

Guided Imagery

You are in the dark, forbidding forests of 18th-century North America. There is danger in the air as you march along. You remain in formation, even though you sense that an ambush is forming around you. You hear nothing but the tramping feet of your fellow soldiers. Yet, as you glance about, you think you see a glimpse of movement through the dense underbrush. Suddenly a war cry rips through the air from the thick foliage to the left of you. The Hurons!

This scene describes an episode from the evocative 1992 motion picture *Last of the Mohicans*. Sitting in the theater, moviegoers found it nearly impossible not to feel as though they personally were experiencing the French and Indian War—the tension, fear, and excitement of an impending conflict. Our imaginations placed us on the screen next to the characters and helped us identify with their lives and the historical events portrayed in the film.

As teachers, we know that showing a movie helps students to get a feeling for what they read. But effective readers also are able to generate images for themselves as they read. Guided Imagery (Gambrell, Kapinus, & Wilson, 1987) is a strategy that helps trigger visualization for students as they read and learn. For many students, textbooks are an endless parade of terms and facts. Helping students visualize what they are reading brings the material to life and makes it more meaningful. Guided Imagery can be used either to prepare students for a reading or to deepen their understanding after they have read. For example, although most students in a social studies class could readily visualize many of the hardships experienced by the pioneers traveling west across the U.S. Great Plains, Guided Imagery could help introduce the textbook passage. However, students in a science class would first need to read a passage on photosynthesis to acquire some basic knowledge before they could successfully visualize the process inside a plant.

Using the Strategy

Guided Imagery is a strategy that capitalizes on students' active imaginations. Activities such as role playing, pretending, and daydreaming are natural elements of children's play. Using this strategy involves the following steps:

1 To warm up students to using imagery, tell them you are going to suggest things for them to see in their minds. Have each student work with a partner. Suggest an image and have the students describe to their partners what they are seeing with their mind's eye. You might suggest images such as a storm, building, animal, food, relative, or sporting event. Allow students a few moments to elaborate on the image they are forming in their minds before sharing it with their partner.

2 Have students preview the reading selection. Emphasize that they should give special attention to pictures, drawings, or graphics that are included with the text. This is especially important for science or social studies texts, which typically feature a number of visual elements that enhance information. As students notice these visual elements, they begin to see what the material is about. You also may wish to use other sources for pictures that will stimulate the students' imaginations (see *You Ought to Be in Pictures*, page 149). For example, before biology students tackle the dense prose of their textbook, a science teacher can take them through a short, guided imagery exercise on fungi (see *Guided Imagery for Science*, page 60). After students imagine the fungi, they are directed to a photograph in their textbook to see how close their imaginations were to the actual item.

3 Tell the students to close their eyes, take several deep breaths, and relax. Introduce the exercise by giving them some background on the situation they will be visualizing. Encourage them to make use of all their senses as they imagine—sight, sound, physical sensations, and emotions. Suggest an image to students one sentence

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at a time, and pause for several seconds after each sentence to allow them time to process what you are saying and to visualize the picture. To prepare students for a reading about the rigors of farming in the Great Plains during the 1880s, begin with the following:

Imagine being a homesteader on the Great Plains in the late 19th century. You are alone, and you see the prairie much the way it was before the settlers came (see Guided Imagery for Social Studies).

To prepare students for a Guided Imagery exercise on photosynthesis, you might say,

Think about things you would find in a factory: machines, workers, raw materials, and energy source. Imagine that you can shrink to a size so small that you

can walk through the pore of a leaf. You are now in a photosynthesis factory.

Continue with suggestions to help students visualize the process of photosynthesis in a plant. (See Lazear, 1991, for an excellent example of Guided Imagery for photosynthesis.)

4 Ask students to share their reflections about what they were imagining during the exercise. What did they notice with their imaginations? Do they have any questions about what they were attempting to visualize? This would be an excellent opportunity to have students write about what they visualized, as a way of summarizing their insights about the situation.

GUIDED IMAGERY FOR SCIENCE

Fungi

Imagine the air moving through the room. As the air slowly circulates, notice that on these air currents are carried thousands of microscopic, round, bead-like spores.

They are so small you have to look very closely to spot them. These spores are looking for an opportunity to grow. They are like tiny little seeds, searching for a food source that will enable them to grow and live. If they locate a food source with enough moisture, they can grow.

As you watch them drift by, notice that loaf of bread on the counter. The plastic bread bag has been left unopened.

The drifting spores get closer and closer. Some of them begin to land on a slice of bread.

Watch carefully as tiny little strings of cells began to grow from a spore. More and more cells grow out, farther and farther from the spore.

Soon there are so many of them that you see a tangled mass of little strings; these are growing denser and denser as they feed off the bread. You see some of them with little hooks that attach to the bread fibers. They continue to wind outward and outward.

You can start to see a velvety fuzz appearing on the surface of the bread. What colors are you seeing now?

GUIDED IMAGERY FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

The Great Plains

Imagine that you are in Nebraska. It is summer, 1887, and you are standing in the midst of rolling prairie for as far as you can see in all directions.

Look around and see that no trees, buildings, or other human beings are in sight.

Notice the wind gently swaying the 2-foot tall prairie grasses back and forth.

Feel the 90-degree heat from the hot noon sun as it beats down upon you.

Breathe in the dust and pollen from the grasses around you and imagine wiping the grimy sweat from your forehead.

Notice the tired ox standing next to your single-bladed steel plow.

See yourself trudging over to the plow and placing your hands on its rough wooden handles.

Watch the hard-packed deep black prairie soil turn over from your plow blade as you struggle along behind the ox.

Feel the blisters on your hands as they grip the plow handles.

Imagine the strain in your back muscles and in your arms and legs as the plow jerks you along.

Labor your way over a small hill, and in the distance notice the small hut made with thick squares of prairie sod.

Leave the plow and slowly make your way closer to the hut, noticing it in greater and greater detail.

Bend your head as you enter the dark, dank sod hut, and slowly pace around on the hard dirt floor.

5 As students gain practice in visualizing, have them create their own Guided Imagery exercises in cooperative groups or with partners, taking turns describing what they visualized as they read parts of the text.

Advantages

- Students are stimulated to generate their own images when they read.
- Students create vivid mental images of ideas and concepts that help them remember information longer.
- Students who are visual learners become more actively involved with their reading, which is especially true for low achieving students.

- Students find imagery techniques motivational, and they become more personally engaged with the material.

This strategy is appropriate for students from elementary through high school levels and can be effectively used with materials in all content areas.

References

- Gambrell, L., Kapinus, B., & Wilson, R. (1987). Using mental imagery and summarization to achieve independence in comprehension. *Journal of Reading, 30*, 638–642.
- Lazear, D. (1991). *Seven ways of teaching: The artistry of teaching with multiple intelligences*. Palatine, IL: Skylight.

