

Why the Front Matter Might Actually Matter

Categories: Professional Learning, Reading, Writing

We all know that no matter how inspired and amazing we are as teachers, planning high-quality lessons from scratch for every hour of instruction is impossible. Like most teachers, I looked to the programs on my shelf for inspiration, materials, and a scope and sequence. I wanted to take ownership of any lessons I taught, modifying them in anticipation of, and in response to, my students' needs. I assumed that I could understand the intentions of a publisher's program by flipping through lessons without reading the introduction at the beginning of a teacher's manual, what I now know to be called the "front matter."

I believed that the front matter was there to meet state requirements, to convince my district to purchase the materials, and to explain why I should teach the materials with "fidelity." Reading those first 30 pages seemed like a low priority.

I was amazed to discover (quite recently) that there, in the front matter of *Making Meaning* and *Being a Writer*, were the tips and tricks I needed to take ownership of the lessons.

Here's what I found . . .

Things to Keep in Mind

A couple of key ideas I discovered in the front matter would have been good for me to know and keep at the forefront of my mind:

"Making meaning of the text-not using a particular strategy-is the primary goal of Making Meaning."

I often added more strategy practice rather than spending a greater portion of instructional time supporting comprehension of the text at hand. (Whoops!)

"Cooperative structures are taught to increase the students' engagement and accountability for participation."

When short on time, I sometimes cut "Turn to Your Partner" and other cooperative structures to preserve the whole-class share-out, without thinking about how this change reduced the accountability of quieter students. (Argh!)

Sections I'd Mark with Self-stick Notes

A few parts I might flag to reread throughout the school year. Yes...not only do I now think it's a good idea to read the front matter, I actually think parts are worth reading more than once!

In Making Meaning

- The "Managing the Program" section has an overview detailing each unit, the trade books used for read-alouds, the length of each unit, and the focus(es) of each unit for long-term planning.
- "Setting Up a Leveled Classroom Library" provides guidance on this topic including the number of books recommended, the percentage of books to select for each reading level, and resources to support the leveling of books in a classroom library.

- “Suggestions for Simplifying Questions” is a handy chart for making questions more accessible for ELLs.

In Being A Writer

- “How the Grade # Program Is Organized” provides an overview of units, suggestions for preparing daily lessons, and sample calendar for long-term planning.
- “Teacher Conferences” sections share sample questions and suggestions for making writing conferences that support students’ intrinsic motivation and reinforce what’s taught.
- “Tips for Managing the Program in Your Classroom” is important to revisit because, even mid-year, there is value in revamping procedures.

The Bottom Line on Front Matter

Investing the time up front acquainting myself with the front matter would have saved me time flipping haphazardly through a manual as I planned for the year. And revisiting the core principals of the programs could have served as a check to make sure the revisions I was considering were wise.

Without a classroom of my own this year (sigh), I can’t apply my newfound discoveries, so I’m writing this in the hopes of inspiring you to grab a pad of self-stick notes and crack open your manuals to the (possibly pristine) front matter.

This post is Margaret’s second in a series about Front Matter. To read her first blog post, “The Dog Ate My Front Matter,” [click here](#).