

Strategic Note-Taking with Middle Grade Non-Fiction

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Abstract:

This article offers a theoretical base for taking notes with a practical format for teaching middle school students how to keep from copying directly from the text. With comprehension as the focus, the note-taking procedure teaches middle school students to determine importance, recognize key words, synthesize those words into brief, meaningful information bytes, and then summarize those bytes into a main idea. Working sentence-by-sentence and paragraph-by-paragraph, students learn to think about what they are reading while they read.

Strategic Note-Taking with Middle Grade Non-Fiction

So much to read! So much to remember! How do we do it? More importantly, how do we teach our middle school students to do it? We take notes. Many forms of note-taking exist including the three-column (Bos and Vaughn, 2002), Cornell Template (Pauk, 1962), and charting, mapping, outlining and the sentence methods (Academic Skills Center, n.d.) and others. This article introduces one of the ‘other’ methods, a hybrid of the others if you will, utilizing the best of what they offer.

Note-taking takes different shapes from the passive strategy of underlining or highlighting (Custer, 1990) to the mindless, often verbatim copying of text. Middle school students tend to think if it’s in the book, it’s important so they mark it or copy it. The trouble with just underlining, highlighting, or copying verbatim is that only the hand and the eyes are engaged, the mind is not. Without the mind, thinking does not occur; without thinking, learning does not occur. Passive strategies provide students with no responsibility for determining the level of importance the text may hold. Our task becomes teaching students to think about the content on which they are taking notes.

Boyle (2010) points out that even though teachers use different instructional methods in middle-school science (and other) classes, lectures and note-taking still comprise a major portion of students' class time. He found that students who were taught a strategic note-taking method scored significantly higher on measures of immediate free recall, long-term free recall, comprehension, and number of lecture points and words recorded in their notes than students in a control group who used conventional note-taking.

Beginning in the upper elementary grades (middle school), students are expected to read source material and take written notes. Eventually, they are expected to write reports based on the written notes, meaning the notes they take need to be useful (Altemeier, 2006). The notes students take should be easier to read than the original text as they are shorter than the original text and are in a familiar style. The more frequently notes are taken the easier it becomes to take notes (Sanders, 2007). If students are taught a particular formula for taking notes beginning early in the middle school years, note-taking should become an automatic – and successful – behavior.

The essence of teaching middle school students how to take notes is teaching them how to read a paragraph. Too often, students slide their eyes over the text while thinking of something else. When asked, “Did you read it?” they respond honestly, “Yes.” That is, their eyes traveled over the words. No one said they had to think about what they are reading – they read without responsibility. The system of note-taking proposed here gives students a specific task to perform while reading – being on the look out for certain types of words.

Key Words

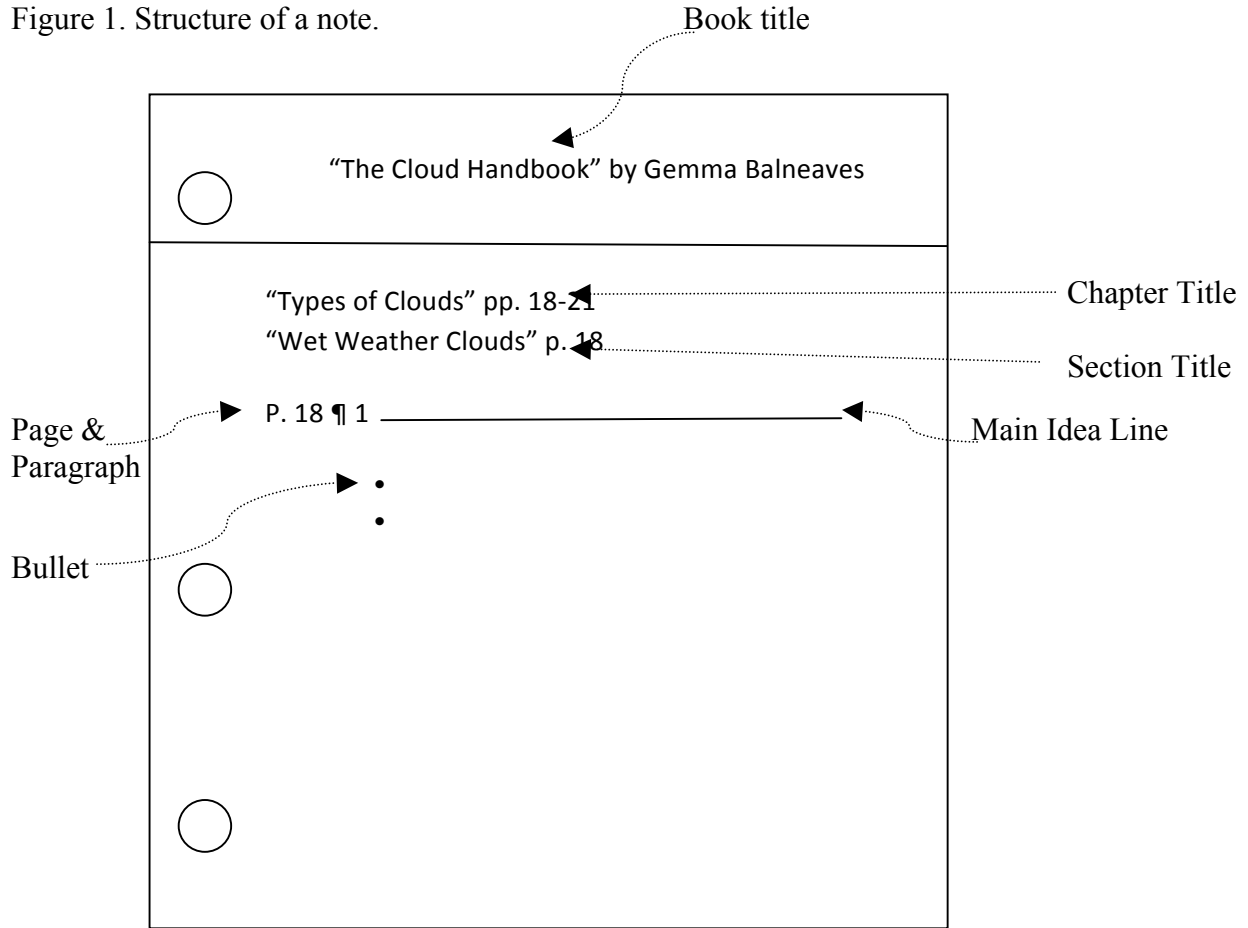
The strategy or formula suggested in this article provides middle school students a system for analyzing text for key words and then synthesizing those key words into succinct (five-word), specific information bytes. Nonfiction texts are easier to use when teaching students to take notes because of the nature of the content and its structure. Notes are taken on the details offered in the text. The details are the key words. Students need to learn to recognize key words. These include nouns, numbers and numerals, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions. We teach students to record these types of words by having them make note of anything with a capital letter, anything with a number word or numeral, action words, descriptive words, and position words.

In the beginning, we work sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Some teachers complain that reading this way slows down the reading too much. My response is, isn't that what we want? The students have been reading words, not paying attention to the meaning of those words. Over time, as the note-taking becomes more automated, the students' reading pace improves.

Format

The note-taking format described here has a particular structure that involves recording of details and synthesizing those details into a main idea. First, students record the title of the book and the author in the top margin; the section and/or chapter, and the page spread follow. Next, they indicate the page number and paragraph of the notes using the paragraph symbol – ‘backwards uppercase P with a vertical line through it.’ Beside the paragraph number, a horizontal line is drawn. This line is the last to be filled in when taking notes as this is where the paragraph's main idea is written. The main idea is a synthesis of all of the details which are written in a bullet list below the main idea line. Each sentence may have a bullet. To prevent students from falling back into the verbatim copying, students are taught the ‘only five words’ rule – each bullet can only have five words, symbols don't count. We'll get to symbols next. Figure 1 illustrates what a blank note structure looks like.

Figure 1. Structure of a note.





Often additional words are needed for the note to make sense, but the rule of five still stands. In these occasions, students need know how to substitute a symbol for a word or phrase. Josel (2000) refers to a student's own shorthand which includes symbols and abbreviations. Students might incorporate math symbols as substitutions or make up their own. It is important that both the teacher and student know what the symbol and/or abbreviation mean, so a key is often included. Figure 2 shows some examples of symbol and abbreviation substitutions.

Figure 2. Symbols

Symbol	Substituted For	Abbreviation	Substituted For
$&$ or $+$	and	bet.	between
\approx	almost, sort of	w/	with
\neq	not equal to,	w/o	without
\leftrightarrow	was, now	vs	against
\uparrow	increased, above		
\emptyset	no, not, none, nothing		

Teaching Sequence Teaching middle school students how to take notes might take several paths. One might teach students what key words are and how to find them in sentences and paragraphs before teaching the format for recording them. Conversely, one might teach students the concept of key words as they learn the structure of recording notes. Whichever suits one's style or curriculum probably works.

Teaching the 'rule of five' is an important step and works well with learning key words within the context of format (Saunders-Smith, 2009). Recall that one traditional problem with students taking notes is that they want to copy it all. The 'rule of five' helps prevent that. Each

bullet can only hold five words, symbols don't count. For example, take the first sentence on page 18 of *The Cloud Handbook* (Balneaves, out of print), "Stratus clouds are gray and flat and cover most of the sky." The students first must identify the key words. Too often, though, the student will end up offering the whole sentence! Reminded of the 'rule of five', the student might mention *stratus, clouds, gray, flat, cover, most, sky* or some collection like that. Here is where the reduction begins. When asked if the word *clouds* is needed, the answer is usually a 'no' with a grin. When asked why, the student mumbles that the whole book is about clouds so it is not needed. When the students are asked what's important in that sentence, they'll say something like, "Stratus gray flat cover most sky." Pretty good, but too much. Here is where symbols come into play. We should also point out that the first sentence is long and may take more than one bullet. The first bullet might look like this, *stratus = gray + flat* which reads, *stratus are gray and flat*. The second half of the sentence might be reduced to something like, *covers*  *sky* which means, *covers most of the sky*. The next sentence is easy, "They form low in the sky" which can be reduced to *form*  *in sky*. The last two sentences on page 18 are, "Light snow or drizzle sometimes falls from stratus clouds. Drizzle is a light rain." The first of these offers a challenge with the word, 'sometimes'. The key words are *light, snow, drizzle, sometimes* and *falls*. The symbol \approx can replace 'sometimes': *light snow + drizzle \approx falls*. The last sentence is another easy one: *drizzle = light rain*.

Before moving onto the next paragraph on the page, the final step is to determine the main idea of the current paragraph. Students re-read their notes and synthesize them into one big idea. When asked, 'What is this paragraph about,' they should be able to respond, "Stratus clouds" which is written on the blank line. Strategic note-taking is a sure fire way to focus students' attention on the details within text and then synthesizing them into a main idea.

Should the page have multiple paragraphs, the same format and routine is used. The first sentence in the second paragraph on page 18 reads, “Nimbostratus clouds are a lot like stratus clouds in that they are flat and cover nearly the whole sky.” It contains a lot of information and is tricky because it contains ambiguous phrases like “are a lot like” and “cover nearly the whole sky.” Again, symbols can be used. The \approx symbol, which means ‘sort of’ or ‘almost’ can be used for “are a lot like”: *nimbostratus* \approx *stratus* which stands for *nimbostratus are almost like stratus*. The rest of the sentence might be represented using the same symbol: *covers* \approx *whole sky* which stands for *covers nearly (almost) the whole sky*.

The second sentence reads, “However, they are dark gray and form higher in the sky.” This sentence might be reduced by using the key words, *dark, gray, form, higher, in, sky*. The note might look like this: *dark gray + form* \uparrow *in sky*. The last sentence, “Nimbostratus clouds bring rain or snow” can easily be represented with *nimbostratus = rain, snow*. The last task is to determine the main idea, which is nimbostratus clouds. The next page of notes begins with the page number, paragraph numeral one, and main idea line with the bullets below. A completed note is seen in Figure 3.

Conclusion

Reading and comprehending are two different actions. Reading is done with the eyes, comprehending with the mind. Our middle school students need to activate and engage the mind while reading to prevent glazing over while moving their eyes over the print. Being armed with a format for recognizing and recording the important bits of text just might be the tool to activate and engage the brain while reading. Having taught any number of middle school classes how to take notes this way, I can say the students begin to see it as a game – getting each bullet to five

words and inventing their own symbols. Sometimes the best learning happens when one doesn't even know it's happening.

Figure 3. Completed Note

○ "The Cloud Handbook" by Gemma Balneaves

"Types of Clouds" pp. 18-21
"Wet Weather Clouds" p. 18

P. 18 ¶ 1 _____ stratus clouds

- stratus = gray + flat
- covers ↘↘ sky
- form ↓ in sky
- light snow + drizzle ≈ falls
- drizzle = light rain

○ ¶ 2 _____ nimbostratus clouds

- nimbostratus ≈ stratus
- covers ≈ whole sky
- dark gray + form ↑ in sky
- nimbostratus = rain, snow

P. 19. ¶ 1 _____

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