary to enter those disciplines.
- b) **Reading and writing in the social studies is different than reading and writing in English or in the sciences.** Studies of the way historians read help us to understand that experts in the social studies have unique ways of approaching text. Historians engage in three processes that students frequently fail to use: sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating. Sourcing refers to evaluating the credibility of the author and the source of a piece of text (e.g. newspaper editorial, magazine, book). The process of contextualization includes determining the political, social, economic, etc. conditions of the time when the text was written. Corroboration describes the act of determining the extent of agreement and disagreement between a specific text and other texts. Historians use these processes regardless of whether they are reading a textbook or an original source document, reading each text as an argument. The way historians read is very different from the way a mathematician reads. A mathematician doesn't necessarily engage in any of these processes, but reads largely for accuracy and clarity. The different fields encompassed by the social studies each have unique ways of creating, sharing, and evaluating information. One can't expect someone who is an expert in English to have the disciplinary knowledge of a historian, economist, political scientist, geographer, or sociologist. Thus, one can't expect the English teacher to be able to help students understand what is important in their history, economics, civics, or geography texts. The English teacher just doesn't know what counts. And teaching students what counts—what to pay attention to in text, is the kind of literacy teaching social studies teachers should be doing.

Historians engage in three processes that students frequently fail to use: sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating.

- c) **Students who can engage in the rich reading of social studies texts are more likely to know how to engage in informed citizenry.** Even if students do not wish to become historians or economists, many of the processes used in reading in these disciplines are key to being an informed citizen. Think about the election process, for example. Citizens are bombarded with messages about candidates and issues. These messages often conflict, as they come from individuals and groups that represent different perspectives, and making sense of these messages means taking into account the source, the context and how they agree and disagree. It also helps that individuals know something about fields like economics and political science: these provide an interpretive lens that takes into account the context.

For these reasons and others, it is important to teach students to read social studies—not to read generally or to read literature, but to engage in disciplinary reading. That kind of reading requires specific instruction, and social studies teachers are the ones who are primed to provide it.

2. How do I fit literacy instruction and the use of literacy strategies into my daily instruction when I do not have enough time, as it is, to cover my content?

Social studies teachers often wonder how they can have enough time to cover the content *and* literacy strategies. The social studies curriculum is jam-packed with content, the texts are difficult, and it is tough enough to get through the content without adding additional instruction.

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Nonetheless, teaching literacy strategies up front can actually help content coverage in the long run. If students know how to read a text and apply strategies independently (the ultimate goal of strategy instruction), then they can independently read about content that a teacher would have to present in

some other way more arduously and with the likelihood that it will not really be learned, *just covered*. There is plenty of evidence that reading and writing aid memory and learning. In addition, teaching students how to read social studies is not the same as teaching students how to read in general. The time spent teaching students how to comprehend, remember, and think about the ideas in social studies text *is* time spent teaching students to understand social studies. Finally, if the social studies are taught through reading and writing activities, it is more likely that your students will be able to demonstrate their knowledge on the written tests they are required to take in order to demonstrate achievement.

3. In regards to reading, writing, and word learning in social studies, what kinds of texts should students read in my class?

Texts to Read

Social studies and history textbooks draw from areas such as economics, psychology, sociology, civics and government, and history. The characteristics of these disciplines help to determine the kinds of texts that students should read. For example, historians rely on a wide range of texts—from original source documents such as letters, books, photographs, paintings, interviews, first-person accounts, and newspapers from the time period—to the books written by historians that rely on the analysis of the documents (sometimes referred to as secondary sources)—to the syntheses of common interpretations found in textbooks (sometimes referred to as tertiary sources). Involving students in reading the range of texts that historians read helps them to understand what historiography is—an interpretive field that relies on evidence gathered and analyzed after an event has happened. Economists read primary documents (such as the separate figures that make up the GNP, crop yields in 1872, the number of dollars devoted to health care, or the writings of important current and past economists), interpretations of economic history (such as books about the 1929 stock market crash), and modern textbooks explicating various theories of economics or describing past and current economic policies. As with history, the range of texts read by students should reflect the range of texts read by economists. The same is true of the other social sciences. The texts that students read, however, won't be as long (they may even be excerpts), or as technical as those read by experts. They will be used to illustrate in a strategic way the kind of activity in which experts engage.

Texts to Write

Students should be taught to write in the various genres used to communicate information in the social sciences. Historians, for example, write arguments for particular interpretations of history, they write descriptions of people, places, events, and policies based upon their interpretations. They refute common interpretations based upon new evidence, and so on. They discuss the significance of certain critical events that have broad-based or important effects. They speculate on the causes of critical events. Political scientists write descriptions and analyses of the workings of government. They analyze political actions. Students should practice writing these kinds of texts.

Words to Learn

We can think of vocabulary in Social Studies as being technical, general, and specific. Technical terms are those terms that have specific discipline-based meanings. Some of the terms also have general meanings that are different than their technical meanings, and these words can be troublesome if students don't understand the difference between the general and technical terms (e.g. the term "bear" means something different if it is referring to a type of market than if it is referring to an animal in the wilderness or if it describes what one must do with a burden). General words are necessary to learn if they are used to help students understand the technical terms. For example, "stabilization" in the phrase "stabilization of interest rates" is a general term that needs to be understood to fully understand interest rates. Specific terms are those that describe particularized elements of a field. In history, D-Day, General Eisenhower, and Potsdam are specific terms.

The answer to what kind of vocabulary students should be learning is complicated by the nature of the disciplines themselves. History textbooks rely less on technical terms than do other texts such as those in civics and government, sociology, psychology, or economics. Yet, they also use quite a few difficult general and specific terms. If the general term “conflagration” is used to describe a war-like incident, it can cause

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comprehension problems if it is not understood. It is a good idea, then, to teach students the most important technical terms, the general terms that are critical to understanding the key ideas or technical terms, and the specific terms that describe people, places, events, policies, legislation that are part of the curriculum. The other fields of the social studies use more technical terms, so they should be emphasized more. However, the same is true of the general terms in these fields. If they are needed to fully understand the concepts, they should be taught as well.

Because there are so many words to learn, teachers need to focus on fully teaching only the most important ones. They need to provide sufficient practice and review (multiple exposures to words are important). And, they need to provide students with strategies for grouping the words in meaningful units. For example, “bicameral,” “legislature,” “senate,” “house” can all be grouped together with other words that help explain legislative structures and processes. Memory experts say that grouping words in these ways can help students remember what the words mean.

4. What literacy skills (or learning strategies related to literacy) are essential for students to learn in social studies classrooms?

The instructional literacy strategies described in the Content Area Literacy Guide can be applied to the social studies. These strategies will be somewhat modified based upon what discipline is being taught. For example, all students need to learn the strategy of note taking. In the two-column notetaking strategy, a history teacher might assign key words to be put into the first column that represent important events, people, places, policies, and so on. Students might write items such as descriptions of events and policies, causes and effects of events, and summaries of significance in the second column. In sociology, the key words might be technical vocabulary such as the names of different social theories or societal structures. The graphic organizer is another useful strategy. Graphic organizers used in a civics class might show the relationships among the various branches of the government or a flow chart representing the steps that must take place when a bill is introduced to Congress. The Discussion Web is another. When there is disagreement about a historical interpretation, students would benefit from engaging in a discussion-web. Technical terms in economics class might be understood using the Frayer model. The power strategies described in this guide will help students to engage with the text in meaningful ways, but it will be up to the social studies teacher to decide how they might best be used for their particular curriculum.

Social studies teachers should also think about teaching their students the reading and thinking habits that are unique to the discipline. For example, through analysis, historians create connections among events and describe these in statements about cause and effect. Students can be taught to do the same. That is, they can read about two or more events, take notes on the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why* of each event, then write down what they think the connection among them is. The hypothesized connections can then become part of a discussion about cause and effect. Also, students can make comparison/contrast charts that compare several texts on their stance regarding an event about which there is some dispute. Regarding the Tonkin Gulf Incident of the Vietnam Conflict, for example, historians argue about whether President Johnson was entirely honest with Congress about the gravity of the incident or whether he kept the event shrouded in mystery to get Congress to pass legislation allowing him to escalate the conflict without a declaration of war. Students can read different texts to answer a question from their viewpoints posed about President Johnson's actions, and then decide which version of history to believe based upon an evaluation of the credibility of the sources and the context in which the texts were written.

Sociologists try to make some sense of the behavior of groups of people by applying a theoretical lens to the behavior. That is, a functionalist might look at a particular incident and explain it in terms of what the incident helps society accomplish. A conflict-oriented sociologist might look at the same incident and explain it in terms of who retains the power and who is subjugated. These lenses can be the focus of rich discussions as students read.

It is also important to share with students how experts create, share, and evaluate information in their field. That is because experts approach new information with particular frameworks regarding what is important and what counts as credible, and they read within these particular frameworks. In many cases, experts in the social sciences build new knowledge based upon their interpretation of evidence that is collected after the fact rather than based upon experimentation or scientific method. Thus, the level of confidence they have in that knowledge is always tempered by the credibility of the interpretation. For that reason, experts in the social sciences approach all text more critically than hard scientists might. Students who know that can begin to understand that part of their job in reading is to think about credibility.

5. Many of my students lack sufficient literacy skills to adequately complete the content area work in social studies; other students have very advanced skills. How do I differentiate instruction in my classroom when students have such a disparate range of literacy skills?

Differentiation is a key concept in adolescent literacy because the range of reading ability among students in any one class may be quite high—with some students reading several years below grade level and others reading at the college level, with some students struggling with English as a second language, and with some students categorized as learning disabled or ADD.

Teachers can differentiate along four dimensions. (a) They can increase the *amount* of instructional time spent with students who are reading below grade level. (b) They can provide reading *content* that capitalizes on students' background knowledge or that is more familiar to

the students who struggle. (c) They can vary the intensity of instruction so that students who struggle are asked to dig deeper into instruction (more work with word meanings, for example). (d) They can vary the level of instruction so that students who are below grade level are reading easier materials. Each of these ways to vary instruction can be quite time-consuming and problematic for teachers. However, those needing more instruction benefit greatly. Below are some ways to think about altering instruction regarding social studies texts.

- a) Have students who struggle read an easier “anchor text” prior to reading the targeted text. This “anchor text” can help to provide them with background knowledge and introduce them to key vocabulary that will help them interpret the harder text.
- b) Set up cooperative grouping structures or *buddy reading* that would allow students who are weaker readers to be supported in their reading by a better reader.
- c) Use one of the on-line translation sites to translate text to a student’s primary language.
- d) Pre-teach vocabulary making sure that students connect the words they are learning to their own lives with relevant examples.
- e) Let students read different texts on the same topics, some easier and some more difficult, and teach others about what they read (through jigsaw or some other technique).
- f) Teach students reading strategies.
- g) Employ the help of the reading specialist, ELL or special education teacher to provide extra instructional time and support in reading the texts you assign.

Teachers might be surprised that students can read more difficult texts with support—with more intense instruction in how to read them. Learning to approach texts within a particular disciplinary lens and intensifying vocabulary instruction can help students read at higher instructional levels.

6. I know word learning and vocabulary instruction are important in social studies. What words should I focus on to teach and support? What strategies work the best?

In social studies, I recommend that teachers teach the most important technical vocabulary (words and phrases with meanings that are used in the discipline such as *bicameral*, *bear market*, *matrilineal*, and *détente*); the most important general vocabulary that help students understand the concepts (words such as *animosity* or *conflagration* that students are likely to see often in relationship to key concepts) and specific vocabulary (words and phrases that are names of particular people, places, events, policies, etc., such as *Black Thursday*, *The Gilded Age*, or *Eisenhower*). Note that, in history, specific vocabulary is often dated and is metaphorical in nature. *Gilded*, for example, is not a term that students would be expected to know in modern times, and *The Gilded Age* was called *gilded* based upon someone’s interpretation of the era as seeming well-off, but in reality, only superficially so. These kinds of words will be confusing to students unless they are taught.

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How should vocabulary be taught? Students need multiple exposures to words that are key to understanding a particular discipline. In addition, in order for students to truly understand the key

concepts, they must have more than a superficial understanding of the vocabulary. Merely memorizing a definition will not do. Students should be able to discuss a word's meaning, true, but they should also be able to provide examples, group the word with other related terms and discuss the similarities and differences among them, generate their own text in which they use the word correctly, and so on. This level of knowledge is built up over time, so teachers need to introduce opportunities for review. Students can use strategies such as the Frayer Model or the Three-Entry Vocabulary Journal to make sense of the key words.

As students advance through the grades, more nuanced understandings of the meaning of words are important. I teach students that even synonyms differ in their connotations. One can be more positive than another, for example: *détente* is more positive than *cease-fire*. One can be stronger than another: *War* is stronger than *conflict*. One can be more active than another: *retaliation* is more active than *disagreement*. When words are discussed, these distinctions can help students gain deeper understandings of the words they encounter.

Teaching students to pay attention to the connotation of key words also helps students engage in critique. Exploring why authors use certain words is an important aspect of what it means to read in the social studies, especially in history, as it helps students to evaluate the credibility of sources.

7. How often should I use literacy strategies? In other words, should I use a before, during, and after reading strategy in every single social studies lesson?

One of the points about teaching students literacy strategies is that students are to be taught to use them independently. This independence won't develop, however, after one lesson, and it won't happen unless students become part of the decision making process about what strategies would be most appropriate for what lessons. So, to answer the question, I do think that all reading lessons should be accompanied by *Before*, *During*, and *After* strategies; but, as students gain practice in using the strategies, the instruction will become focused on reminding students of the strategies they already know and helping them to use those strategies with new content. Further on, the instruction will become focused on helping students make their own decisions about which strategies they will use and to think through the possible implications of their decisions.

8. What kinds of questions should I ask students when I teach social studies concepts?

There are several classification systems for questions.

In QAR, questions are classified by where students have to find the answer (right there; think and search; the author and me; on my own). Others classify questions as literal (right there questions) inferential (requiring some searching and thinking) and applied (on my own).

Bloom's taxonomy of questions specifies six levels: Knowledge (recall level); Comprehension (summarizing, interpreting, inferring, etc.); Application (illustrating, showing, using, etc.)

Analysis (seeing patterns, organizing, seeing hidden meanings, etc.; Synthesis (pulling together information from several areas, drawing conclusions, making generalizations, etc.); and Evaluation (assessing credibility, discriminating among ideas, making choices based upon reasoned arguments, etc.).

Depending upon which grade levels are being taught, social studies teachers may choose one classification system over another. The most important thing, however, is that students must understand social science at all of the levels. Students do need to understand the “facts” of history or economics or political science, but they must also be able to think like historians or economists or political scientists, and that means that they engage in higher-level thinking using analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Let’s take an example from history. If the Vietnam Conflict is a topic of study, it is, indeed, important to understand what historians know about the Tonkin Gulf Incident. However, historians disagree on some of the details about what took place and they also disagree about the motivations of the President and his advisors, some saying that he acted in good faith based upon the knowledge he had; others say he misled Congress about the details of the incident in order to enlarge the conflict. Different history textbooks might portray the incident differently, and historians argue that a full understanding of the incident must take into account an evaluation of the author’s stance. So, not only do questions like the following need to be asked: *What is the Tonkin Gulf Incident, and What actions or ideas are significant?*, questions like the following are also important: *What viewpoints are left out?; Are the sequence of events and their relationships agreed upon by other historians?*

9. Do I need to use different strategies for boys and girls?

We do know that, in general, boys particularly benefit from active engagement. Thus, strategies are useful to them because they require active engagement in doing something before, during, and after reading rather than passively sitting and reflecting. That doesn’t mean that strategies

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aren’t useful to girls...it just means that it may be even more critical for boys than it is for girls to engage in strategies, although it is

critical for both groups. There is also some research that suggests that boys can intimidate girls when doing group work and when classes engage in orally debating or arguing a particular viewpoint. Different classes have different characteristics, however, and the teacher is perhaps the best one to determine if some modification in lessons is called for. Argumentation is an important form of communication among discipline experts in the social studies; thus, both boys and girls need to learn argumentation within its disciplinary constraints. But argumentation can be written rather than oral, girls can engage in argumentation with other girls rather than boys, or other modifications can be made to account for disparities due to gender.

10. How does the use of literacy strategies relate to learning styles? In other words, what strategies lend themselves well to different styles of learning?

I know of no research that validates the notion that teaching students strategies based upon their learning styles is effective. The problem is that reading and writing require the whole range of sensory data and both sides of the brain. To truly understand and think about what is read, students need to understand and imagine, they need to take in visual input and make connections to auditory output. They must visualize, manipulate, and organize information.

Some students on their way to using strategies independently may prefer certain strategies, and they should be able to make choices about the strategies they use given certain constraints. If the strategy is helping a student understand and think about the information at an appropriate level of sophistication, then the choice of strategy is probably appropriate as well. In other words, I don't think teachers should get too concerned about learning styles.

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11. On average, how much time should students spend in the act of reading and writing in a typical class in my social studies classroom?

I have a fairly broad definition of reading and writing that includes the reading of political cartoons, writing notes, interpreting film, completing projects, doing research and so on. Given that definition, all of the time students spend in a typical social studies classroom should be spent either on reading and writing or on the discussions surrounding reading and writing. Perhaps a more pointed question would be, "How much time should teachers spend teaching literacy strategies in a typical social studies classroom?" The answer to that question is, "as long as it takes for students to use a strategy independently." When a strategy is first introduced, the teacher will have to model it, provide some group practice and feedback, provide independent practice and feedback, and show how the strategy could be applied to new content. Modeling

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and provided guided group practice may consume more than one class period—especially if the strategy is complex and if students have difficulty. However, the independent practice students engage in will also be helping them to learn the

content as well, and so the instructional time serves a dual purpose. Not only does the student learn a strategy for dealing with the content, but they also learn the content. The National Reading Panel Report of literacy strategy instruction reviewed experimental and quasi-experimental studies showing that strategy instruction helped students learn and think about the content. These studies showing effectiveness did not try to teach students strategies in a single lesson, however. Rather, they taught a strategy over weeks and even months in multiple contexts. Teachers should understand this point and make sure that students are being taught to use strategies, not just assigning strategies to use.

12. Many strategies appear to support the needs of struggling readers and writers; what strategies work best for advanced students in social studies?

Power strategies or “across the curriculum strategies” are great in supporting the needs of struggling readers and writers. With more advanced students in the social studies, however, a teacher might rely more on discipline-based strategies. That is, he or she might focus on strategies that may not be appropriate for other disciplines, but are appropriate in engaging students in thinking like a historian or an economist or a political scientist. For example, a discipline-based strategy in history might be a history reading events chart where students must decide on the connections among several related events and write their own “histories” that insert those connections. In a psychology course, a discipline-based strategy might be to complete a guided critique of a study a psychologist has performed demonstrating an aspect of human behavior.

Not all strategies need to be discipline specific for advanced students, however. Marking the text is an appropriate strategy for any discipline-based reading. The marking system changes, though, depending upon the discipline, and more advanced readers might be helped to design their own specific systems for marking. For example, in history, students could be helped to develop a marking system that identifies the author’s expertise, the year in which the text was published, and the venue for the text, then identifies instances in the text that point to the author’s biases. In economics, students might be helped to design a marking system that identifies the connections among the text and the graphics. The point is, the strategy should be in service of the type of learning that needs to take place for deep disciplinary understandings.

13. What strategies or practices work best to motivate and engage students in reading and writing in social studies?

One thing that strategies do is to provide a way for students to become actively engaged in reading and writing. Thus, teaching students to use any appropriate strategy will increase motivation and engagement. Given that, it might be useful to think about what kinds of learning contexts are motivating. Scott Paris and his colleagues have discussed motivating contexts as having the following elements: challenge; choice; control; collaboration; and consequences. That is, students are more motivated when they are appropriately challenged (not frustrated, but not bored either), when they have some choice in what they will do (like a choice in using one strategy over another), some feeling of being in control (like being able to make their own decisions about what to believe); when they engage in collaboration (working with others in meaningful ways so that they are responsible to them) and when they can see that their actions have consequences (they learn more or they spur some action). Teaching students strategies in collaborative environments brings in all of these elements.

14. What are the best and easiest strategies for assessing literacy skills in social studies?

One can find out about how well students read the text at the beginning of the year through a cloze technique where every fifth word in a 100-word passage is deleted, and students supply the

answers. The way to construct the cloze passage and score it is in many of the content area textbooks on the market.

But there are many other ways to assess literacy skills in social studies. One can assess the strategies themselves to see what kind of thinking students are putting into them. For example, if students are doing graphic organizers, the graphic organizers can be evaluated for quality. Also, one can assess literacy skills by the writing that students do. Are students using the key vocabulary in their writing? Are they clearly explaining the key concepts and using examples that show their understanding? Are they organizing the material in a way that shows they understand the relationship among the concepts? One can also assess student discussions. Are students able to summarize information after reading? Can they ask questions that show they know what is important?

A key point to make is that students who read with understanding and thought will be able to do well on the normal assessments a social studies teacher usually gives. I spent many years teaching college students reading and study strategies; and I always ultimately assessed how they were doing on the strategies by giving them a content-based test. So, if they were applying the strategies to history content, they took a history test. The students who were thoughtful in using literacy strategies did well on the tests.

15. What are the best strategies for helping students comprehend visual texts (e.g. charts, maps, graphs, etc.) in social studies?

The role of charts, maps, graphs, photographs, cartoons, paintings, and other visual texts is somewhat dependent upon which of the social studies is being taught. I like to think of the different kinds of relationships that exist between the written text and the visuals. In some instances, the text and the visual are *redundant*. They present the very same information, but in different formats. In some instances, the text and visual are *unrelated*. The visual actually presents new information not existing anywhere in the text. And in some instances, the text and visual are *complementary*. The visual contains new information but it is an extension of what is in the text. These three relationships should be taught to students so that they can know how to process the visual information. If the visual information is redundant, then students can remember the information in either format. If it is unrelated, they need to determine how important the new information is, and may even be able to disregard it. If the visual information is complementary, then students will need to synthesize the visual and textual information. In economics texts, the visuals are more likely to be redundant and complementary rather than unrelated. Sometimes in history texts, however, unrelated visual information is inserted on text pages.

There are instances, too, where visuals are even misleading. For example, if a painting from the time period shows an idealized depiction of a battle scene (a common way of painting battle scenes in the 1800's) then readers who took the painting literally might get a false impression of history. These misleading visuals provide teachers with excellent opportunities for showing students how to question the text.