

# Daybooks of Critical Reading and Writing

R e s e a r c h B a s e

by April D. Nauman, Ph.D.

## Introduction

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Teachers today must find new, effective resources for helping students improve their literacy skills. The *Daybooks* provide this resource. Designed by educators, these journal-like paperbacks can help students become active, engaged, critical readers. The books provide students with the opportunity to regularly read and write responses to good literature. The books contain lessons in critical reading, literature selections, and spaces for students to write responses. The strategies and activities in the *Daybooks* are based in current research on how to improve student reading and writing ability.

One of the major goals of the *Daybooks* is to immerse students in quality literature. The passages selected for the books were recommended by panels of expert classroom teachers. At the high school level, the excerpts from contemporary authors are a valuable supplement to the standard curriculum. For the younger grades, the literature in the *Daybooks* may be used to enrich basal programs or as the core of a literature-based program. The difficulty levels of the selections are varied, which provides students with opportunities to read comfortably as well as to challenge themselves. These high-quality works also span a range of genres, from fiction to nonfiction.

Other major goals of the *Daybooks* are to promote students' ability to read actively; to build essential skills, such as questioning, summarizing, and finding the main idea; to develop an appreciation for the elements of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction; and to foster an appreciation of language. These goals are accomplished through the introduction of strategies and activities drawn from the best available research in education today.

## The Reading-Writing Connection

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Educators and researchers have clearly established that reading and writing abilities develop together (e.g., Calkins, 1983; Pearson & Tierney, 1984; Shanahan, 1990; Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Both processes are constructive and require similar kinds of knowledge. Teaching reading and writing together enhances communication, improves academic achievement, and leads to critical thinking (Cooper, 2000). Teachers who foster the construction of meaning through integrated reading and writing activities enable their students to become better thinkers (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

The *Daybooks* connect reading and writing in many important ways. Students are asked to read and respond creatively to literature excerpts. Also, students are prompted to jot down questions about the text, to brainstorm on the page, and to annotate the selections by underlining and highlighting. The varied writing activities in the *Daybooks* help students become better constructors of meaning.

The *Daybooks* encourage students to read and write frequently, even daily. Research has shown that students improve their literacy skills when they have the time and opportunity to practice these skills regularly. Most teachers agree that students “learn to read and write by reading and writing” (Cooper, 2000, p. 342), which underscores the need for frequent literacy opportunities. In addition, major writing educators emphasize the need for daily writing to enhance writing and reading ability (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994). Recently, the U.S. Department of Education, in its summary of evidence-based reading instruction essential to the *No Child Left Behind* initiative, identified frequent writing opportunities as one of the important aspects of literacy instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The writing activities included in the *Daybooks* are based in reader-response research and theory. Reader-response activities enhance both students’ motivation to read and their ability to comprehend (Ruddell, 2002). Students given opportunities to respond to literature have been found to develop a sense of ownership over their learning (Hansen, 1987). Because constructing meaning relies on the reader’s prior knowledge, each reader’s meaning construction is individual and personal (Rosenblatt, 1978). Students given the opportunity to construct their own meanings learn to take responsibility for their own comprehension process. The opportunity to respond promotes students’ monitoring of their own reading and writing (Cooper, 2000), which builds students’ metacognitive processes (Palincsar & Brown, 1986; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991). Instructional activities that promote comprehension monitoring are also endorsed by the National Reading Panel (2000), a panel of top U.S. educators recently convened to review the best available reading research in education today.

One excellent medium for responding to literature is journaling (Routman, 2000). Journaling allows for individual expression, engages all students in responses, and promotes active reading. Researchers have found that journaling in response to literature reinforces students’ comprehension skills (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Tierney, Readance, & Disger, 1990). By journaling, students construct their own meanings and connect reading and writing (Atwell, 1998; Harste et al., 1988; Parsons, 1990; Weaver, 1990). Responding to literature through journaling fosters introspection, deeper thinking, and metacognitive awareness (Routman, 2000). Such journaling “sensitizes” students to become more active in their reading, more deeply engaged with text (Atwell, 1998). Many types of journals have been described and are useful for promoting student response to literature (Cooper, 2000). The *Daybooks* are a unique type.

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## Interacting with Text

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One hallmark of successful reading is the ability to interact with or engage with text. Good readers are able to make connections with text in a variety of ways, whereas less capable readers are not (Wilhelm, 1997). Because comprehension relies on readers' ability to activate prior knowledge, connecting with text improves comprehension. To understand text, students must be able to link what they are reading to what they already know (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994).

The *Daybooks* introduce and reinforce many skills that promote engagement with the text. Because the *Daybooks* belong to the students, they are free to mark up their texts, highlight and underline, jot down notes, or draw pictures in the margins as they progress through their reading. In each lesson, students are cued to respond at certain points in their reading and in specified places on the page. This level of support and practice helps all students gain a mastery of the active reading strategies they need to be successful readers.

In addition, the *Daybooks* introduce and reinforce strategies for active reading. For younger children, these strategies include predicting, questioning, and visualizing as well as marking up the text. For middle school children, the strategies include predicting, inferring, finding the main idea, identifying the author's purpose, and reflecting on reading. For high school students, the *Daybooks* introduce important aspects of literary interpretation and reinforce strategies such as interacting with text and making personal connections.

The value of these strategies has been demonstrated in a large body of research. Successful readers are known to approach reading strategically, using a variety of strategies to comprehend text (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Predicting and questioning promote engagement with the text and improve comprehension (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992). Visualizing is also an important strategy, which struggling readers often lack (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Wilhelm, 1997). Summarizing during reading helps students build the habit of monitoring their comprehension (Cooper, 2000; Morrow, 2001; Tompkins, 1998). Finding the main idea, or distinguishing between important and unimportant information, is a related strategy that students need to learn to be successful readers (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Cooper, 2000). The ability to use prior knowledge and make inferences while reading to "fill in the gaps" in a text is also essential to successful reading (van den Broek & Kremer, 2000). Instruction in the strategy of inference increases students' reading comprehension (Vacca & Vacca, 2002).

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## Reading Critically

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The *Daybooks* foster students' ability to read critically through the Five Angles of Literacy. The Five Angles help students go beyond basic reading skills, building the ability to read critically and write effectively. The Angles of Literacy represent five approaches to effective critical literacy (Vinz, Reid, & Claggett, 1996). For each Angle, a set of strategies is taught and reinforced through practice.

For elementary school children, the Angles of Literacy involve learning and practicing strategies for active reading (such as highlighting and underlining, questioning, predicting, and visualizing); reading well (such as predicting, identifying the main idea, making inferences); reading fiction and nonfiction (understanding sequence and textual elements); understanding language (including similes and metaphors); and studying favorite authors. Students in the middle grades learn strategies for becoming active readers, making story connections, understanding the author's perspective, and focusing on language and craft.

At the high school level, the Angles of Literacy are explored in more depth. Students are encouraged to move gradually from the initial stage of engagement to more interpretive and evaluative approaches to text, in which they study authors' language, craft, lives, and work. Moving students from engagement to interpretation and finally to evaluation is supported by major reader-response theorists (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1978).

The first Angle is interacting with a text, which promotes active, engaged reading. The strategies introduced to scaffold student ability to interact with text include underlining key phrases, writing questions or comments in the margins, noting word patterns and repetitions, circling unknown words, and keeping track of the story or idea as it unfolds. Rereading, summarizing, and generating questions, all important to successful comprehending (e.g., Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002), are some of the activities in which students engage.

The second Angle is making connections to stories. Activities that promote such connections include making a story chart (e.g., Cooper, 2000; Freedle, 1979), connecting stories to events in one's own life (e.g., Routman, 2000; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994), and speculating on the meaning or significance of story incidents. Connecting with stories enhances student engagement, motivation, and comprehension.

The third Angle of Literacy is shifting perspectives to examine a text from many viewpoints. Students learn to do this by examining point of view, changing the point of view, exploring various versions of an event, forming interpretations, comparing texts, and asking "what if" questions. When students learn to ask higher-level, "literary" questions, they begin to consider multiple possibilities and are motivated to look at the literature more carefully (Routman, 2000).

The fourth Angle is studying language and craft in a selection. This includes understanding figurative language, examining how the writer uses words, and studying a variety of types of literature. The ability to read "attentively and imaginatively," with an awareness of how authors use language, enhances the reader's enjoyment of a story (Charters, 1999). In addition, attention to the elements of quality literature has a positive impact on students' own writing (Calkins, 1994).

The fifth Angle of Literacy is studying the author, focusing on his or her life and work. Author study involves reading what the author says about his or her work, reading what others say about the work, making inferences about connections between the author's life and work, analyzing the author's style, and paying attention to repeating themes and topics in several works by one author. An awareness of the writer behind the work is essential to reading critically, enabling students to identify the author's purpose and point of view as well as distinguish fact from opinion (Roe, Stoodt, & Burns, 1998). The ability to "question the author" improves reading engagement and comprehension (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997).

The Angles of Literacy foster students' ability to read critically and write effectively. The strategies and activities provided in the *Daybooks* help students understand, practice, and gain control of the Angles of Literacy, enabling students to transfer their skills and become autonomous critical readers.

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## Literacy Growth in the *Daybooks*

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The *Daybooks* provide a valuable written record of student progress for assessment by teachers, parents, and the students themselves. Teachers may view the *Daybooks* as a type of portfolio an ongoing, authentic measure of students' reading and writing ability. Portfolios are generally considered valuable tools for documenting, analyzing, and understanding students' reading and writing growth over time (e.g., Routman, 2000; Ruddell, 2002; Tompkins, 2001; Vacca & Vacca, 2002). In the *Daybooks*, students create a variety of responses that can be used for effective evaluation, such as summaries and reflections on readings (Cooper, 2000). Parents will also be interested to see the growth in their children's literacy skills.

In addition, this unique record of progress can also promote student self-assessment, which is an essential part of literacy evaluation (Flood & Lapp, 1989; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Students can look back over their *Daybooks* to see how much they have learned and improved during a particular school year and may also compare their *Daybooks* from year to year. These records of progress can be used to enhance students' self-esteem and set a direction for future learning.

Because students literally own their *Daybooks*, students can experience a sense of ownership over their literacy progress. This sense of ownership is an important part of students' motivation to become readers and writers, their ability to persist in their literacy learning, and the development of a positive view of themselves as readers and writers. A sense of ownership also leads to a sense of

responsibility for students' own learning. Combining ownership with opportunities for personal, creative involvement with quality literature, the *Daybooks* are a valuable addition to literacy curricula in elementary school, middle school, and high school.

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