

# Learning from Text Features

## What Are Text Features?

I first became aware of what are now known as text features when I discovered the term *graphic aids* in *Teaching Reading in Content Areas* (Herber 1978) at the beginning of my teaching career. Text features (also called book parts, text supports, graphic aids, visual aids, and sources of information) are the format and physical features that provide the external organization for a text. These include features such as bold type, italics, charts, graphs, maps, titles, subtitles, headings, subheadings, table of contents, index, glossary, appendix, and unit divisions.

## Why Would I Teach My Students About Text Features?

Most students overlook text features, which are there to provide valuable information for students as they read. Herber points out one reason it is critical for students to know the purpose of these aids: "From such aids students can gather clues about the priorities authors place on the ideas and information in the material" (1978, 97). Students who recognize and know the purpose of these text features can effectively skim and scan to find important content information. For example, many students who do not read textbook assignments in their entirety (or at all), could gain valuable information about the topic or concepts in the reading if they were aware of the text features. Making the purpose of these aids explicit to students corrects the faulty notion that they are simply "fillers" that cut down on the number of words students have to read.

## How Would I Teach My Students About Text Features?

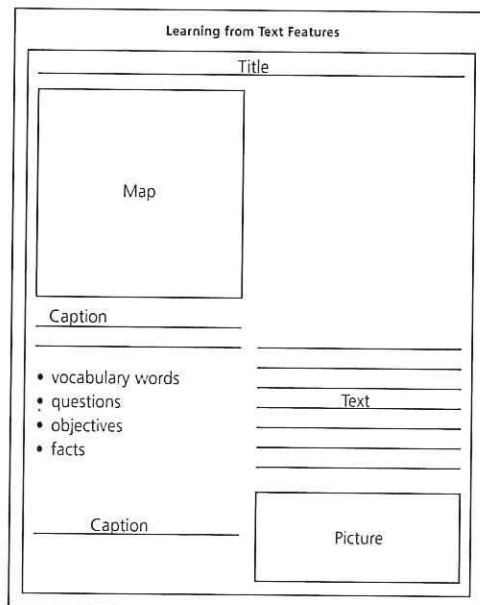
Many instructional tools are available for teaching students about text features. I found that the least effective method is telling my students that the features are there and they are important. The most effective way is asking students to actively discover the text features and to describe how they support comprehension. My favorite instructional tool for helping students uncover the role of text features is a scavenger hunt using their texts and a textbook template I created. Steps for creating the template follow.

1. Choose a text that your students currently use as a resource in your classroom.
2. Go to the next chapter the class plans to read.
3. On a blank piece of paper, make a textbook template by outlining a blank space for every text feature on the first page of the chapter.
4. Make sure to designate a space for each text feature you want to emphasize.
5. Ask students to bring their texts to class and assign them to small groups to find each text feature on the first page of the text.
6. For older students, you can use both the first and last pages of a chapter. For younger students, use just the first page in order to focus on a few features at a time.
7. Students label each space with what they find.
8. After students have labeled all the features, help them to go back and discover the purpose of each feature.
9. Make sure students use the correct names for each feature.
10. Follow this activity with a TAG (Textbook Activity Guide) (Davey 1986), as practice for using text features to find information. A Textbook Activity Guide extends the modeled

lesson by giving students a guided opportunity to find information using text features.

## In the Classroom

The textbook template shown here was one I created for a sixth-grade geography class. The chapter we were studying was titled, "Northeast: Land of the Big Cities," and several text features



(Note: No blank template is provided in the appendix, as you will need to create one specific to the text you are using.)

- Title—gives us the main idea or topic
- Map—gives us visual information so we know where the Northeast is and what states are considered Northeastern states
- Caption—explains the map or picture
- Vocabulary words or glossary—highlights the specialized vocabulary words for the chapter (usually boldface, italics, or color in the text)
- Questions—help focus reading (prereading) and monitor understanding (postreading)
- Objectives—tell us what the authors/editors think we should learn from the chapter
- Facts—add interest, highlight related details
- Pictures—give us visual support for what we are learning

## Research/Origins

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