Probable Passage

DESCRIPTION

The teacher selects a set of 8-to-15 key terms from the piece to be read. Working in small groups, students place the terms in categories the teacher has established. Each group creates a "gist statement," which they predict will summarize the reading. Finally, they list things they *hope to discover* as a result of words they didn't understand or questions that were inspired by the process.

WHY USE IT?

This activity takes some time, but addresses a number of important mental strategies for good reading. It leads students to use their **prior knowledge,** focuses on important vocabulary, and uses **prediction** to build active thinking about a topic before reading. Predicting helps readers become conscious of their expectations and how the reading either fulfills or surprises them—an important aspect of learning. The activity gets students talking in small groups in a carefully organized way. It helps them become conscious of the structure of a story, argument, or explanation. And finally, the "to discover" step helps set **purposes** for students' reading.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

1. Choose 8-to-15 key words, so they invoke main elements or ideas in the reading. Similarly, the categories for labeling these words depend on the subject and kind of writing to be studied. Categories for a news article on the spread of the disease, SARS, could be: *Problem, Setting, Causes, People, Solutions, Unknown Words.* The word list might include: *Hong Kong, SARS, respiratory, epidemic, coronavirus, genetic shift, travelers, virulence, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, quarantine, death rate, co-evolution.*

2. Model the strategy first, with a group of words on a topic in your subject, thinking aloud so the students will understand what is involved.

3. Provide a few key directions: The "unknown words" category is only for terms the group does not know. Tell students whether you want them to use all the words in their gist statement, or only a certain proportion. Explain that if their gist statement doesn't completely match the reading, there's nothing wrong—but it does show that their expectations and the reading differed, and that's important to realize.

4. When the reading is completed, return to the "to discover" lists to see which questions got answered and which did not.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Kylene Beers. 2003. *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; K. Wood, 1984. "Probable Passages: A Writing Strategy," *The Reading Teacher,* Vol. 37, pp. 496–499.

EXAMPLE

When Brenda Dukes of Foundations School used Probable Passage to introduce a unit on "number concepts" in eighth-grade math, here's how one student team grouped their words in the categories she provided:

Ways of representing numbers
40
VI
decimal

Types of numbers
even or odd
whole numbers
integer

How they work
hundreds, thousands
place value
addition, subtraction,
multiplication

How they're used
clocks
age
calendar
counting

Unknown words
rational
exponential
abundant number
deficient

Write a sentence telling one important thing you think you'll learn about numbers based on these words and categories:

We think we'll learn about how you can multiply with different kinds of numbers, like Roman numerals or decimals.