What Do We Teach, and When Do We Teach It?

Textbook publishers often repeat everything year after year. Teachers may like it, but it works against good articulation.

Sequencing and spiraling of skills is desired by educators in textbook series in most subject areas. The intent of this practice is to ensure the structured learning of new material and the review of previously practiced skills at levels of increasing difficulty. It allows teachers to concentrate on increasingly challenging skills at their respective levels because they can assume that students will be familiar with basic material.

But does it really work this way? I think not. I contend that sequencing and spiraling is license for repetition and boredom. Let's examine one publisher's partial Tables of Contents of four high school language composition texts shown in Table 1.

The listings are identical, except for the addition of a topic in grades 11 and 12. Does this indicate an orderly progression of skills? Possibly—but look at a comparison of actual textbook exercises for one topic, Writing a Description: Descriptive Language, shown in Table 2.
This mindless repetition exists primarily because every teacher at every grade wants to teach... everything.

In Table 2, explanations and exercises are highly similar, revealing no progression of skills, no progressive increase in difficulty. These typical exercises make me question how anyone could write the same lesson so consistently. Were they written on a word processor with copy and edit functions? Did the editor accidentally zap out the explanation in the grade 11 text? Is this how publishers create sequencing and spiraling of skills? Is this how my child will learn to write?

Although near word-for-word repetition is widespread in most subject series textbooks, it is most evident in K-12 language arts textbooks. The textbook series represented in Tables 1 and 2 is not unusual; it is simply a blatant example.

Why do publishers do this? This mindless repetition exists primarily because every teacher at every grade wants to teach, or have available to teach, everything. Therefore, publishers, who usually produce what customers want, include almost every
thing in every book. What happens to sequencing and spiraling when several teachers within a district begin each year on page one and proceed sequentially through the book, completing only half to two-thirds by June?

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<td>In order to pinpoint just how your subject looks, sounds, smells, tastes, or feels, you will have to choose your words carefully and place them exactly. By exercising such care in choosing and placing words, you will make your description vivid. In addition, the precise words you choose will place your individual stamp on your writing.</td>
<td>In order to pinpoint just how your subject looks, sounds, smells, tastes, or feels, you need to pick and place your words exactly. As a result, your writing will become vivid almost automatically, for precise language gives descriptive writing an individual spark and twist.</td>
<td>Remember the following points when you are choosing words for descriptive writing. For more information about any of these points, see Chapter 5.</td>
<td>In order to describe your subject exactly as you experienced or imagined it, you need to select and place your words exactly. Your writing will thereby become vivid almost without conscious effort, because precise language gives descriptive writing an individual flavor and twist.</td>
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When it comes time to choose between two similar words to use in a description, keep the following suggestions in mind. If you want to know more about any of these suggestions, refer to Chapter 5.

1. Always choose the most specific word.

   - **GENERAL:** The building stood on the place like a silent sentinel.
   - **SPECIFIC:** The castle stood on the cliff like a silent sentinel.

**EXERCISE 9. Using Descriptive Language.** Rewrite the following paragraph using more exact and vivid language. Use figures of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine any sentences as you see fit.

Paul stopped rowing to look at the sunset. It was as pretty as a picture. A group of birds moved just over the water one last time before going to their roosting places. Shadows of the trees were on the water of the lake. Behind the trees the sun looked beautiful. A shiny fish came out of the water near Paul’s boat. It scared him. Everything was so quiet. When it got dark, Paul took the boat back to shore. He had a good feeling.

2. Always, always, always pick the most specific word.

   - **GENERAL:** I would start out in the boat in the long shadows of the trees.
   - **SPECIFIC:** I would start out in the canoe... in the long shadows of the pines.

   —E. B. White

3. Always pick the most specific word.

   - **GENERAL:** The bird soared over the grove of barren trees.
   - **MORE SPECIFIC:** The eagle soared over the grove of barren maples.

   —Ariane Ruskin

4. Remember the following points when you are choosing words for descriptive writing. For more information about any of these points, see Chapter 5.

   1. Always select the most specific word.
      - **GENERAL:** The people were splendid artists.
      - **SPECIFIC:** The Egyptians were splendid portraitists.

**EXERCISE 10. Using Descriptive Language.** Rewrite the following paragraph using more exact and vivid language. Use figures of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine any sentences as you see fit.

Our rubber raft went quickly down the last river. Cliffs of the surrounding gorge sped by like blinking lights. The current carried us rapidly. The raft moved up and down over the foamy waves and rocks. Then we entered a quiet piece of still water. The peace was nice. Finally we were as safe as a doorknob.

**EXERCISE 11. Using Descriptive Language.** Rewrite the following paragraph using more exact and vivid language. Use a figure of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine sentences as you see fit.

Our rubber raft went quickly down the last river. Cliffs of the surrounding gorge sped by like blinking lights. The current carried us rapidly. The raft moved up and down over the foamy waves and rocks. Then we entered a quiet piece of still water. The peace was nice. Finally we were as safe as a doorknob.

**EXERCISE 11. Using Descriptive Language.** Rewrite the following paragraph by using more exact and vivid language. Use a figure of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine sentences as you see fit.

Our rubber raft went quickly down the last river. Cliffs of the surrounding gorge sped by like blinking lights. The current carried us rapidly. The raft moved up and down over the foamy waves and rocks. Then we entered a quiet piece of still water. The peace was nice. Finally we were as safe as a doorknob.

Camping out was a good experience. First we set up our tent and put some things into it. We then got some wood and made a fire. Next we cooked dinner, which turned out to be very good. After our meal we sat around the fire, sang some nice songs, and shot the breeze for a while before turning in.
"... what do students learn when, each year, they get a different book with essentially the same content?"

And what do students learn when, each year, they get a different book with essentially the same content? Do they learn clarity, brevity, and accuracy? Or do they learn repetition, redundancy, or worse—that writing is boring?

Let’s look again at Table 2. Consistent with most 7-12 or 9-12 language textbook series, the grade 12 book is the “complete program.” The grade 12 book usually includes what the other grades may only imply. Furthermore, it is often better written.

Therefore, if sequencing and spiraling of skills is the reason your district purchases a series, wouldn’t it be more honest to purchase only one book—the best book—for all students? Incoming seventh-graders could be given the grade 12 book—the complete program—and told it would be theirs for six years, grades 7-12. They would know what they were supposed to learn. They could mark their book just as college students mark texts. And at graduation each student would be given the book. After all, the life of most textbooks is six years. Perhaps, by using one book for six years, students would get to know it and use it when writing in other subjects (writing across the curriculum). Articulation between grades and between teachers would be guaranteed. Sequencing and spiraling, if desired, would have to be directed by the district’s curriculum guide, not the publishers’ series.

There is another option. Three publishers whose textbooks I examined did not follow this practice. These books are thin, containing about half the number of pages as some of the best-sellers. Students in these programs are required to think, to use their own words, their own ideas. They experience the word manipulation struggle every writer faces in an attempt to transfer images and concepts from one mind to another. However, these books don’t sell well. They don’t try to provide everything at every grade.

Connie Muther is Director, Textbook Adoption Advisory Services, 250 Esquire Dr., Manchester, CT 06040.

Call for Manuscripts

The May 1988 issue of Educational Leadership will focus on “Families, Values, and Schools.” We welcome articles dealing with the effects of schools on students’ values and the relationship between parents and educators in this process. Rather than expressions of personal opinion, we prefer analyses of the way values are reflected in the curriculum and descriptions of successful programs. Deadline for manuscripts is November 1.

Writing for Educational Leadership

Papers should be written in direct, conversational style and be as brief as possible (five to ten doubled-spaced pages).

References may be cited briefly in the text (Jones 1978) and listed in bibliographic form at the end of the article, but citations in the form of endnotes are also acceptable. For examples of either style, see The Chicago Manual of Style (13th edition, University of Chicago Press) or a recent issue. Please double-space everything.

Unsolicited manuscripts judged to merit further consideration are sent for evaluation by from three to five reviewers, usually including both scholars and practitioners, but final decisions on publication are made by the Executive Editor. Manuscripts are returned only if the author supplies a self-addressed envelope with the necessary postage.

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