

# Surfacing the Big Ideas

**Distinguish what you think is important from what the author most wants you to get out of the text.**

Surfacing the big ideas in a text is a perennial problem for striving readers. One reason is that they often have difficulty separating what they think is important from the author's intent. We want them to understand that both matter, their thinking and the author's. The last thing we want is for striving readers to think that their thinking doesn't matter! So, in this lesson, we show them how to distinguish between the two.

**Preparation.** Choose an engaging one-page nonfiction article from *Scholastic News*, *Junior Scholastic*, *Time for Kids*, or any other magazine or Internet source that is aimed at kids. Texts that express a point of view—editorials, opinion pieces, and argument essays—are most effective. Each student needs a pencil, clipboard, and a copy of the article. Have three or four additional articles for independent practice toward the end of the lesson.

## 1 Connect and Engage

Gather kids on the floor as you model. Engage them by asking them to preview the article and then turn and talk about what they think it is mostly about. Explain that what the reader thinks is the most important information in the text may not be what the writer thinks is the most important information. It's important to ask ourselves, "What is the writer trying to convey?" and "What is his or her big idea(s)?" *When readers read, they often find information that is very interesting and important to them. Sometimes it is the same information the writer wants you to take away from the piece, but other times it is a different idea. And that's okay, because nothing matters more than your thinking when you read. But the writer's thoughts and information matter, too. So, we have to be able to separate what we think is most important and interesting from what the writer most wants us to get out of the text, the writer's big idea(s). Sometimes they are the same thing. Other times they are different. Both matter.*

## 2 Model

Read through a few paragraphs of the article, identifying what you think is important and distinguishing it from what the piece is mainly about. *Let me show you how it works for me.*

*When I read something that I think is important, I am going to underline it, mark it with a star, and maybe jot some thoughts in the margin. When I read something I think the writer thinks is important, I will mark that with a “W” for writer. If I code it with both a star and a “W,” that means I agree with what the writer thinks is most important.*

*To figure out what the writer thinks is most important, I am going to look mainly at two things. First the title—the title is often a clue as to what the writer thinks is a big idea. As I read the text, I am also going to look at how much time the writer spent on that particular idea, the one in the title. But I am going to stop and jot when I come to something that matters to me, because my thinking matters, too. Read through the text and stop to annotate when you come to something that interests you, a detail of sorts. First of all, I am going to put a star where it says \_\_\_\_\_ because I have a connection to that information and it is interesting to me. But I am quite sure it is not something that the writer cares too much about. It is just a small detail, not a big idea. But it matters to me.*

*Read the next paragraph. As I listen to my inner voice, it is easy for me to notice something that is important to me, but I have to remember to read with an eye to what the writer wants me to learn, too. Oh, look here. The writer has written that \_\_\_\_\_ and she spends quite a bit of time talking about that idea. I also notice that the paragraph relates to the title; I think this might be one of the bigger ideas from the writer’s perspective. I’ll mark it with a “W.”*

### **3** Guide

*Now we can do it together.* Hand out the article, pencils, and clipboards. Read the next paragraph, stop, and have students jot something that they think is interesting or important, something they think is important to the writer, or something they think is important to both parties. Have them turn and talk to a partner and share their thinking as you walk around, scanning their work and listening in.

Once they have finished, have students turn their paper over and ask them to jot down three things:

- Something they learned that they think is important to remember
- Something the writer most wants them to get out of the article, a big idea
- One optional response and any questions they have. (Explain that questions the reader has are the most important questions, not the teacher’s questions or the textbook’s questions.)



#### **4 Practice**

Have three fascinating articles available at different levels. Do an enthusiastic sales pitch on each one and let kids choose. Choice always matters! Kids should have text they can and want to read. If a striving reader chooses an article that is too hard, deal with it quietly in a conference. After kids go off to read, have them turn and talk about what they are supposed to do. When they're finished, choose several students to share out. If they are confused, remind them what you did during the lesson and tell them what you expect. Send them off to read and think. Move around the room, conferring with kids.

#### **5 Share**

When they come back to the sharing circle, have students turn their paper over and address the same three questions that they did together in the Guide portion of the lesson. Then, invite someone to share either an idea they thought was important to remember or one of the writer's big ideas. Invite a few more students to share with the whole group and then have each student share his or her learning with a classmate. When students are finished, thank them and remind them that the writer worked hard to get his or her ideas out there, so it is important for them to pay attention. But it is important for them to remember that their thinking matters, too.