

Introduce New Topics with the Building Background Knowledge (BBK) Workshop

Excerpt from Transformational Literacy

The Building Background Knowledge (BBK) workshop is a protocol that generates enthusiasm for learning new content and motivates students to persevere through challenging work. The BBK immerses students in a new content topic. It is a short (two to three class periods) hook into a longer unit of study. The BBK builds curiosity and mystery as teachers guide students through a series of texts and other media, helping them to generate questions and promoting a spirit of inquiry about a new content area. The BBK provides a rich opportunity for students to have a range of reading experiences—complex texts, provocative texts that represent multiple perspectives, informational texts, and literary texts such as poetry and short stories—and is a strong vehicle for building literacy skills and content knowledge.

The BBK encompasses a series of steps that provide just enough provocative information to inspire students to want more. Students record what they know or think they know as well as their questions at each step in the process. As additional pieces of information are provided, some of the questions get answered and new questions are formulated. It is important to stress that the questions are answered not by the teacher but by individuals and small groups carefully reading and interpreting text.

At the end of the BBK, students have some basic knowledge about the topic, have gotten some clarity about things they thought they knew, but about which they may have had incorrect or incomplete information, and have generated questions they are eager to answer. The types of questions range from simply factual to more complex—questions that scholars in the field still grapple with—that require further digging and reading. Students are now well positioned to approach their long-term study with excitement and engagement.

BBKs are powerful for students, but they can also be quite time intensive for teachers to prepare. Doing one or two steps of a BBK may be more feasible to plan and teach than the entire protocol. A shortened protocol can still be valuable for students.

Overview of Steps in the BBK

The “mystery piece.” The mystery piece captures students’ interest in the topic they are about to begin studying. It piques their curiosity. Sometimes the mystery piece is an image, chart, graph, or poem that students must try to make sense of. It may be realia from a historical time period. It may even be an expert visitor who comes to the classroom or fieldwork at a museum or local site that is important to the upcoming content. Teachers may also put together a gallery walk of several mystery pieces, during which students explore images, charts, graphs, or short written pieces hanging around the room.

During this stage of a BBK, students still don't know what they are going to study. The mystery piece is designed to give them a clue, but to not give too much away, so that they are eager for more information. Teachers may give students questions to consider as they explore the piece, perhaps using a protocol such as think-pair-share, which gives students an opportunity to think independently before talking to a peer and making meaning collaboratively. Depending on students' familiarity with the medium of the mystery piece, they may need a skill-building mini-lesson (e.g., how to read a photo, how to interpret scatterplots). (See "Five Key Questions for Deconstructing Media.") At the conclusion of this stage, and following whole-class discussion, the topic of study is revealed and learning targets are introduced.

Five Key Questions for Deconstructing Media

- Who created this message?
- What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand this message differently?
- What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
- Why is this message being sent?

Source: Center for Media Literacy, Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York (nd).

Activating schema. During this stage of the BBK, the teacher conducts informal assessments to determine what students already know about the topic. Students may write in a journal or on a note-catcher about what they know about the topic. Primary students may draw pictures to represent what they know. As students think, write, and share about things they already know, they build connections to the topic they are going to study, which builds their confidence to begin learning new things.

Reading a common text. Students read a foundational text that anchors the learning in common content and vocabulary. This is an opportunity for teachers to select a complex text that not only builds content knowledge but also builds literacy skills. Teachers should move slowly with the common text, perhaps coming back to it over multiple days, and should provide students with note-catchers and other tools to help them read closely. Discussion protocols will help students make meaning as they work through the text. During this stage, and those that follow, students inevitably will generate many questions, which teachers should record.

Expert and jigsaw groups. In order to further build on what students have learned about their new area of study, teachers select a set of reading materials to expand students' knowledge to be used as "expert texts." In expert groups, all students will read the same expert text. They will gain expertise on that topic so that they can join a "jigsaw" group—a group made up of one student from each expert group—and speak knowledgeably about their topic. Students in jigsaw groups can answer questions that cut across the various topics and consider issues from multiple perspectives.

When students read in expert groups the text has a different kind of power. Because each student in an expert group will need to share his or her knowledge with the jigsaw group, every student will feel accountable to understand and communicate the content and ideas. No one in the jigsaw group will have read that particular document except for that student, and the group will depend on him or her to give them information they will need for their work.

In terms of helping students develop content knowledge *and* making sure all students are building their literacy skills, teachers must be mindful of two key factors when using expert and jigsaw groups: text selection and level of teacher support. When choosing texts for expert groups, be sure weaker readers have texts that they can access (however, this does not mean students should be grouped homogeneously). Struggling readers need a chance to build their content knowledge *from the text itself* (as opposed to just from listening to stronger readers explain what is in the expert texts): building their reading muscle is how they will become better readers. Also, expert groups may need considerable teacher support. Teachers can circulate to different groups to read the text aloud before students dig in, define key vocabulary that may not be easily determined from context, or ask text-dependent questions. Gone are the days of just giving groups folders with texts and leaving them totally on their own to decipher them.

Revisiting the original hook or mystery. This final stage of the BBK is a chance for students to reflect on their new knowledge and understandings. Students think about what they knew before the BBK, what they know now, and what they still have questions about. This is an important time for teachers to hold students accountable for returning to their texts to cite specific evidence for their assertions.