

What is “Authentic Text”?

-and why should I use it in my classroom?

Many terms swirl around the efforts to improve student performance and prepare them for college and career. One such term is “authentic text.”

Authentic text may be thought of as any text that was written and published for the public. Journal articles, blog posts and novels are just a few examples. Authentic texts are written for “real world” purposes and audiences: to entertain, inform, explain, guide, document or convince. In fact, authentic texts need not even be written words. Audio files, virtual tours, speeches, blueprints, photos, video clips and other non-written items that can be read or interpreted are also considered to be text.

In contrast, most of what students read in school is written for the purpose of student instruction at the student’s grade level, and is intended to provide content in a clear and accessible manner. Thus, most are heavily structured through headings, subheadings and bullets, often starting with an overview and review questions at the end. Use of graphic devices such as photos, diagrams, white space and bold or italic font help to draw the student’s attention to important points. Vocabulary and sentence structure are controlled to support comprehension.

The problem is that students who have been exposed only to instructional text are unprepared for the kinds of materials they must confront beyond school, such as academic journals, contracts, tax forms and instructions, technical manuals, student loan applications, consumer reviews or news reporting and analysis. In order for our students to be prepared when they graduate to face the challenges before them, they must have the skills and strategies to independently grapple with a variety of formats and purposes as well as a range of kinds of prose structure and vocabulary.

Authentic Text for Deeper Student Engagement and Learning This is the second of two articles on authentic text.

To re-cap: Authentic text may be thought of as any text created for “real life” purposes – as opposed to textbooks and other materials developed for classroom use. In order to ensure our graduates have the literacy skills to successfully navigate the demands of their future, we must provide them with the skills and strategies to independently grapple with a variety of formats and purposes as well as a range of kinds of prose structure and vocabulary.

This installment will discuss two questions. First, what instructional benefits do authentic texts offer? And second, how does a teacher (whether of history, biology or another area) select and utilize these texts effectively?

Instructional Benefits of Authentic Texts Real-world materials, including magazine articles, video and audio resources, primary historical sources, technical documents and so on, bring a wealth of benefits to the classroom. Among them:

- Increased student engagement and motivation

- Expanded opportunities for differentiation and scaffolding using text sets and a variety of text types
- Enhanced understanding of vocabulary and concepts through multiple exposures in context
- Greater understanding of how the ideas and language of a discipline are expressed, and serving as mentor texts for writing and speaking tasks
- Clearer understanding of the purpose and role of a discipline in the real world, making the learning more meaningful and relevant
- As a basis for academic discussion and collaboration on tasks with a real audience and purpose
- Offers opportunities for students to think critically and synthesize ideas from multiple perspectives.

Ways to Use Authentic Texts In selecting authentic texts, begin by considering your unit of study.

1. What are the big ideas and important details or skills? How do these connect to the real world?

2. Consult your class textbook: does it provide a useful framework for these goals? Where would more engaging instruction fit in?

3. Conduct an internet search of the topic. Look for websites, images, videos, audio and current issues.

4. Select 3-6 resources that will help your students enlarge their understanding of the topic. Consider grade level, accessibility, prior knowledge needed and age-level appropriateness, as well as how you intend to have your students work with these texts. Individual texts and text sets can be used in a variety of ways. For example:

- Scaffold student independence by providing a set of several texts on the topic of study. By beginning with a more accessible text, students can build background knowledge, basic concepts and vocabulary. Follow this with more complex texts which the students can now access, having established a mental framework on the topic.
- Differentiate through text sets by assigning groups to work on different texts, with lower level students working on the more accessible text while mid-level and stronger students work on texts that provide more challenge. Then jigsaw and have each member of the new group share their learning. Follow up with an activity requiring all the students to make use of the entire set of information.
- Use the texts as examples, or mentor texts, for student writing. For example, if teaching how to write a critical review (of a book, film, artwork, music, research, etc.), begin with several authentic examples of the format and have the class discuss and analyze how the author addresses the purpose, audience, language, style and other features that make reviews effective. Follow by modeling for the whole class while you think aloud and incorporate student input. Students may then work in pairs, groups or individually to write their own reviews.