

Emily Kissner

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Grades
4-8

The Forest AND the Trees

Helping Readers
Identify Important
Details in Texts and Tests

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SEEING THE FOREST AND THE TREES

I

Details are the bane of my existence. Each day a new pack of them howls outside my classroom door, waiting to tear me to shreds. Who needs to bring in lunch money. Who needs to go to band, and when. Which papers I need to fill out for IEPs, 504 plans, and my certification. Who to mark absent, who will go to the office to do the announcements, who turned in homework, who did not turn in homework, who needs to go to the guidance counselor. No matter how hard I try to tame these details, at least one will escape to bare its teeth, growl, and bite me.

But at the same time I am trying to escape these rabid details, I actually invite other details into the classroom. “Remember to use text-based details to support your responses,” I tell students while we practice writing short-answer responses for state tests. “Let’s categorize these details from the story based on whether they are relevant or irrelevant,” I tell a reading group. “Wow! I love the detail in your drawing!” I say, looking at a marvelously intricate picture of a dragon that a student drew during indoor recess.

I became interested in the role that details play in my classroom as I was teaching summarizing. I saw that students had trouble deciding which details to include in their summaries. Which were the important details? How did they relate to the main ideas? Which details were interesting, but not important?

I have to admit that my own inclination is to let details slide. Given a choice between focusing on details or main ideas, I will choose the main ideas every time. After all, I wrote a book about summarizing. But I owed it to my students to cast aside my doubts about details and learn more. I wanted to know how students used details to form inferences, visualize, and learn new information.

The more attention I paid to how my students processed details, the more I noticed that not all details are the same. There are details in the text, but there are also details that students have in their prior knowledge. These details can interact to shape comprehension. If a student misses an important detail, she can fail to make an important inference or grasp the main idea of a passage.

But other details can pull a reader away from a text. These might be the interesting, seductive details that authors use to make their writing

more interesting or they might be details from the student's prior knowledge that contradict the author's main ideas. In order to help students make sense of these different details, I would need to show them how to notice the details of the world around them, how to use details to build inferences, and how to learn from details.

The shadow of state testing, which looms menacingly over my school year, added another wrinkle to my work with details. Not only would I need to help students understand different kinds of details in text, but I would also need to make sure that they could deal with the details of standardized tests. Answering multiple-choice questions and writing short constructed responses are other challenges for students, challenges that require them to move seamlessly between looking at details and looking at main ideas.

Over the course of several years, I learned as much as I could about how readers process details. I'd notice a problem in my students' comprehension, turn to the research journals to figure out what was going on, and then try to devise ways to help students overcome the problem. In the busy laboratory of the classroom, I was quickly able to find out what worked and what didn't.

Big Ideas About Little Details

After two years of scribbling notes about student progress and poring over student work, I gained a new appreciation for details. And I realized that just as I wanted students to pay attention to the details in text, I needed to attend to the details in my classroom. By studying my students' responses and thinking about their comments, I was able to build some broad generalizations to guide my instruction. Each of these ideas is discussed in further—well, detail—in later chapters.

- Helping students notice details in real life will build their understanding of details in the text.
- Simple classroom assessments can help me to see how my students process details.
- Readers process text—and details—in three different ways during reading.
- There are many different kinds of inferences. Text-based inferences depend on critical facts from the text, and reader-based inferences depend on details in the reader's prior knowledge.
- Visualizing is a form of extended inference.
- The details in expository text present new challenges for young readers.

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- Prior knowledge can help a reader understand a text but can also interfere with understanding.
 - A reader's goals influence what a reader learns from a text.
 - Many students don't know how to use specific text details to support a constructed response.

What I learned—from the work of other teachers, from research journals, and from the students themselves—has changed my instruction in unexpected ways. I used to be content to just let details slip through my fingers as I reached for big ideas; now I understand that I need to take the time to notice these little bits of information. Whether I am helping students understand the one word that changes the meaning of a sentence, the one idea that creates the visual image, or the new concept that contradicts prior knowledge, paying attention to the details can have huge rewards.

I still try to get the big picture, to see the whole forest. For a reading teacher, this means that I am essentially trying to get kids to understand what they read. But I have learned to appreciate the different trees in the forest—the many tools and strategies that readers use to get to a deep understanding.

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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO DETAILS

After spending a summer as a camp naturalist, I found that I was suddenly noticing hawks. Along highways, at the edges of farm fields, on telephone wires, there they sat, red-tailed hawks and kestrels, watching and brooding. I was astonished at how suddenly they appeared. Had the hawks suddenly appeared out of nowhere? No, there was no surge in hawk numbers. The difference was that now I was looking for them. Something interesting happens when we start looking for details. We see them, in greater richness and clarity than ever before.

Before our students can come to a full awareness of text details, they need to be able to see details in their own lives. Some students, of course, are adept at this. These are the students who bring in intricately designed Lego creations and draw detailed fantasy worlds. But in every classroom, there are the students who have gotten used to living in a world of generalities, a world in which they remember a general statement or idea about an experience but not the details that led them to the generalization.

I noticed this when I asked students to write about their hopes for sixth grade. Hunter wrote, “I know that sixth grade will be fun. I am hoping to have lots of good times in sixth grade. That’s why I think it will be fun.”

“Why do you think sixth grade will be fun?” I asked Hunter.

“Because it will be. It looked like you guys did fun stuff last year,” Hunter answered. The fifth-grade classrooms were right across the hall from ours, so I was expecting incoming sixth-graders like Hunter to have some ideas about what to expect in sixth grade.

“What are some fun things that you’re looking forward to?” I asked. I was trying to fish a detail out of Hunter, something specific to anchor his paragraph.

Hunter shrugged. “It’s going to be fun. That’s all I know.”

Hunter’s responses were fascinating to me. In his writing, he produced generalizations—*sixth grade will be fun*—without remembering any of the details that he had used to make that generalization. This is common of many of my students. They seem to drift through a world that is either “fun” or “boring” by turns, rarely pausing to consider the details that led them to these generalizations. I imagine these children with file folders in their brains. They file away all the details of an event or