The Fail-Safe Classroom

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Improving Reading, Writing, and Content Learning

INTRODUCTION

With release of The National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) and the response from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), there has been a renewed focus on literacy learning initially in the primary grades and more recently in Grades 4 through 12. In the primary grades, students are learning to read. In contrast, in Grades 4 through 12, students are expected to read to learn content, and yet there are students who still need to learn to read *and* to read their content texts to access the standards-based curriculum. Many teachers from Grades 4 through 12 are frustrated in their teaching of mathematics, science, social studies, health, technology, and electives since the students have difficulty reading the textbooks, which are often written above grade level. A fourth-grade teacher recently shared with me that she conducted a readability test on the fourth-grade social studies book and found that it was at the tenth-grade level. No wonder the students have such a difficult time!

This issue continues in middle school and high school, where independence in accessing content text is expected to a greater degree. Providing support to address this concern, Biancarosa and Snow (2004) identified a

critical element of effective adolescent literacy programs as "effective instructional principles embedded in content, including language arts teachers using content-area texts and content-area teachers providing instruction and practice in reading and writing skills specific to their subject area" (p. 4). The emphasis on improving reading, writing, and content learning in Grades 4 through 12 and teachers' needs for a doable systematic approach—regardless of grade or subject matter taught—are the focus of this text.

Although some of the examples and strategies found in the text may stretch some paradigms, they are based in research and proven in practice working with teachers in diverse schools. As a result of using the ideas, teachers and students experienced more success on a daily basis, and school data reflect higher student achievement overall.

As an educational community, we have worked toward but not achieved the goal of NCLB of all children reading on grade level by the end of Grade 3, but we are slowly making progress. The Nation's Report Card (www.nationsreportcard.gov) identifies results of the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for both fourth and eighth grades. From 1992 to 2005, nationally the percentage of fourth graders on or above *Basic* did not change significantly, but the percentage performing on or above *Proficient* increased. For eighth graders, there was an increase in the percentage on or above *Basic* and no significant change in the percentage scoring at or above *Proficient.* Exacerbating the lack of significant gain is that from 2003 to 2005, eighth-grade students lost 2 points! The good news is that the average score for White, Black, and Hispanic students increased and the achievement gap between White, Black, and Hispanic students decreased, although during the time period measured numbers of Hispanic students increased. These NAEP data support the sense of urgency for all classrooms in Grades 4 through 12 to support both literacy learning and content learning as much as possible.

There are many excellent teachers who accomplish this expectation every day, and for them, this text should confirm their good work. For others, this text seeks to provide support and guidance and to be a source of reflection for continuous improvement. To begin the journey of creating and reinforcing classrooms that improve reading, writing, and content learning, let's first reflect on excellent classrooms that we have known. These are classrooms where all students seem to thrive. These classrooms are fail-safe: Teachers create the environment and instructional experience for all students to maximize literacy learning and standards-based achievement.

Close your eyes and visualize (use all the senses—see, hear, feel, smell, touch) one of those classrooms.

What did you see in the classroom?

What were students doing?

What did you hear?

How was the classroom organized?

Where was the teacher, and what was the teacher doing?

The one I visualize is a seventh-grade social studies class where students are reading and writing while learning about world cultures—improving all three at the same time.

> There are students all around the room, seemingly doing different things. A few are at their desks writing, trying to resolve something in the text that is puzzling them. Others are using the Internet to research the perceptions of their peers in other countries. Two are in the back of the room practicing a PowerPoint presentation, The Middle-Level Years in Three Different Cultures, which will be shown on the school's closed-circuit television system during the daily announcements. Three just came back into the classroom after reading to younger students the book they had written and illustrated, *Tamales on Christmas.* Five are sitting at a trapezoid table with the teacher, conferencing about their writing and receiving feedback from one another. Students seem happy, even joyful, although their work is at a high level. These students work hard, feel valued, and develop intellectually and socially in a safe, supportive environment where they use the literacy processes and strategies to achieve high levels of thinking.

Jotting down your answers to the questions posed above will help you formalize your ideas of a fail-safe classroom for literacy and content learning. Before the optimally successful classroom for literacy and content learning is developed, we must know what it is and what it is not.

ACADEMICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE TO LEARN

Fail-safe classrooms for literacy development and content learning are academically and psychologically safe. This means that they are supportive of all students working on standards-based meaningful and challenging work; that is, they have equal access to rigor.

Most teachers will describe their classrooms as safe and supportive. Think beyond traditional conceptions of physical safety to "safety to learn." Safe for each student means that each one has equal access to the standards-based curriculum through incorporation of literacy processes and research-based literacy strategies and experiences of the classroom. To achieve such safety, each student must be met where he or she is in the learning continuum (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998) and provided the appropriate support, processes, and instructional resources to grow. Learning is differentiated, with some students getting different kinds of instruction and different instructional resources. This aspect comes from the teacher considering three elements that are essential for creating the community of learners, a condition of the fail-safe classroom. These essential elements are the classroom community, the student, and the text resources.

Classroom Community

Basically, the classroom community is developed through consistent student-centered decisions on the part of the teacher. Eric Jensen (1998) suggests that such classrooms are absent of emotional threat, value relationship building, and have frequent feedback, clear goals, and choices for students. This classroom community makes it psychologically safe to learn. Students do not have the fear of put-downs or being laughed at by either other students or adults in the room. Incorrect answers are seen to be opportunities to think, to clarify, and to support a response rather than a negative response like, "NO!" Teachers who create a community of learners first attend to developing the classroom community and getting to know the students. After those relationships have begun development, the teacher will turn his or her attention to the text to be studied.

Classroom community motivates by including clear goals and by providing reasonable choice for students in assignments and choice in showing how much they have learned. Other evidence of a classroom community is the literacy-rich, print-rich classroom. While some think of print rich as being purchased resources, classroom libraries, and professionally developed print, it also means the display of student work. When a classroom is a community of learners, it is student owned. I can walk into the classroom and immediately know what is being studied by the evidence of student literacy and content learning, displays of student work, and student products.

Student

By the time students reach upper elementary, middle, or high school they display many different levels in their academic and literacy

backgrounds. They have learned or not learned many different vocabularies, concepts, and skills. This is why building common background knowledge for all students is important. Those who know less are well aware of their deficiencies and often feel neither emotionally nor academically safe unless the teacher infuses literacy strategies to scaffold students to success (Graves & Fitzgerald, 2002). Creating success through careful scaffolding develops students' personal motivation to achieve.

Each student's culture and economic status impact background knowledge, vocabulary learning, and life experiences that either accelerate or make difficult comprehension. This is why building background knowledge and explicit vocabulary instruction are essential (Irvin, 1998). Some classrooms embrace only certain cultures and economic backgrounds, but those that are academically and psychologically safe respect and consider as strength the diversity within a learning environment. Creating a safe, supportive environment means that every student feels significant and respected as an individual making progress toward competency as a learner.

Text Resources

Think of the worst teacher you have ever known and picture or visualize (using all your senses) this person in your head. Where did this teacher begin on the first day of school each year, with the classroom community, the student, or the text? You are correct; the worst teachers begin by immediately assigning reading in the text in the name of rigor! In my experience observing teachers for more than 30 years, I have seen that these teachers have lower student achievement and less rigorous evidence of learning than the teachers who begin by getting to know the students and their academic backgrounds and by building the classroom community. As the teacher gets to know the students' backgrounds related to the standards-based content to be learned, he or she will be more strategic in developing appropriate instructional experiences for the students.

When we think about text considerations, we first think about the structure of the text. Good teachers in all grade levels and in all content areas begin with strategically teaching students how to read the text, where to find important information, and how to learn without reading word for word. It is an erroneous assumption that even good students understand text organization as the teacher does. For example, teach the students to read headings, boldfaced words, and sidebars. Essential information is generally found in these areas. Teach students to preview the text before attempting to read the paragraphs. Previewing means to read the titles, headings, and sidebars. It also means to read the pictures, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs (multiple-symbol systems).

Figure 1.1   Community of Learners

Classroom Community	Student	Text
Academic and psychological safety	Background knowledge Vocabulary	Structure
Motivation: Choice, clear goals	Literacy strategies	Vocabulary
Literacy rich Print rich	Personal motivation	Respectful and relevant
Student owned	Culture and economic status	Accessible rigor

Understanding strategies used by each text for introducing vocabulary and assisting with its acquisition are critical to providing access to the content. Each publisher may use a different technique for introducing vocabulary. Most will have key vocabulary highlighted or boldfaced. This helps little in science, where a chapter may have as many as 30 new vocabulary words!

Well-selected texts have relevancy to and respectfulness of students. Historically, many texts have had biases and underrepresented many of our students. Publishers are savvy to the changing student populations, so providing students with respectful, relevant instructional resources is a fairly easy task, but one to be strategically addressed.

Teachers who improve literacy learning provide relevant, respectful texts supplementary to the core text in the content area. Newer editions of literature anthologies, science, and social studies texts have companion texts and support materials for those students who read below grade level. These texts have explicit strategy support for comprehending the rigorous on-grade-level content standards. Providing access to the rigors of a standards-based curriculum begins with creating a community of learners.

NONNEGOTIABLE EXPECTATIONS OF DAILY PRACTICE

Along with creating a community of learners, the fail-safe classrooms incorporate nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice to ensure equal access to both literacy development and content learning. Teachers who are consistent with the expectations of daily practice have positive changes in student achievement regardless of the grade or subject taught.

Figure 1.2   Nonnegotiable Expectations of Daily Practice

- Classroom is print and literacy rich.
- Teacher uses the processes of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, thinking, and communicating with multiple symbol systems.
- Teacher reads to and with students on-grade-level texts.
- Teacher teaches, models, and practices strategies of expert readers and writers with students.
- Students read independently with accountability.

SOURCES: Taylor & Collins, 2003; Taylor & Gunter, 2005.

Nonnegotiable 1: Literacy-Rich and Print-Rich Classrooms

In the description of the academically and psychologically safe classroom, the first nonnegotiable was mentioned: All classrooms are literacy and print rich, at all grade levels, even for seniors! As we move up the grades from elementary to middle years to high school, the concept of literacy and print rich tends to diminish. This lack of literacy- and print-rich materials is consistent with the lower student literacy achievement documented as it declines from elementary to middle school to high school. Literacy and print rich means the classroom reflects the student learning at that time. It is not a bulletin board welcoming students back from their summer break with changes in athletic schedules as the seasons change. Nor is it the elementary classroom with only teacher-made displays of seasons and academic concepts to be studied. In contrast, at all levels the bulletin boards and academic displays are probably student developed or are displays of student work. In other words, these classrooms are print rich—not decorated. For teachers who use more authentic assessment and less pencil-and-paper tests, creating a literacy-rich environment will be natural.

Print rich also means that each classroom has a classroom library reflecting the content learned in the classroom and the reading levels of the students. Ideally, the percentage of books that are nonfiction will reflect the expectation of the standardized assessment: about 50% at the elementary level, about 60% at the middle level, and 70% at the high school level. Excellent nonfiction and informational text can be located on your librarian's professional resource Web sites, state resources like www.Sunlink.com, and publisher Web sites such as www.Scholastic.com.

If you are wondering how you will accomplish obtaining a classroom library, there are several ideas that work. The first is to go to the principal and ask for a budget to order a classroom library. You will need to have an

amount in mind, and perhaps even an order list to substantiate your request. Books vary in cost, from the *Blueford Series* at $1.00 each to those beautiful collector books that may cost $50.00 each. Think about checking out of the school or public library the expensive books, and focus the purchase request on inexpensive paperback books.

You may also consider having a class book club or schoolwide book fair. Depending on the amount of orders, free books are earned from the vendor. A parent or community volunteer may be available to coordinate the orders and the book fair event.

Don't forget to advertise to students, parents, and community groups that you are soliciting books for the classroom. Be sure to review any books donated for appropriateness. You can always trade inappropriate books for appropriate ones at a used-book store.

Nonnegotiable 2: Using the Processes of Literacy

Literacy processes are reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, thinking, and communicating through multiple-symbol systems that develop simultaneously as a student's language grows. These processes are used to learn the vocabulary, content, concepts, and skills of all content areas studied. For this reason, developing all of the literacy processes in every content classroom is critical for every student. Often, by the time students reach fourth grade, they struggle with the difficult vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension necessary for reading the content text without extensive teacher assistance. The instructor who assigns reading of the on-grade-level textbook and does not incorporate the other processes will make less progress in literacy and content learning than the one who develops them all simultaneously.

Listening is not passive. Listening means that students are making meaning by organizing their thoughts, drawing relationships between what is being read to them or what they hear and what they already know, and drawing conclusions. They may be completing a graphic organizer to keep track of their thoughts. While students are listening, the teacher is pausing, probing, asking questions, and encouraging predictions and higher levels of thinking. While students are listening, they are developing their speaking skills and background for reading and writing.

Articulating clearly, organizing thoughts, and communicating orally are essential to developing excellent readers, writers, and content learners who can communicate what they are learning. In fail-safe classrooms, teachers use formal English and academic language of the content area they teach. This means they use exacting terms and do not dumb down or baby the content by using less than formal terms. The practice of using

casual rather than formal academic content language insults the students' abilities to grow in vocabulary and language usage. For students to use accurate academic content language in their speaking and writing, they must hear it in multiple venues and multiple times (NICHD, 2000). Although it may not be the norm, students should be encouraged to use formal English, academic language, and accurate content vocabulary while speaking in complete sentences at all times.

Reading, writing, and listening develop speaking skills. This will surprise those who work hard at keeping the students from talking! In fact, if you provide purposeful opportunities to speak, expect appropriate academic language, and provide feedback, you may find that extraneous unrelated talk diminishes. Practicing speaking in front of the class or to a peer about what is being read is critical. A quick strategy is to ask the students to turn to their partners and explain the concept just discussed for two minutes. Or, turn to your neighbor and ask the questions for which you need answers to understand the chapter; take three minutes to do so. Speaking and using academic language in a more sophisticated way helps to develop reading and writing skills and vice versa.

What is viewing? Viewing means looking, seeing, and taking in clues that provide meaning. This meaning is called a mental model, visual, or, in some cases, anchored instruction (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990). Those teachers who gain the most learning from their students will open a unit with visuals, short vignettes or video clips, streaming video on the Internet, demonstrations, or models. These up-front experiences with concepts and vocabulary provide students a mental model on which to "anchor" their new learning. This experience provides students who may have had interrupted schooling or for whom English is their second language the background knowledge that is essential for learning the new content concepts and language.

Viewing has a particular meaning related to the use of multimedia, which is ever present in our lives and the lives of our students. Burmark (2004) reported that we process visual information about 60,000 times as rapidly as text and that such viewing can improve learning up to 400 percent. We want students to develop their expertise in viewing, to understand and to be discriminating in what they view—on television, the Internet, CDs, visual and performing arts, and in print. Viewing supports students in developing content knowledge but requires the development of the other literacy processes. A previously mentioned example is previewing the text or conducting a picture/visual walk-through of a text chapter prior to reading the text. This walk-through develops vocabulary, concept, and content knowledge and prepares the student for reading the text.

In our technological world, students need to view expertly. To do this, a student must be able to read, to write, to speak, to listen, and to think. The literacy processes are interdependent in their use and development. Viewing is a critical literacy process that will continue to gain in importance as our reliance on technology increases.

Communicating with multiple-symbol systems is always present in schools. Multiple-symbol systems include symbolic representations that are found in each content area. Examples include the periodic table, mathematical symbols, scientific notation, technology, art, music, movement, maps, graphs, and charts. You may think of some other multiple-symbol systems. Being an expert reader and writer requires the reading, speaking, and writing about these various multiple-symbol systems. Reading comprehension assessments include passages with charts, graphs, maps, and other symbol systems and are often labeled the research and reference strand. These naturally appear in content texts. Skill with comprehending these symbol systems and expressing the comprehension in writing is essential to improving achievement on formalized assessments.

Readers are probably surprised to see that we list thinking as a literacy process. Can you read without thinking? Can you write without thinking? To make meaning, to translate ideas into print, a student has to think. Thinking is implicit in literacy development. Comprehension is thinking. Keeping thinking in the forefront of our literacy processes also ensures that we will provide students with meaningful work. Such work communicates that we believe they can think, and it requires them to think. Thinking connects directly with the higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, which we will delve into in Chapter 6. Students demonstrate operating at these high levels through other literacy processes. Thinking at a high level is possible for every student, even very young ones, and encourages the development of content knowledge, skills, and concepts, as well as language, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Developing all of the literacy processes simultaneously will impact learning. Greatest improvement will take place with deliberate and purposeful incorporation of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, thinking, and communicating with multiple-symbol systems into instructional plans.

Nonnegotiable 3: Reading To and With

The third nonnegotiable is for teachers to read to students and with students every day using on-grade-level standards-based content. A student can comprehend about two grade levels higher than his independent

reading level when hearing the pronunciation and having eyes on print. The higher oral language comprehension is why teachers are encouraged to briefly model how fluent readers read a textbook, a piece of nonfiction, or fiction with students every day. It is not entertainment but the opportunity to teach the vocabulary and essential content concepts. Since this is instructive, it is not round-robin reading but reading by a fluent reader—probably the teacher. It may also be an audiotape, DVD, or CD that accompanies the textbook or other shared text.

Reading to and with students also supports developing lifelong readers (Trelease, 2001). Hearing a fluent reader read with expression and comprehension develops the joy that motivates students to want to read more and to reread the shared reading text. In addition to Trelease's well-known *The Read Aloud Handbook* (2001), readers may want to access *Read-Aloud Anthology* (Allen & Daley, 2004), which includes a variety of selections for upper elementary through high school. Reading to and with naturally leads to independent reading, the next nonnegotiable.

Nonnegotiable 4: Teach, Model, and Practice Strategies of Expert Readers and Writers

When teachers read to and with students, they are teaching, modeling, and practicing the strategies of expert readers and writers, showing that reading has meaning and is joyful. On-grade-level readers have developed their own strategies for comprehension if they have not been taught specific ones. Below-grade-level readers do not understand that good readers are strategic and that they too can become strategic and develop greater comprehension. Below-grade-level readers are not the only ones who benefit from explicit comprehension strategy instruction; on-grade-level readers who have difficulty with specific types of text, like science or technical reading, improve comprehension with strategies. Direct, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies is recommended in *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Research-based comprehension strategies are delved into more deeply in Chapter 5.

Nonnegotiable 5: Accountable Independent Reading

The fifth nonnegotiable expectation of daily practice is that students read independently every day on their reading level and teachers hold them accountable for doing so. The suggested amount of time is 20–30 minutes each day. It is important that the independent reading is a book, because the teacher and student can match the book to the student's independent reading level. A student can easily be held accountable for

completion of the book and for upward growth into higher-reading-level books. More important, as surprising as it may seem, many struggling students reach twelfth grade and admit they have never read a book until they find this just-right book and get hooked on reading. Therefore the student selects the book he or she will read on his reading level that is of personal interest.

Daily accountability means that the student probably maintains a reading log of the dates of the reading, last page read, and a short summary, or connection to the current day's reading, or prediction about the next day's reading. When teachers ask students to read a certain number of pages or note the number of pages read, it becomes inefficient if the students cannot find the page to begin reading the next day, and it does not support comprehension improvement.

After reading the entire book, an overall accountability that gives the student choice and the opportunity to demonstrate joy in the reading is important. Giving a book talk or making a storyboard or poster of the book is a good way for students beginning in Grade 4 to show with joy that they have read a book. An example of a visual that a ninth-grade teacher displayed in her room uses the traditional graphic of introduction, rising action, climax, and falling action. The students write on the graphic the associated events in their independent reading book. Accountable independent reading is revisited in Chapter 4, "Developing Fluency in Reading All Texts."

NONNEGOTIABLE EXPECTATIONS OF DAILY PRACTICE AND WRITING

These nonnegotiable expectations of the daily practice of reading to students, reading with students, and students reading by themselves apply to all classrooms. After students have read or been read to, they write. In all grade levels, students write about what they heard or read, what it meant to them, how it relates to something else they have read, or how it relates to their world. Teachers who are making progress do not teach or assign writing out of the context of reading. Vocabulary and language of the lessons are modeled and taught through the reading and are expected in the writing. The more students read, the better their writing and comprehension will be. They just can't help it! These nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice will be addressed throughout this book with practical applications. Consistency in application of the concepts of failsafe literacy classrooms—community of learners and nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice—will ensure improvement in reading, writing, and content learning.

Mental Model: Fail-Safe Classroom for Improving Reading, Writing, and Content Learning

Here is an example of an English-as-a-second-language classroom I was in at Lake Brantley High School in Altamonte Springs, Florida. What took place in this classroom could have taken place in any classroom at any grade level. Mrs. Gutierrez created a close-knit community of learners from a number of cultures in the Caribbean, South America, Asia, and Europe. As you enter her room, on the right she had beautiful displays of interesting books. At the end of the display and book case is a listening center; in December when I was there, *Great Expectations* was the audiobook in the center. Farther down the right wall was a bulletin board, labeled Wonderful Writers, full of student writing. At the right angle of this wall and the end of the room were computer stations for student practice and writing. The front of the room was covered by a whiteboard, on which was written vocabulary words that were reviewed prior to listening to an audiotape and following along with the text to *A Christmas Carol.* An audio player was there as well. The left side of the entrance to the room housed resources on bookshelves. Where were the students? In the center of the room, tables were placed together so that 4 to 6 students worked in a group.

Bordering the top of the four classroom walls was the word wall. Students created the word wall as they discovered words they did not know and brought them to the attention of the class. As a student introduced a word to the class with discussion and understanding following, the student owning the word completed a 5 × 8 card with the word, definition, and nonlinguistic representation of the word. Then the word was added to the word wall, creating a functional classroom resource for all students and documenting their growth as proficient English-language learners.

The instructional experience of the day focused on *A Christmas Carol.* After introduction of the new words, the students found their places in the text. As the students listened to and followed along with the chapter, when they came to one of the new vocabulary words, Mrs. Gutierrez stopped the audio player and discussed the use of the words *in context.* Following the "reading with" instructional experience, the students worked in groups on comprehension responses to the reading. This classroom is literacy and print rich, building on the strong community of learners, the uniqueness of the students, and the text being studied. It also includes the nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice.

Creating the Fail-Safe Classroom for Literacy and Content Learning

Beginning the journey with visualizing a classroom that works helps you to think about what you already have in place and what you may

select as your entry point. Many teachers begin with creating a literacy- and print-rich environment by visiting with their media specialist and checking out a relevant collection to keep in their classrooms for a period of time. Reflecting on your own practice and thinking about how you may celebrate the exemplary instruction that you have and how to add more exemplary instruction will inform learning as you read Chapters 2–6.

Finally, to create a fail-safe literacy system for the classroom, the family and community must substantively engage in the learning process, and in Chapter 7, we look at proven ways to make this a reality. Now, glance over the practical tips that follow, then turn the page and consider the role of literacy components in Grades 4–12.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CREATING FAIL-SAFE CLASSROOMS FOR LITERACY AND CONTENT LEARNING

To review and engage thinking, specific instructional strategies that support both literacy learning and content learning are offered. They reflect the academically and psychologically safe classroom and the nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice. One might think that instructional strategies should vary from fourth grade through twelfth, but in practice there is such a diversity of literacy development and content learning across these grades that explicit instruction and scaffolding are recommended for all grade levels. The first ones are important for all classrooms and all teachers of Grades 4–12. The second group targets content classrooms beyond language arts specifically.

Tips for Grades 4–12 Reading, Language Arts, and Content Areas

- Be explicit and clear about directions and expectations. Provide them in print, not just orally.
- Give one set of directions at a time. Let students complete that task, then give the next set of directions. Multiple sets of directions confuse even the most accomplished students and overwhelm others. Scaffold the students to success.
- Teachers of grade levels, academies, integrated teams, or houses create a plan to ensure implementation and assessment of accountable independent reading. Reading Counts or Accelerated Reader may play a part in the accountability.

- Teach students the structure and features of the textbook. Students should know to read headings, look for boldfaced words, and read sidebars. Where does the author place important information? Where is the information you think is important?

Tips for Grades 4–12 Content Areas

- Introduce new information, concepts, and so on with visuals, discussion, introducing essential vocabulary, and accessing and building on prior knowledge before asking students to read and do book work. Remember that many students will not have the prior knowledge expected by the publisher, so think of your role not as accessing prior knowledge but as providing it.
- Create print-rich classrooms appropriate for your content area:
  1. Create bulletin boards or word walls with vocabulary, definitions, and visuals. (Have students do this!)
  2. Check out book collections from the library related to your content curriculum. Be sure to cover the range of readers and interests. Include audio books or CDs that support the content.
  3. Post student work related to the curriculum.
  4. Create time lines, maps of events, literature, and so on. (Students should do this also!)
  5. When you show videos, use the English captions.

- Consider alternatives to the quizzes for lower readers. It is always best to provide choice in how students demonstrate comprehension. Choice is a motivator.
- Be sure that all print placed in front of students is in the format they are expected to use in their own writing. Using formats for writing other than those used in language arts or English or on state assessments creates a confused mental model. Block formats are commonly used in worksheets and lessons printed from the Internet. Remember the power of viewing, and consistently place accurate mental models in front of students.
- Preview the text to be read with the students, focusing on headings, sidebars, and titles. Previewing should also

(Continued)

> include graphics, pictures, maps, charts, and diagrams (multiple-symbol systems).
>
> - Ask students to write a 1-sentence summary for each visual in the chapter before you assign the reading of the text.
> - Divide the class into teams of 3 or 4 students and ask each team to explain a specific picture, visual, graph, chart, or map.
> - Ask students to write a short explanation of problems after they are solved.