

Introduction

“Is anybody in here from Armenia?” a ninth-grade girl asked her classmates. No one answered. She knew the answer was no. “Well, why should we read about it then?”

Classroom conversation moment from an academic literacy class, Thurgood Marshall Academic High School, San Francisco, 1997

Literacy and Identity

Why should we read about other people’s lives? Why should we read about places we’ve never been, have never heard of or cared much about? What’s the point of reading? Why do some people hate reading, or feel they are “just not readers,” when they are clearly very smart and talented? Why do other people feel that reading helps them survive ?

The selections in Part One of this anthology on the theme of Literacy and Identity provide starting points for your thinking and talking about these kinds of questions. In this first part, you will find a sampling of how others have come to define themselves as readers. Jimmy Santiago Baca’s desire to know more about his Latino cultural heritage helps him struggle to understand the words on the page. Richard Wright shares how his discovery of reading came to direct his life.

Literacy and Power

What is the relationship between literacy and power? Societies throughout history and around the world have limited literacy for people as a way to reinforce inequality. Girls in Afghanistan, for example, were not allowed to go to school for many years until the Taliban rule was ended in 2002. Access to a quality education can make a big difference in how much money one is likely to earn throughout a lifetime.

In Part Two of this anthology, *Literacy and Power*, the selected readings explore these questions and more personal aspects of the relation of literacy to power. We read about the power of reading as it transforms people's lives. Malcolm X finds that reading makes him come "mentally alive." In the poem "Precious Words," Emily Dickinson shares her belief that words can keep our spirits alive in difficult times. Gary Lee, frustrated by his failure to learn how to read in school, realizes years later that he must learn to read and write if he is to function in the world.

How We Read

Imagine yourself, for a moment, reading a cartoon, a menu in a restaurant, an e-mail from friends or family, a favorite magazine or newspaper section, a chapter in a textbook for a science class, or a book your best friend recommended. What exactly goes on in your mind when you are reading these different kinds of texts? Each of us reads differently. We bring our thoughts, experiences, and feelings about ourselves as readers to the words on the page.

Part Three of this anthology explores the questions of how we read. What goes on in our minds as we see the printed words on the page? Eighth-grade student Jennifer Liu offers her advice on how "to create a movie in your head" as you read. In "Superman and Me," Sherman Alexie describes how as a very young boy, he learned to see the world "in paragraphs."

Breaking Codes

The readings in this part present a variety of texts that challenge us because of their specific vocabularies, structures, and purposes. Movies, hip-hop, and science, for example, use coded language, and readers must be able to understand the code. In “Technicality,” the author helps us see that scientific terms can be changed from a reading challenge to a key to breaking the codes of scientific concepts. In the humorous essay “Important: Read This First,” the seemingly clear directions for reading a book can become a challenge when they are followed exactly as written. And, finally, Herbert Kohl, in “Comic Books,” explains the language and structure of comics.

Academic Literacy and the Reading Apprenticeship™ Framework

We created this anthology for students and teachers in “Academic Literacy” classes based on the model described in *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms*, by Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz (Jossey-Bass, 1999). We also offer it to students and teachers in other classrooms. The Reading Apprenticeship™ framework described in *Reading for Understanding* can be a powerful guide for building a community of readers. We offer this anthology to support and enrich the conversations in your classroom communities.

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