

# The **Primary** Comprehension **Toolkit**

Language and Lessons for Active Literacy

**Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis**

## Teacher's Guide



***Dedication:*** To Smokey Daniels—our editor extraordinaire, thoughtful colleague, and good friend.  
*We're thrilled that you can channel our thinking so clearly and keep us laughing along the way.*

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# Using the *Toolkit* in Science and Social Studies: Active Literacy Across the Curriculum

When we step into a primary classroom that promotes active literacy, we notice a child sketching the classroom praying mantis as it chomps on a bee caught in its clutches. A small group of kids are gathered on the floor, checking out a giant photograph of a cockroach. Kids pull us over to see a poster of a butterfly they're painting or regale us with poems they've written about buzzing, whirring, chirping insects. Maybe it's spring and time for the unit on insects, but the topic doesn't really matter. Kids love the real world—it sparks their curiosity and sends their imaginations soaring about all the possibilities for exploring it.

Active literacy in the content areas means we integrate comprehension practices and lessons with science and social studies instruction, throughout the day and across the curriculum. Daily real-world reading is at the heart of *Primary Toolkit* instruction, and resources include a variety of nonfiction: trade books, magazines, picture books, newspapers, poetry, maps, charts, and online sources. We bring the real world into the classroom in social studies, science, health, geography, etc. and use comprehension strategies as tools for learning across disciplines.

## Creating a Culture of Thinking and Learning

David Perkins suggests that “Learning is a consequence of thinking . . .”. We follow his lead and create a classroom environment where students get engaged whatever the subject, exploring and really thinking about content knowledge as they read, write, talk, listen, draw, and investigate. When kids actively use the knowledge they are learning, they are more likely to understand and remember it.

We believe that comprehension instruction in science and social studies is best delivered in what we call “researcher’s workshop.” In researcher’s workshop, kids have long blocks of time to read and investigate topics and respond by talking, drawing,





and writing about them. In this way, they actively use their new knowledge as they share and teach others what they have learned. Just as in reader's and writer's workshop, teachers and librarians teach minilessons, and sometimes longer "maxilessons," particularly when we are teaching a concept or a strategy for the very first time. Many of these lessons come from the array of nonfiction lessons and practices offered in the *Toolkit*. Notice we said "teachers and librarians." When classroom teachers team teach with librarians, research skills are no longer relegated to a few quick, and often disconnected, sessions in the library. Librarians and teachers work together to make sure those all important research skills and strategies become tools kids use throughout the day and across the curriculum.

During researcher's workshop, we may focus on topics that are part of a district mandated curriculum unit, like the rain forest examples described here. Kids can choose specific aspects of the unit or umbrella topic that particularly interest them and have at it. At other times, kids select their own topics. Either approach works. What does matter is that kids are engaged in authentic, experiential, thoughtful practices in which reading, writing, drawing, and thinking serve to build their knowledge store. These efforts result in diverse, child-authored and illustrated projects, such as the posters, poems, and student-authored books described in the last two synthesizing lessons (Strategy Book 6). Note that the examples included here are simply suggestions: the idea is to give kids much to think about so that they come up with original (and often far more interesting!) ways to share all their new learning. We want classrooms brimming with kids who are enthusiastic, independent learners, so we make sure kids have the time, materials and reading/thinking strategies that allow them to explore their own learning.

## Hallmarks for Creating an Environment for Thoughtful Content Literacy Instruction

The learning opportunities we create

- focus on comprehension and understanding rather than memorization
- connect us with real-world, real-life issues
- center around content-related big ideas, essential questions, and key concepts
- engage students' interest and enthusiasm
- encourage student choice and independent thinking
- provide time for thinking to take place
- set expectations that push students toward higher levels of thinking

When we demonstrate our thinking, we

- illustrate what good thinking looks like
- focus on topics and ideas worth thinking about
- reveal our curiosity, interests, and passions
- explicitly show how we understand what we read through questioning, drawing inferences, synthesizing information and ideas, etc.

We support attitudes and interactions that

- emphasize a common language for talking about thinking and learning
- encourage and respect different viewpoints and perspectives
- ensure that students experience positive ways of thinking about and engaging with content
- spark thoughtful discussion and debate
- support students' enthusiasm for discovery and their readiness to investigate what's new or unusual

Student artifacts and work products

- are the result of thoughtful work and send the message that thinking matters
- make thinking visible
- involve sharing knowledge and teaching others
- illustrate the process of thinking and learning

Materials, texts, and the literature that students read

- encourage a variety of perspectives, opinions, and interpretations
- require students to solve or discover problems
- provoke discussion and raise significant issues
- focus on content-related themes, issues, and/or essential questions

Adapted from *Intellectual Character: What It is, Why It Matters, and How to Get It* by Ron Ritchart

## A Framework for Reading, Writing, and Research

We developed the following four-part framework to guide lesson design and planning for instruction in science and social studies. Each part of the framework describes what teachers do to guide instruction and how kids engage in these varied learning experiences.

<b>Activate, explore, and build background knowledge</b>		
<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Kids</b>	<b>Toolkit lesson link</b>
Connect curriculum topics to kids' interests and experiences	Connect new information to their background knowledge, lives, and experiences	Lesson 1: Think about the Text Lesson 6: Make Connections
Collect and organize materials related to the topic—picture books, artifacts, charts, magazines, and online sources	Explore, experience, and learn about the topic using texts, visuals, artifacts	Lesson 2: Notice and Think about Nonfiction Features Lesson 7: Merge Thinking with New Thinking
Immerse kids in topic and encourage questions and responses	Listen, read, talk, view, draw, and write to respond and wonder	Lesson 8: View and Read to Learn and Wonder Lesson 9: Wonder about New Information
<b>Read to learn and understand information</b>		
Demonstrate ways to read, view, and respond to information	Read, write, talk, and draw to notice new information	Lesson 7: Merge Thinking with New Thinking
Show how to merge thinking with new information	React, respond, and merge their thinking as they learn new information	Lesson 8: View and Read to Learn and Wonder
Model learning from visual and text features	Notice and respond to information from features	Lesson 2: Notice and Think about Nonfiction Features Lesson 14: Make Sense of New Information
Demonstrate how to ask and answer questions	Develop questions and read/view to answer them	Lesson 9: Wonder about New Information Lesson 10: Use Questions as Tools for Learning Lesson 11: Read with a Question in Mind

## **Summarize and synthesize information and big ideas**

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Kids</b>	<b>Toolkit lesson link</b>
Teach paraphrasing information Teach the difference between important information and details	Put information into own words to understand it Sort out what's important from less important details	Lesson 16: Figure Out What's Important
Show ways to summarize information and add your thinking	Begin to summarize information in their own words, through writing, pictures, and features	Lesson 17: Paraphrase Information
Demonstrate examples of ways to summarize and synthesize learning	Organize and summarize learning in a variety of ways	Lesson 18: Organize Your Thinking as You Read Lesson 19: Summarize Information Lesson 20: Read to Get the Big Idea

## **Share learning and demonstrate understanding**

Establish expectations for projects and ways to respond to and assess them	Demonstrate understanding and learning through writing and drawing posters, poems, books, etc.	Lesson 19: Summarize Information Lesson 21: Explore and Investigate
Model possibilities for final projects	Become teachers as they share knowledge with others through projects	Lesson 22: Share Your Learning
Support kids to articulate their learning process	Express their ideas and how they went about learning	Lesson 21: Explore and Investigate
Provide opportunities for kids to respond to each other's work to build a community of learners	Talk, write, and draw as they learn from and respond to one another	Lesson 22: Share Your Learning

## Using Toolkit Components in Science and Social Studies

There are several ingredients that help you integrate *Primary Toolkit* comprehension practices and lessons with reading, writing, and research in science and social studies. These include:

### ***Science and Social Studies Slideshow***

Using photographs of kids at work in classrooms and examples of student work, the slideshow, (see the DVD-ROM), “Reading, Writing, and Research in Science and Social Studies,” shows researcher’s workshop in action. It summarizes general principles for integrating comprehension instruction with curriculum topics. We show how this happens in a kindergarten unit on Africa, a first grade study of the rain forest, and a second grade science unit on weather. The four-part framework and practices described here can be used with any topic under the sun. We’ve just shared examples from district curriculum units we’ve taught in classrooms. The last section of the slide show demonstrates how children begin to use comprehension practices such as noticing new learning, asking and answering questions, and summarizing learning through drawing and writing as they research and investigate self-selected topics.

### ***Classroom Video: “Content Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Research.”***

This video with primary classroom teacher Brad Buhrow shows children summarizing and synthesizing information about the rain forest. Kids create and construct a large, three-dimensional rain forest mural in the classroom, adding pictures, captions, labels, and other features of rain forest plants and animals as they learn about them. We also see a small group lesson, observing how Brad supports kids to play with language and create poems about the rain forest. As Brad confers with kids as they work in pairs or on their own during this researcher’s workshop, we see how artistic and written expression are powerful tools kids can use to share their excitement and demonstrate their learning.

### ***The Six Strategy Books***

Each and every Toolkit lesson can be used with science or social studies texts—trade nonfiction, magazine articles, poetry, narratives, you name it. Just as kids use strategies for monitoring understanding, activating and connecting background knowledge, asking questions, etc. in their literacy block, so they apply these whenever they listen, read, and view in other subjects. Over the course of these lessons, comprehension practices become tools for kids as they “read to learn” across the curriculum.

The Summarizing and Synthesizing strategy book focuses on lessons that teach kids to summarize and synthesize information as part of a classroom unit on the rain forest. Although kids explore the rain forest topic in these lesson examples, these lessons can be used with any curricular topic. The four lessons in this strategy book include how to take notes and record information, summarize big ideas in response to a story about the rain forest, and create projects that synthesize information and demonstrate understanding. As kids internalize these reading, thinking and writing strategies over time, they become research practices children use to explore and investigate topics they are passionate about.

### ***Keep Reading! A Source Book of Short Text***

The *Toolkit Source Book* is chock-full of articles on science and social studies topics from bald eagles, to recycling, to Helen Keller.