

Trolling for Topics: Teaching Students to Skim

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Introduction

After several years coaching National History Day students, summers became a time to think about the upcoming year's theme and ponder potential topics while puttering in the garden. One sunny July day I had one of those minor epiphanies that lead to an effective teaching activity. I realized that a treasure trove of topics awaits students in the pages of periodicals.

Background Information

Students are often stumped when it comes to picking a topic for NHD. They may have difficulty relating a topic idea to the theme, or they may lack sufficient historical background knowledge from which to select a topic. Other students have numerous ideas, but they yearn to be original and discover an esoteric and unique topic.

Pre-Lesson Questions

Before students embark on their voyage to discover a topic, they must possess an understanding of the theme. In order to accomplish this, teachers can conduct several preliminary activities over several class sessions to approach the theme from different directions. You might ask students to:

- read the article in this curriculum guide about the theme and create an outline or mind map of the various topic ideas listed;
- discuss how the theme relates to their previous social studies learning;
- free-write about what the theme means to them;

- review dictionary definitions or locate famous quotations using words from the theme;
- examine the class textbook's table of contents and chapter subheadings for relevant topics.

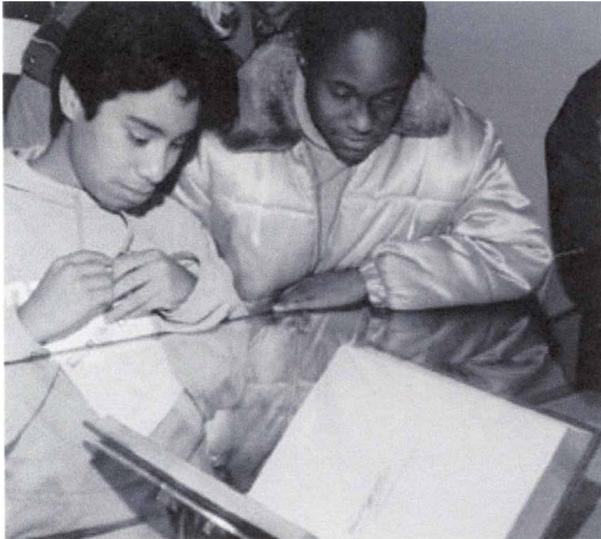
In particular, try to draw connections between topics students already know about and the theme. A mind map, or word web, can serve to illustrate the complexities of a topic and various links between that topic and the theme. Students are often surprised to discover more than one approach to connect a topic to the theme.

Once students demonstrate their understanding of the NHD theme, introduce them to the vital reading skill known as skimming. Ask them when they use this technique in their everyday lives. Typically, they deny ever doing so. You might point out that browsing Web pages is essentially the same skill in a different medium. Once engaged, they are ready to begin the formal lesson activity.

Resources Needed

Provide at least one magazine for every student, but if you have students with varying ability levels, two or three per student is preferable. The more magazines available, the more students remain engaged with their challenge. For this activity, consider any periodical that uses short articles, with punchy and engaging writing, and liberal use of illustrations.

Show students that history is everywhere, not just buried in dull textbooks or dusty professorial journals. Heavy use of graphics makes journals like *National Geographic* and *Smithsonian*



Students view the Social Security Act at the National Archives in Washington, DC.

inviting even for the casual browser. Additionally, bring in a magazine from home, like the Sierra Club's *Sierra* or *Nature Conservancy*, as well as your alumni magazines. Even the weekly news magazines contain relevant articles.

Helpful magazines in your school library may include the following:

- *Junior Scholastic* magazine (grades 6-8)
- *Scholastic Scope* magazine (grades 6-8)
- *Cobblestone* (grades 5-10)
- *The New York Times/Scholastic Upfront* (grades 9-12)
- *American History Illustrated* (grades 9-12)
- *American Heritage* (grades 9-12)
- *American Legacy* (grades 9-12)

In addition to the magazines, students will need a few pads of sticky notes to tag the articles for easy reference.

Lesson Plan

Explain to students that their challenge is to locate as many magazine articles relating to this year's NHD theme as possible. Their goal by the end of class is to share as many topic ideas as possible. Mention that as they do this, they will practice an important reading skill called skimming which will make their research tasks more efficient. Guide them through the following steps:

- 1. Peruse one or two magazines.**
 - a. Read the table of contents, looking for articles that may be relevant to the theme.
 - b. Spend only a few minutes identifying articles and tagging them with a sticky note.

Teacher Note: At this point, it does not matter whether the article is relevant or not; students will confirm this later in the lesson.

- 2. Pass their magazine(s) to the next student.**

- a. Repeat the process of scanning the table of contents.
- b. Tag articles missed by the previous student.

Teacher Note: One variation of this activity is to pretag the articles yourself, or assign the task to an older group of students. You might wish to involve parents by having them tag articles and donate magazines.

- 3. Practice skimming.** Read the following parts of one tagged article:

- first paragraph
- last paragraph
- summaries
- block quotations and captions under illustrations

Teacher Note: Allow less than five minutes for skimming. Since students will be passing their magazines on, they should not worry about reviewing all of the tagged articles at this point.

- 4. Judge the article's relevance to the theme.**

- a. Decide whether or not the article concerns a topic suitable for the NHD theme. If necessary, reskim sections or select certain paragraphs to read thoroughly in order to judge the article's content.
- b. Consider these questions as you skim the text and illustrations:
 - What is this text about?
 - Does it appear to relate to this year's NHD theme?
 - Does it appear to relate to other NHD topics we discussed?
 - What questions arise after skimming this text?

Teacher Note: While you may want students to formally answer these questions as they skim, allow them to freely explore the articles. Their purpose is to discover topic ideas and expand their choices. You might use the questions at the end of the session to have students unite about one or two articles they found most intriguing, or save this for a future assignment.

- c. Write one of the following on the sticky-note tag:
- "Yes" – the article's topic is relevant to the theme.
 - "Maybe" – I'm uncertain of the article's relevance.
 - "No" – the article's topic is not relevant.
- d. Pass the magazines and repeat this procedure until all the articles have been reviewed twice and the sticky-note tags labeled with a "yes," "no," or "maybe."

Teacher Note: Passing the magazines many times ensures that more students will be exposed to potential topics. Remind reluctant students that they are helping the entire class discover a greater number of topics to choose from.

Have students continue passing and reviewing the tagged magazine articles for the next 15 minutes or so. Instruct them to focus on the tagged "yes" articles first, the "maybe" articles next, and to skim the rest if they are waiting for a magazine to be passed.

As they finish their reviews, write the topics they discovered on the board. Emphasize historical connections between topics which students might not recognize. Point out the availability of local resources such as archives, museums, or historical organizations, for specific topics in your region. Encourage students to use the magazine articles as a starting place to locate more resources. *Smithsonian* magazine, for

example, lists bibliographic information for its articles at its website:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com>.

Assessment

Although teachers may prefer that students generate topic ideas without the cloud of assessment hanging over their heads, there are a number of ways to assess students without distracting them from the practice of skimming and analyzing the texts. You might, for example, ask students to initial the sticky notes and collect these as evidence of the number of articles they reviewed. For a more formal evaluation of their performance, have students select one of the articles they reviewed and write complete answers to the questions listed in item four, above. Although this may not directly address their ability to skim, reviewing their answers provides you with vital information about their comprehension of the article and whether they connect its content to the NHD theme and other topics.

If time is short, conduct an informal assessment by discussing the benefits of the skimming activity. Once the topics are listed, ask students to reflect on their accomplishment. Point out that the task they completed emulates the reading process they should follow as they hunt for resources pertaining to their NHD research topic. Explain that historians, when faced with deadline pressures, also skim material to locate the resources that best help them understand their subject and share their knowledge.

Teachers whose goal is to make NHD a meaningful process for their students appreciate the numerous skills students must employ to be successful. Often we take these skills for granted, uncertain how to support students who may be overwhelmed by the complexity of a major research and communication project. By articulating specific skills such as skimming, teachers can demystify a complex research process and nurture their students' life-long learning.