

## Six Tips for Inspired Instruction

Even a strategy that has been refined through classroom use is not a magic bullet; it won't increase student engagement or learning on its own. What's more, if you treat a strategy as a list of steps to follow, then the learning you get back will be similarly prosaic. To ensure that your work in strategic instruction is inspired rather than tired, we offer the following six tips.

**1. Capture students' interest.** Both common sense and research tell us that when students are engaged in what they are learning, their achievement increases (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Marzano, 2007). Whenever you begin a lesson, you will experience better results if you take the time to design a good "hook." A hook is a question or an activity that provokes student thinking and activates prior knowledge related to the content to come. A well-designed hook will establish a strong sense of intrigue or curiosity at the lesson's outset. To design an attention-grabbing hook, try using

- *Mystery.* On paper, the U.S. Civil War was a mismatch. So why did it last for more than four years? Generate some ideas.
- *Controversy.* Look at these famous masterpieces of modern art. Some use only basic shapes or a single color. Is this really art? What is art?
- *Personal experiences.* Have you ever felt so guilty about something that you thought others could tell you did something wrong just by looking at you? How can guilt be like a stain?
- *"What if" questions.* What if there were no plants? How might the world be different?

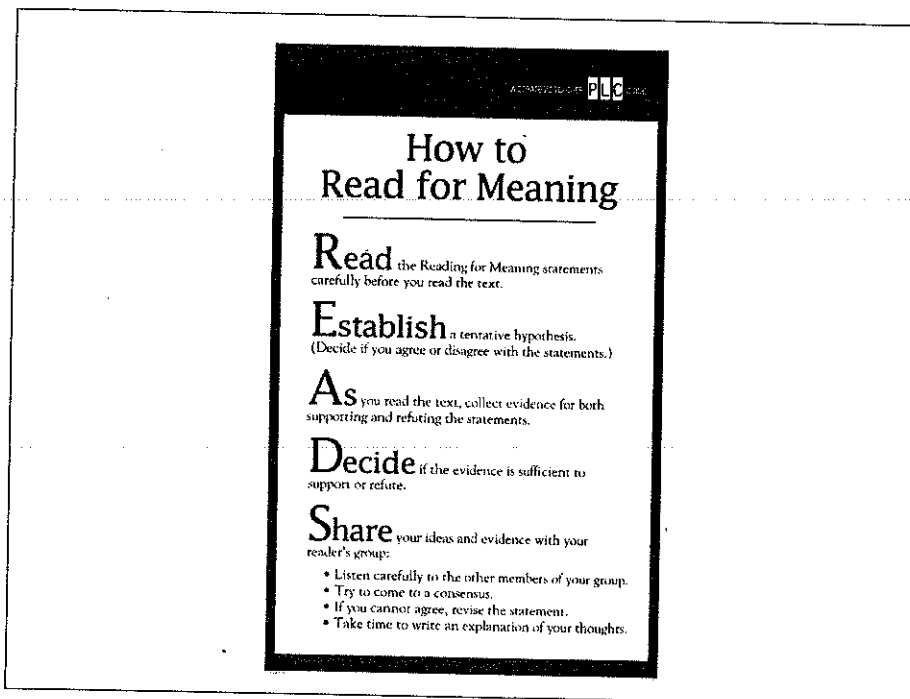
Hooks can also focus on the specific strategy you'll be using. For example, if you're about to introduce the Compare & Contrast strategy, you might ask students to think about a time they had to compare two or more things to make a good decision.

After students have collected and shared their ideas, bridge the discussion to the lesson: "Good! You have come up with some great examples of how we use comparison in our everyday lives. Now, let's learn how we can make our comparative thinking even stronger using the Compare & Contrast strategy."

## 2. Explain the strategy's purpose and students' roles in the strategy.

Students don't come to school with a strategy gene. Strategic thinking does not usually come naturally. Whenever you use a strategy, take the time to tell students its name and explain how it works and why it is important. Most essential, teach students the specific steps in the strategy and explain what you expect them to do at each step. Research (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996) shows that explicitly teaching the steps and making expectations clear enable students to use strategies independently. One highly effective tool for teaching strategies directly to students is a classroom poster. Figure I.2 shows a classroom poster delineating the steps of the Reading for Meaning strategy (Silver, Morris, & Klein, 2010).

**FIGURE I.2** Reading for Meaning Classroom Poster



Source: From *Reading for Meaning: How to Build Students' Comprehension, Reasoning, and Problem-Solving Skills (A Strategic Teacher PLC Guide)*, by H. F. Silver, S. C. Morris, and V. Klein, 2010, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. © 2010 Silver Strong & Associates/Thoughtful Education Press. Reprinted with permission.

**3. Teach the thinking embedded in the strategy.** For example, collecting and evaluating evidence is one crucial thinking skill embedded in several Core Six strategies. To teach this skill, discuss the concept of *evidence* with students. What is evidence? When and how is it used? What's the difference between an argument that uses evidence and one that doesn't? Model what good evidence sounds like using simple claims like "Taking care of a pet is harder than taking care of a plant." Whenever students make a claim during a lesson, use it as an opportunity to explore the evidence behind the claim.

**4. Use discussion and questioning techniques to extend student thinking.** To move students from superficial to deep understanding, extend student thinking through questioning and discussion. A simple but powerful technique for improving classroom questioning and discussion is Q-SPACE (Strong, Hanson, & Silver, 1998), a strategy described fully on page 42.

**5. Ask students to synthesize and transfer their learning.** Challenge students to pull together what they have learned and transfer that learning to a new context. For example, after completing a Circle of Knowledge discussion in which 5th grade students debate a local issue (should their small town allow a big-box store to build on a vacant lot?), you might present three more debatable issues for students to discuss in teams, using what they have learned about civil debate and compromise to resolve each issue.

**6. Leave time for reflection.** When using a strategy, students need time to think back not only on the content but also on the process. For example, you might say, "Let's think back on our use of 3 x 3 Writing Frames [a tool that's part of the Write to Learn strategy]. How did the 3 x 3 Writing Frame help you plan your essay? What might you do differently next time you use a 3 x 3 Writing Frame?"