

# The Challenge of High School Readers

by Jim Burke

It has never been easier *not* to read; yet the same set of skills remains essential to students' success in the world. Access to online “study guides” and the pretense that skimming for the bold words equals understanding—these and other such modern conveniences highlight the challenges of high school readers. The students themselves are challenged by the growing array and sophistication of texts, texts which include colors and symbols alongside words and images. Teachers, too, are challenged by the needs of readers at all levels as students struggle to read those texts most challenging to them at the levels most appropriate to their current skill level.

To meet these challenges and those that await our students in the adult world, students must develop the craft of reading (Scholes, 2001). According to Scholes, “As with any craft, reading depends on the use of certain tools, handled with skill” (2001). Craft, as Scholes goes on to emphasize, can be taught because it is based on skills that can be studied and taught. The *Reader's Handbook* shows students how to read the texts they encounter in all their classes; it demystifies the process of reading, thereby developing the student's “textual intelligence” (Burke, 2001), even as it adds a range of tools to the student's intellectual toolbelt (Schoenbach, et al., 1999).

Reading the table of contents of the *Reader's Handbook* is like walking through a huge mall or a megastore. Both students and teachers alike confront the fact that ours is a textual world. You don't just read the newspaper; instead, you read editorials, ads, comics, maps, graphs, and infographics. All of them try to accomplish something different, using different conventions and demanding the reader use different “tools” to make sense of the text. The same goes for content area literacy. Textbooks are made up of many different demanding types of texts. For example, the reader must try to understand the visual explanation of a map within the context of a chapter on World War II.

High school teachers have long felt that students arrive—or should—having learned how to read. Reading now means reading to learn about content. The challenge of high school readers, especially when students come from such diverse backgrounds and enter the class with such different needs, is that they mostly do know “how to read” but rarely know how to read the different types of texts they study or those they will encounter in newspapers, contracts, college classes, or workplaces. Just as batting coaches teach players how to “read the pitcher,” teachers today must teach students how to read those texts central to their discipline. The science teacher must not only help students master the multicolored, crowded pages of the six-pound textbook but must also teach them how to read the different tests and the tables, charts, articles, experiments, and results common to any lively science class. The same goes for English teachers and social science teachers, not to mention the math teachers who find their own textbooks increasingly weighed down by words and concepts which challenge their students.

The *Reader's Handbook* is *not* written specifically for students with reading difficulties. Think of it as an anthology of practices, a collection of strategies that will benefit all students at all levels. It offers, to return to the toolbelt analogy, a set of tools designed

to make all students more strategic readers. It does this by introducing them to the reading process and then giving them a range of strategies they can employ at different stages of that process. These different strategies and those tools found in the Reader's Almanac of the *Reader's Handbook* are just as useful to the advanced reader as they are to the struggling reader. While the less skilled reader learns to use the reading process to comprehend the basic action of the story or the main idea of the essay, the *Reader's Handbook* expands the developing and sophisticated readers' abilities to read for meaning and style, showing them how the author organizes ideas and uses words to create a certain tone or develop a theme.

The challenge of high school readers is sometimes exacerbated by the challenges schools face. Lack of time needed for teachers to collaborate and plan means students encounter a maze of methods and general absence of coherent, schoolwide strategies. The *Reader's Handbook* provides a set of clearly defined, classroom-tested techniques—applied to the very texts most commonly taught in high schools—that will improve students' abilities to read those texts as much as it will strengthen a teacher's own ability to teach them. It is our hope that the *Reader's Handbook* will create a schoolwide vocabulary of techniques. Thus, when the teacher begins a new text, all the students will know they need to begin by setting a purpose, previewing, “making connections” as they read, and so on. When students get stuck—whether reading Shakespeare, a difficult test, or a textbook—they and their teachers will be able to refer to the handbook and ask which strategy will be most effective in this situation.

Let's face it, with the demands of high school these days—the pace, the quantity of work, the increased standards and high expectations—students can easily feel challenged, even afraid. They quickly lose confidence as they begin taking those large history exams and reading that science book written for more advanced readers. When they receive their first major novel in high school, they lose motivation to read it because they worry they cannot keep up, that they will not understand it, that they cannot understand it. The *Reader's Handbook* demystifies the reading process, turning reading into a craft instead of an art. People can learn, even master a craft, because it can be taught. Following the same steps in the process in each chapter, students learn by first watching the *Reader's Handbook* model, and then applying the same techniques. While the more skilled reader benefits from the book's demonstrations, learning to recognize the more subtle elements of, for example, a poem or a Shakespearean play, developing readers learn that by following the steps in the process they *can* read a poem, they *can* understand Shakespeare. In subsequent years, as readers' capacities develop, the handbook supports their progress by showing them how to read those more challenging aspects of the texts.

This distinction between struggling and sophisticated readers merits further discussion as the *Reader's Handbook* is written for them both. Students in advanced or honors classes—even AP (Advanced Placement) classes—too often pretend they understand what they read (Tovani, 2000). They become reliant on various study aids to give them the insights they are incapable of arriving at on their own. Such a “strategy” is a bit like having someone else do your exercise for you. It catches up with these advanced students who do not “learn to fish” on their own. They might get out of high school, even graduate with good grades, but when they arrive at college, they suddenly find themselves unprepared and ill-equipped to read the literature and textbooks their professors assign and expect them to

read independently. While writing the *Reader's Handbook*, I taught both struggling readers (a program called ACCESS, which stands for Academic Success) and freshman honors English. I routinely tried out what I wrote with both groups, making sure it was not only readable but useful to both groups of students. Honors students can read and comprehend the basic plot of a short story like Tobias Wolff's "Powder" (see page 270), but they miss the multiple meanings, the connotative meanings of words, the devices Wolff uses to create tension between the father and son. The *Reader's Handbook* develops their critical reading abilities, turning their intuitive or natural reading talents into a set of conscious, effective decisions and skills that allow them to read a range of increasingly sophisticated texts common to advanced students.

The handbook supports students in several different ways. Foremost, it provides a powerful way to teach specific skills needed to read the texts teachers need to teach and students must know how to read. Second, it gives students a readily available guide to help them troubleshoot their own reading when not in class. Just as a computer user reaches for the manual to resolve some confusion, or the mechanic consults a manual to troubleshoot some problem encountered while repairing a car, so, too, a student can refer to the *Reader's Handbook* while preparing for a big exam or tackling a tough assignment. Here, for example, students can find useful strategies designed to make them more effective, intelligent readers of different types of tests. Or, should they find themselves struggling to read Shakespeare, students can go to the "Focus on Shakespeare" lesson and get tips they need to be successful.

The world of texts has changed in ways that not even Shakespeare himself could have anticipated. If Shakespeare's plays were the only challenge to high school students today, a book like the *Reader's Handbook* would not be necessary. Yet the Internet, the proliferation of tests, the growing complexity of many textbooks, and the developmental needs of today's students make this book essential reading. Students rarely form relationships with books, for they too often see school books as obstacles to their success instead of guides that will insure their success. Students new to the United States quickly learn that the dictionary is their key to the world of language. The *Reader's Handbook* offers a similar key, one that not only opens the world of different texts but the world beyond high school and even college, the world for which these four years is but a preparation.

#### References

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