

# Step 3: Choosing sources

## What would be the best sources to consult?

### The problem

Nowadays we tend automatically to assume that the internet will be the best place to find something out. Certainly the internet has opened up a wealth of information that was unavailable to previous generations. However, not all questions are best answered via the web. For example, if you wanted to find out when the First World War started you might be able to ask someone close by whose general knowledge you trust. You might be able to find out the capital of Venezuela more quickly by consulting a handy encyclopedia or world map rather than by walking to a computer down the corridor. (It's Caracas by the way. I googled it.) The internet is also very distracting. It's a bit like looking for a cheese grater in a department store: you have to be very self-disciplined to make your visit short and cheap.

### The solution

We need to stop the class from running to the nearest computers or burying their heads in their ipads. We need to start by getting them to talk through a strategy for choosing their sources. Talking and discussing is the key activity here. Students' discussion should not just consider the most exciting sources, but also the ones that are most likely to yield the required information most quickly. In fact one of the reasons that almost all 'research' in schools is useless is because the teacher gives a set amount of time to all students. The problem is compounded if the teacher keeps extending this time allocation. In the real world, most research needs to be both good and quick. School research tasks need to be genuinely challenging, but also completed in the shortest possible time. Groups should gain marks for the speed of completion as well as for the standard of research.

Let's return to our sample research question: **Why is iron important in our diets, and what foods are good sources of iron?** To prepare an effective presentation on this topic, here are just some of the sources that students could go to:

**Google / The NHS website / Wikipedia / Encyclopedias**  
**Non-fiction books / The Food teacher / Parents / BBC iplayer**

We need to ensure that students actively evaluate the potential usefulness and efficiency of all of these (and others), rather than simply stampede for the computers and spend the rest of the lesson fighting the filtering system to access Youtube and Facebook.

# Supporting weak readers

Students who are very weak readers pose acute challenges to teachers. This is as true of English teachers as teachers of other subjects. Without taking on responsibility for teaching students to read, there is much that teachers can do to help weak readers.

All the strategies below depend on the teacher anticipating the reading challenges and applying a little forethought or planning. However, if the result of such planning is that two troublesome students stay on task then the planning is well worth the small amount of extra effort.

## Strategies to aid reading

<b>Reduce the quantity or complexity of text</b>	The teacher might choose an easier, shorter text on the same topic, and containing the same information. This is very easy to achieve in relation to 'home-made' worksheets: the teacher can simply cut out inessential detail and write a version that uses simpler vocabulary and simpler sentences. (See the section on readability above.) If a TA is working with your class then you may be able to give them your 'mainstream' worksheet a couple of days in advance and ask them to re-process it for weak readers. This would be a very good use of a good TA.
<b>Pre-evaluate texts</b>	Ask yourself if the text will be accessible to weak readers. If the text is likely to be challenging then ask yourself if it will prove engaging enough to students to motivate them to persevere in the face of reading challenges.
<b>Listening instead of reading</b>	Could you record your reading of the text and arrange for weak readers to listen to it – probably through ear-phones? If the sound file is small enough you may be able to email it to them so that they can listen to it on their phone. On the other hand, if you email them the written text they should be able to download an app that will read the text to them. Again, a good TA you are working closely with may well be able to provide a solution along these lines.
<b>Use visual aids</b>	Add helpful pictures to the text. Well-chosen, not only will these help to explain the text, they will also make it more memorable.



# Readability: Top tips for teachers

- **Use short sentences as far as possible.**
- **Use the shortest possible words** (e.g. 'give' rather than 'provide').
- **Do not bundle instructions together:** break them into steps with numbers or bullets.
- **Be concise.**
- **Do not jumble pictures and words together.** Writing over pictures might look exciting, but it is much harder to read than text over a plain background.
- **Use a sans serif font such as Ariel or Calibri.** Don't use too small a size, but, more importantly, use more than single spacing. 11-point font is usually readable as long as it has reasonable spacing between the lines.



Leading  
Reading

# Improving reading: Overall advice

Most of the rest of this book is given over to introducing and explaining strategies that teachers can use to improve reading in their subject, and thus to improve students' learning.

Before I do that, however, it might be a good idea to clarify some basic principles that – if put into consistent operation – are likely to make a positive difference even before specific strategies are applied. In fact, the latter are unlikely to be successful unless they are underpinned by these basic principles.

First of all, it is important that teachers do not take it for granted that students can do the reading that they set. At the very least they should not assume that all students will be able to do it efficiently or well. Even when a teacher believes that students will be able to cope well with a reading task they should still take the time to prompt students to consciously choose appropriate reading methods that will be efficient. Without this re-prompting of previously-learnt strategies many students will lose confidence in them over time

One incident is illustrative.

Some years ago I observed a Year 7 RE lesson. Every student had a text book and the lesson was about beliefs. The class had just read a passage about attitudes towards witches and witchcraft in the sixteenth century. After a fairly low-level 'class discussion' the teacher asked the students to write answers to the questions beneath the text book passage. She gave them twenty minutes and the students got on with the task in silence. I realised that inefficient readers would re-read the whole passage and then start work on the questions. Efficient readers would go straight to the questions, read the first one and then use its key words to scan the text for an answer. To my amazement and delight they all seemed to be using the efficient method automatically.

Out of curiosity I crept round the class asking each student how they were going about the task. With some prompting, virtually every student told me they were scanning the text. I was very impressed, but then a thought struck me. The teacher was marking books at the front of the class (and this was not that long ago!). I crept up to her and asked her the same question: how should the students do the task? What reading strategy should they be using? When she looked at me blankly I realised that this Year 7 class were using the strategy they had been taught in primary school. The trouble is that because this secondary teacher was never going to mention the strategy – by name or even just by concept – over time many students would lose faith in it and regress to inefficient ways of reading. And that is exactly what seemed to have happened when I returned to the class nearly seven months later.

# Reading to ‘find out’

We all complain that students are too dependent on us: ‘they just don’t want to take responsibility for their own learning,’ we moan. ‘They just want to be spoon fed.’ We then go back to the classroom and do just that: spoon feed them with little bits of ideas and information. If we really wanted students to be independent than we would equip them with research skills and we would give them access to the equipment that teenagers take for granted outside the hours of 8.30 to 3.30 on Monday to Friday. Many of our own children constantly surprise and delight us with their curiosity and their desire to question and to find things out. The instrument of this curiosity is very often the internet, just as once upon a time – but less so – it was encyclopaedias and libraries.

For students to use the internet and other reference materials both effectively and efficiently they need to cultivate research skills. Yet most teachers seem completely unaware that this is necessary, let alone ask themselves what would be involved. It is still depressingly common for students to be set the task to ‘find out about’ something, and for them to do it both badly and unenthusiastically. The worst of these sorts of thoughtless research tasks are set as ‘off the cuff’ homeworks. You know the situation: just as Y8 are stampeding for the exit in pursuit of the home buses you suddenly remember that not only is this homework night, but this is also the week when senior leadership are monitoring homework tasks in Y8. So, quick as a flash, you poke your head into the corridor and yell after the disappearing Y8s, ‘Find out all you can about oxbow lakes/ Wilfred Owen/ Galileo.’

Now you may be thinking, ‘I would never set that sort of task’, but I have been a parent of secondary age children for almost 20 years, and just that sort of task is set with surprising regularity. When students arrive home they approach the homework by typing the topic into Google and - in the interest of economy - print only the first three thousand references. What they don’t do is engage with the topic. They do not mentally process the information that they harvest. Neither are they particularly selective about what sources they consult.

Actually, ‘finding out’ tasks are potentially invaluable. If these tasks are well-managed, students will learn far more from them than they will from listening to us. It is the management of these tasks which we need to give attention to, and the aim should be for students to become self-managing researchers.

Research can take a few minutes or a few years, but however extensive it is, it should be a disciplined process that passes through incremental stages, each demanding specific skills and practices. Below I outline a stepped model for effective research. When you have read it you might respond, ‘I would never have time for that.’ To that I would say, Fine. Don’t ask students to find things out then: just tell them things. It’s much quicker, and if speed is more important to you than learning then telling is the best option.

However, if independent learning truly matters to you, then the next few pages are for you.