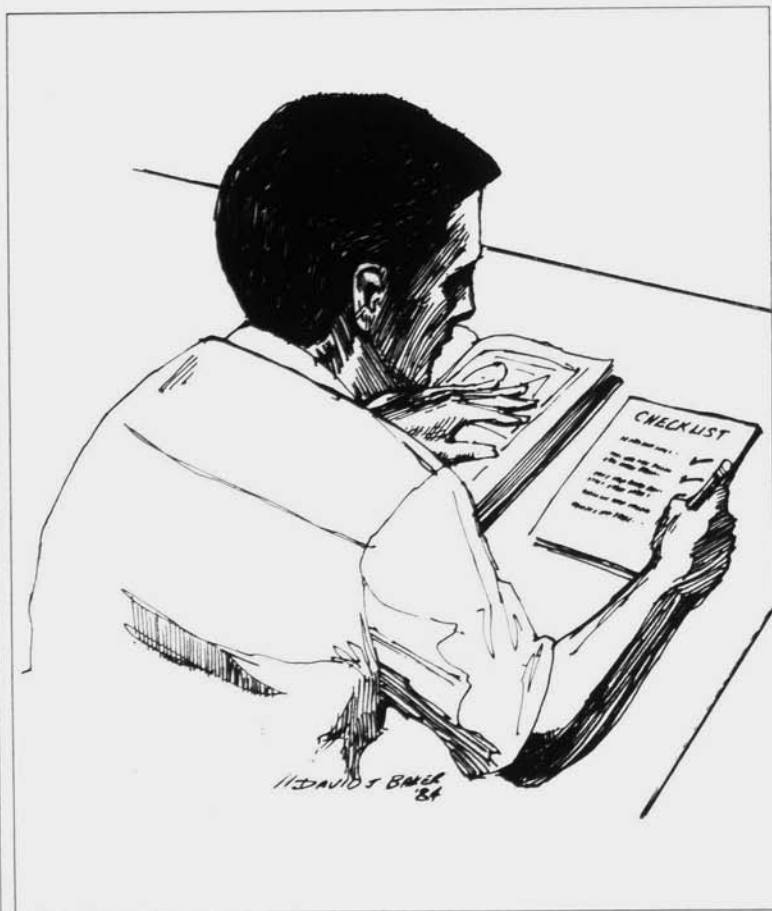


# Textbook Selection

## The Skills Trace



**This is the first in a series of articles by Connie Muther designed to assist local leaders in evaluating, adopting, and installing textbook programs.**

CONNIE MUTHER

It is critical for school districts to ask informed questions on textbook evaluation checklists. First, these questions guide publishers in designing their products. Second, these questions direct textbook selectors to focus on specific aspects of a textbook; if they do not focus on what is wanted and needed by a district, the adoption committee could select an ineffective program.

Most evaluation checklists include these six categories: visual appeal, durability, copyright, suggestions for teachers, ease of use, and authorship. As we examine the responses of publishers to questions from actual state or school district adoption checklists (Comas, 1982), I will recommend alternative questions or strategies that might provide your adoption committee with more accurate information. I will conclude with a list of suggestions for designing your own evaluation checklist.

### Visual appeal

Some questions *not* to ask are: *Is the program attractive? Are the pictures appealing? Is the series colorfully illustrated using many styles or art? Are the colors pleasing and true? Are the illustrations well arranged on the page?*

These questions, focusing on the physical attractiveness of the program, occur more than any other type, signaling to publishers that graphics influence sales more than any other

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criterion. In order to capitalize on this interest, publishers have conducted focus group research to determine which pictures and colors are most appealing and where they should be placed.

What did they discover? This year primary colors are in, pastels are out. Scenery must include people, especially children who have that clean, scrubbed American look. The most appealing pictures are placed on the right hand page because most people flip through a book by holding it in the right hand and thumbing through it with the left. (In publishing circles, this "flip" or "thumb" test is the first test any textbook must pass.)

Do these pictures mean the text is more effective or easier to understand? Beck (Anderson and Osborn, 1984, p. 18) concludes "... some of that 'good' art (and it is often very good) seems in conflict with a given text ... what's the primary goal, exposure to the art or enhancement of the text?"

### What should you ask?

In deciding how much emphasis graphics should be given, the telling point, logically, is whether the graphics "highlight, clarify or complement" the concepts or ideas being presented (Anderson and Osborn, 1984, p. 7). A minor consideration is whether small publishers are prevented from supplying textbooks because of excessive importance attached to the visual appeal of materials. Elaborate graphics are expensive and may be beyond the means of smaller publishers who might otherwise produce excellent results.

### Durability

*Is the book durable? Is the paper of suitable quality? Is the binding sturdy? Is the cover laminated?* These ques-

tions on the physical durability of the textbook were essential in the past but are not as important today because specified tests for durability are required in 22 so-called adoption states. Since all adoption states require durability specifications and since it is far too costly to publish different editions for other states, nearly all textbooks meet common standards of sturdiness. (Adoption states are those with rules and regulations governing the selection and purchase of textbooks. They include Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.)

Typical durability specifications demand that the paper be white but not so glossy that reflected light could cause eyestrain. Margins must be a designated width both to enhance readability and to ease the stress on the binding. Individual pages are pulled to test tearing and bursting strength. Book covers are tested for flexibility, spotting, and stability to light as well as for stickiness from lamination. Bindings have multiple requirements governing the number of threads and stitches, weight, and strength of binding thread or wire.

Furthermore, about 80 percent of American publishers use the same six to eight printers; the textbooks being compared are likely to have been printed and bound by the same machines. Most companies will, in fact, replace books without cost if they fall apart from faulty construction.

### Copyright

*Is the copyright recent? Is the copyright within two or three years? Is the copyright date recent enough to be reliable in the field?* Such queries miss the

point that state funds, which are used in most adoption states, prohibit purchase of a program more than three years old. This forces most publishers into a three-year revision cycle. Therefore, you should *assume* there will be a new copyright every three years.

The purpose of asking about copyright is to assure that content is accurate and up-to-date. A recent copyright, however, is no guarantee that the text has current and correct content. In order to determine if a textbook is accurate or up-to-date, find a professional in the community (perhaps a retired professor) to review it. A high school biology teacher who reviewed elementary science texts, for example, found many errors. In one case a father bird was feeding the baby bird, yet the caption identified him as the mother. In another series a spider's web was inaccurately drawn, and a picture of a viceroy butterfly was identified as a monarch.

Since publishers guarantee the availability of the program for the life of the contract in adoption states (between five and eight years, depending on the state), availability is not a problem. But school districts in open territories, where availability is not guaranteed, could find their textbooks out of print.

### What should you ask if you live in an open territory?

Ask if the program will be available for the life of the adoption. Set the exact number of years you need the materials, and try to get a guarantee in writing from the publisher. (Please do not let me mislead you. I do not know of any small communities that have obtained a guarantee in writing, although several large cities have, but I feel it will—and should—be granted if enough districts request it.)

### **Suggestions for teachers**

*Are there provisions for individual differences? Are there suggestions for enrichment as well as for reinforcement? Do the guides provide independent activities? Are there suggestions for students with different dialects?* These questions focus on repeated labels, inadvertently ignoring the value of the suggestion. Many programs today offer "clearly labeled" suggestions, but the content often reveals repetition of the same idea or information without much substance. For instance, one language program offering suggestions for students with different dialects provided such dubious pointers as "Spanish-speaking students may have difficulty with this page."

### **What should you ask?**

Does reinforcement include reteaching with new, additional techniques or strategies? Do suggestions for enrichment require students to use analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating skills with new, additional related content? Would suggestions offered to exceptional students be helpful to the ones in my school? These questions assume that suggestions are provided, focus on the content of the suggestions, and emphasize possible results when applied in the classroom.

### **Ease of use**

*Is the program easy to use? Do the guides have easy-to-follow lesson plans for each selection? Are the guides well organized and easy to follow? Are the teaching directions in guides simple and clear? Is the reproduction of the pupil page on the same page in the manual?* Publishers have learned that the pupil page and the corresponding manual page must be turned at the same time or the program appears difficult to teach. Therefore, if directions to the teacher run to another page, they will have to be shortened

or eliminated. Frequent elimination of the heart of the program—the instruction—is discouraging to authors.

### **What should you ask?**

Focus your questions on clear, direct, and explicit instruction. Examples might be: Are students told what they are to learn and why it is important? Does the instruction relate to what the students already know? Do examples clearly demonstrate the skill being presented? Are enough examples provided for all students to understand? Is there a strategy presented to aid the student in identifying, using, or comprehending the skill?

### **Authorship**

*Are the authors well known? What research has the author published recently? Does the authorship team include people who are currently teaching or have recently taught?* These questions emphasize the author and his or her credentials or expertise, ignoring the reality that today's major K-8 programs are not written as they were in the past. Today's programs are *developed*, as publishers say, or *assembled*, as Bowler (1978, p. 39) describes it. Since every publishing house is different and programs within houses also differ, the exact impact of an author or a consultant may not be identifiable.

Most authors work as teams. Often senior authors are program authors, responsible for designing scope and sequence and the specifications for each grade. Others listed as authors may actually edit one or two books in a series or assume responsibility for one or two strands. In general, today's authors do not have control of the product (Broudy, 1975). In fact, some authors and author teams are selected after the program has been started. In some cases, the author has been dead for years.

Recently I was introduced to a K-6 reading program where the authors wrote everything—an unusual case. Much textbook writing is done by teams of 20–100 writers and editors either in-house (on the staff) or out-house (free lance). The latter often are teachers.

Editorial services, listed in *Literary Market Place* in library reference sections, are another source of authorship. These companies are capable of creating, designing, writing, and producing single textbooks, workbooks, tests, or entire textbook programs. Many major publishers use them to write supplementary materials. With increasing dependence on these organizations, the same writers could be producing materials for competing publishers. There is no secret about any of this. Since it normally takes three years to develop a major K-8 program and since some programs have over 400 pieces, it would be impossible for the "authors" to write everything.

### **What should you ask?**

Authorship questions should probably be omitted from a checklist because answers cannot be determined by looking at a textbook. When you are serious about purchasing a program, your questions should include the following:

- What role did the author(s) play in the design of this program? The sales agent may not know this answer but will usually find out for you. If the agent cannot get the answer for you and you are about to purchase a program because of an influential author, contact the author either at a convention or by telephone.

- How does current research in the subject relate to this program? Again, ask your sales agent for research documentation. After examining it, ask the

agent or the program consultant to show you exactly where and how research findings are incorporated into the program's instructional design.

• Is there evidence demonstrating successful performance of this program with target students in other schools? This question is most important because it focuses on results. The best way to obtain the answer is to ask the sales agent for the name, address, and telephone number of user schools. Telephone each school to identify those that are using the program as your district intends to use it. Visit at least two of those schools. If the program is new and there are no user schools, ask the agent for field test schools and follow the same procedures.

## Guidelines

The questions you ask determine what publishers eventually produce. If you want to change the quality of textbooks, change the quality of your questions. Also, the questions you ask on these forms determine the product you ultimately select. Design your questions to focus specifically on your district needs. The following guidelines may help you to design effective evaluation forms.

1. If you choose to evaluate art or graphics, phrase your questions to find out how they enhance the comprehension of concepts or ideas presented.

2. Do *not* evaluate for durability. Instead, obtain a written statement from the publisher stipulating replacement, rebinding, and exchange policies.

3. Do *not* focus on copyright date. Instead, request assurance that all parts of the program will be available for the life of your adoption.

4. Remember that *currency* and *ac-*

*curacy* are not synonymous with *recent copyright*. Ask an authority to review materials before purchase.

5. Ask questions that go beyond the identification of labels. Focus on the value and practicality of the suggestions to teachers. For example, rather than asking whether a program includes reinforcement activities, ask whether the reinforcement activities present new, additional, and different instructional strategies and whether information is presented in forms suitable for local students.

6. Be sure that questions are pragmatic, worded so that the responses will be comparable, and specific to your students.

7. Keep checklists short. Eliminate irrelevant questions. Define terms. And, if you do not know how to evaluate possible answers to a question, do not ask it.

8. Before final selection, be sure to call or visit user schools to verify their success in using the program under comparable conditions and with similar students. □

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