

## Curriculum Trends in Reading

PAT CUNNINGHAM

### Computers and Reading

What do Apples, PEPS, and Peanuts all have in common? That question might cause parents to stop and ponder, but would be answered instantly by most youngsters: "They're all computers, of course!" Computers are here and a walk through any school will convince you they have found a space in many classrooms. But what are they doing besides taking up space? If computers are used to provide on a screen what has previously been provided in a workbook or programmed instructional text, then we have found a more expensive way to insure student boredom and passivity. In many schools the PTA has provided the computers and left us running to catch up and figure out what to do with them.

Two new books are must reading for anyone who needs a crash course on computers and reading. *Computers and Reading Instruction* (Leo and Olga Geoffrion, Addison Wesley, \$13.95) and *Computer Applications in Reading*, second edition (George E. Mason, Jay S. Blanchard, and Danny B. Daniel, International Reading Association, members, \$5.50; nonmembers, \$8.00) provide the novice with readable descriptions of currently available software, suggestions for evaluating software and more possible uses for computers in the reading curriculum than most of us can digest. In spite of the fact that both these books are hot off the press, the information in them will soon need

some updating. The technology is developing so rapidly that no book alone can be depended on to give the latest and best information. For that purpose, I recommend to you "The Printout," a new monthly feature in *The Reading Teacher*. Written by George Mason, who is acknowledged by many as the leading expert in reading and computers, this column will provide, with only a three-month publication lag, information about hardware and software as well as suggestions for use and readable interpretations of the research. For those of you who want a glimpse into the fascinating world of our computer future once the technology catches up with our most creative ideas, I recommend the enchanting and thought-provoking *Reading and Writing with Computers* (CSR Reading Education Report No. 42. See CSR article for ordering information).

### Writers Make Better Readers

It would be impossible to be in the public schools these days and not notice that we are in the midst of a writing revolution. Spurred by the effort of Donald Graves and others, teachers at all grade levels across this nation and in other countries are engaging children in the writing process. While it naturally follows that children who write become better writers, it may not be quite so obvious that children who write also become better readers. Teachers who are involving children in daily writing, however, report that both the writing and the reading of their children are showing dramatic increases and that this is particularly true for the below-average readers.

Consider the three stages of the writing process and what happens in each that might foster improved reading. In the prewriting stage, children think about what they will write and the major ideas they want to include. Everyone knows that to write about something, you must know a lot about it. Often, writers discover that they don't know enough. Faced with this lack of knowledge, we run to other sources—friends, relatives, and books. Children read a variety of sources—tradebooks, textbooks, magazines, encyclopedias, newspapers—in order to gain information about the topic they wish to write about. This unassigned, recreational reading greatly increases both the amount and the variety of text children—and particularly poor readers—are apt to encounter. Furthermore, because the children are reading for their own specific and real purposes, they are more active and selective comprehenders.

The second stage of the writing process is writing. As children put down their ideas, they are encouraged to put in the letters they are sure of and get help on words they are unable to spell. This purposeful listening for sound-letter relationships often results in children's learning some phonics, which years of workbooks and ditto sheets have failed to teach. On a higher level, children who write must consider the organization of their ideas and agonize over choosing "just the right word." Sensitivity to writers' organization and vocabulary are essential to reading comprehension.

Rewriting is the final stage. With help from teacher and friends, children revise and edit. In addition to considering

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the big issues of how clearly and cleverly have I communicated, children also consider style, form, spelling, and mechanics. Dictionaries, thesauruses, and examples of the genre (plays, poems, and so forth) are consulted as a normal part of the rewriting. While these three writing stages were discussed separately in order to show how reading enters into each, in actual practice, the stages go on recursively. As we write, we read and think—get started writing—reread a little—fix something—consult a source—write some more, and so on. Regardless of the stage, writers are constantly reading—their own and other authors' writing. While the research data is not yet

in, teachers who are involved in this exciting venture and common sense both strongly suggest that writers do indeed make better readers—and vice versa. (A few recent sources about writing and readers especially for poor readers are: Marie Dionisio, "Write? Isn't this Reading Class?" *The Reading Teacher* (April 1983): 746-750; Irene Gaskins, "A Writing Program for Poor Readers and Writers and the Rest of the Class Too," *Language Arts* (November/December 1982): 854-861; Sandra Stotsky, "The Role of Writing in Developmental Reading," *Journal of Reading* (January, 1982): 330-340.

**CSR Provides Up-to-Date Information**  
Keeping up to date is an impossible task for all of us—but one we must keep working at or risk getting so far behind, we give up entirely. The Center for the Study of Reading, established in the mid 1970s with federal funds to investigate reading comprehension, is a major source of up-to-date information. Their technical reports (reports of empirical research) and reading education reports (reports that include research but are written for "normal" educators and that focus on instructional applications) often contain information that given the lamentable publication lag, will not appear in books or journals for two or three

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#### Previews Are Not Just for Movies

It is Saturday night and you wait in the theater for a movie you have longed to see to begin. Before the feature, however, are previews of coming attractions. A movie you have never heard of is previewed. The characters and setting are introduced, some idea of the plot is given but you are left not knowing how it all gets resolved. As the preview ends and the feature movie begins, you are wondering who you can con into babysitting next Saturday night!

Most of us have had the experience of seeing a preview and, on the basis of this small enticement, deciding to see the whole film. The research of Michael Graves and associates ("Effects of Previewing Difficult Short Stories on Low Ability Junior High School Students' Comprehension, Recall and Attitudes," *Reading Research Quarterly*, Spring 1983: 260-276) suggests that previews work for stories in much the same way as they do for movies. In a series of four studies, Graves and others have demonstrated that being given a preview before reading a short story improves students' attitudes toward the reading assignment as well as their recall of information not contained in the preview.

The article contains an example of a preview that contains statements and questions designed to capture interest and provide a link to topics familiar to the students; a synopsis including setting, characters, and plot up to the point of climax; and the definition of three or four difficult words. It is evident from the example given that "the previews are very different from the brief introductory statements frequently found in reading and literature texts. These previews make a serious attempt to engage the students and tell students a good deal about the stories" (267). (Guidelines for developing previews are available from the authors.)

The data, which indicate that giving students previews increases their comprehension, are particularly impressive since the students involved were 7th- and 8th- grade inner city, Title I students reading several years below grade level. Furthermore, their inferential comprehension improved as much as or more than their literal comprehension. The researchers speculate that "giving students previews frees them at least somewhat from attending to the details of what they are reading and enables them to devote more attention to dealing with higher level matters such as making inferences" (275).

It is an accepted tenet of reading comprehension theory that the more prior knowledge you have, the more you will comprehend and the better you will like it. Previews are a proven way of providing that prior knowledge. With the Graves' article and guidelines, teachers can write previews for the stories they already have available for their students. Better yet, a group of teachers could write many previews which all could be shared! This would appear to be a no-cost, time-efficient way of getting more comprehension from your currently-available materials. □

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