

## Textbooks

# Evaluating Reading Textbooks with the Story-Sort Comparison

When teachers compare what they find in textbooks to their ideals, they quickly understand how to adapt basal readers to their students' needs.



*Connie Muther's patient work enables teachers to see real differences in basal readers.*

They're all the same!" textbook evaluators cry about today's reading textbook series. They do look the same but in fact they're not. You can find critical differences to display to everyone on your committee, by using an evaluation technique called a story-sort cut-and-paste side-by-side comparison.

## Critical Differences in Reading Programs

Let's consider the kinds of major differences you'll find in popular reading textbook programs.

First, the editing style can mean the difference between stimulating your students and boring them. For example, severe editing to reduce vocabulary and character load, or editing out all controversial issues, could mean dull reading. On the other hand, a no-editing policy, advocated by many educators today, can mean that concepts, vocabulary, and characters introduced and developed in the first few chapters of a book are referred to, without explanation, in the excerpt in the pupil text. Thus, students have no frame of reference; non-editing could mean built-in confusion.

Second, the number and kind of new or difficult vocabulary words introduced can mean that your students comprehend a selection or lack the word knowledge to understand it. Some publishers choose not to identify new or difficult vocabulary words because a long list may be interpreted

| Publisher A<br>5th Grade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Publisher B<br>6th Grade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Publisher C<br>5th Grade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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| Story Introduction                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | In the early 1800s, Mary Ann Anning made an important discovery—one that she called a “monster.” No one had ever seen anything like it before. Draw your own conclusions about why the discovery was so important as you read this account of Mary’s true experiences.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Over one hundred fifty years ago, Mary Ann Anning and her father enjoyed searching around Lyme Regis, on the southern coast of England, for archaeological artifacts. They called the artifacts “curiosities” and often shared their discoveries with Joseph, Mary’s brother, and Henry De la Beche, a friend. Then, in 1810, Mary’s father died. After a time, Mary decided to continue her search. In this account of her experiences, you will learn what Mary discovers later as a result of her great interest in artifacts. | Curiosity drew George Washington to explore underground. It was Mary Anning’s search for “curiosities” that released a monster from its resting place in the cliffs of England.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | While other children were playing, Mary Ann Anning was climbing the cliffs of Lyme Regis with her father. They searched for curiosities, such as strange-looking shells, that they could sell to summer visitors. Many people believed that the shells were children of the stones, or thunderbolts dropped from the sky. They were actually fossils, the hardened remains or traces of animals or plants. Most of the fossils that the Annings collected were the remains of sea-shells that had turned to stone.<br><br>Mary and her father worked closely together. Then, quite suddenly, Mr. Anning died. For a while Mary did not feel like doing much curiosity hunting.<br><br><small>Lyme Regis (lim’ rē’ jis), a town on the southern coast of England.</small> |
| Story Beginnings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| One day Mary woke early and jumped out of bed. “I’m going back to work,” she said aloud. “Father would not want me to mope about.” She slipped on her shoes, tied her bonnet under her chin, and picked up her basket, hammer, and chisel. Then she set out for the cliffs, with her dog Tray scampering ahead of her.                                                                                                                                                                                                            | One day Mary woke early and jumped out of bed. She slipped on her clogs, tied her bonnet securely under her chin, and picked up her basket, hammer and chisel. Then she set out for the cliffs with her dog Tray scampering ahead of her.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | One day Mary woke early and jumped out of bed. “I’m going back to work,” she said aloud. “Father would not want me to mope about.”<br><br>She slipped on her shoes, tied her bonnet securely under her chin, and picked up her basket, hammer, and chisel. Then she set out for the cliffs with her dog, Tray, scampering ahead of her.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Mary worked all that day, and all the next.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Mary searched for curiosities all day. The best place to find them was in the cliffs near Lyme Regis and at nearby Charmouth.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Mary worked all day. When evening came, she felt much better.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | These cliffs were once part of the sea bottom. Many, many years ago, the ancestors of mollusks—soft creatures without backbones—died and drifted down to the ocean floor. Many of the mollusks were very like the snails and clams of today. They had outer shells; others, with inner shells, resembled squid.<br><br>After a long time, the mollusks were covered with mud that slowly hardened. In most cases, the material of their shells was gradually replaced with minerals which became petrified—turned to stone.<br><br>Years later, when the sea bottom rose, it broke apart in places, and cliffs were formed. In the rock of these cliffs could be seen the petrified shells and sometimes the original shells of the mollusks which had lived and died so long ago. These shells were the “curiosities” that Mary Anning collected and sold to the summer visitors. Scientists called them “fossils.” | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

Fig. 1. Story Beginnings: Mary's Monster

by textbook selectors as "difficult to use." A program perceived as difficult won't sell. A few publishers identify new vocabulary, then design workbook exercises and ditto sheets using different words.

Third, the comprehension questions (number of; type of; when, where, or what asked) can help students understand a selection or cause confusion. For example, many publishers impose a taxonomy of questions because they know evaluators will select only those programs with an equal number of "clearly labeled" literal and inferential questions. But the imposed questions may direct students' thinking away from essential information. In addition, several 1987 programs list questions about information that has been edited out: there's no hope of getting the "right" answer.

These critical differences are not apparent even when you turn the pages of textbooks carefully. You need a technique for systematically comparing the varied treatments of stories by publishers.

### Cut-and-Paste Comparisons

The story-sort is a method of classifying large numbers of reading text-

**"When different treatments of a story are displayed side by side, you can draw lines to highlight points for comparison—a change of thought, an idea or paragraph."**

books by a common element, a story. Before computers, information was often sorted with a knitting needle and a stack of punch cards. Stabbing the deck and shaking out cards not pinned by the needle isolated the common element in whatever cards were left on the needle. Finding the same story in three textbook series is like using such a needle to sort a stack of textbooks.

When different treatments of a story are displayed side by side, you can

draw lines to highlight points for comparison—a change of thought, an idea or paragraph. This cut-and-paste layout is time consuming, but only for the two or three people who do it. Their results can be copied and shared. Using this common reference point, you'll quickly see the critical differences described above.

Figure 1 is a story-sort comparing three publishers' treatments of the fourth chapter of *Mary's Monster*, a 1975 trade book by Ruth Van Ness Blair. Figure 1 reveals only the beginning of the story, as space limitations precluded the reproduction of the entire chart. Even with this tiny segment, see what you can find. Publishers A and C included this chapter at fifth-grade while publisher B chose sixth. You can begin to speculate on expected differences. But what else can you see?

Publisher C includes a complete story introduction. The introductory paragraph asks students to "draw conclusions." Is this the comprehension focus? Will instruction in drawing conclusions precede this story, or will it occur afterward? Now you have something specific to investigate and to compare with the other programs.

Publisher B relates the new story to

| Publisher A<br>5th Grade                                               | Publisher B<br>6th Grade                                                                                                                               | Publisher C<br>5th Grade                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Selection Vocabulary: artifacts, debris, petrified, specimens, fossils | Vocabulary:<br>BASIC (defined in Glossary)<br>scampering      lass      affection<br>debris      profession      specimens<br><br>ENRICHMENT<br>chisel | Selection Vocabulary<br>( ) indicates page of first use; T indicates tested word, G indicates word in pupil glossary.<br><br>curiosities (99) G      lumbering (104) G<br>fossils (99) T      fearsome (104) T<br>traces (99) T G      socket (105)<br>chisel (100) T G      astonishment (105)<br>acquaint (100)      argument (105)<br>apprentice (100) G      monstrous (105) T<br>debris (102) T G      pinafore (106) G<br>attach (102)      reptile (107) G<br>remove (102)      consult (107) T G<br>quarrymen (103) G<br><br>Proper Names<br>Lyme Regis (līm' rē' jīs; 99)<br>Charmouth (chār'muth; 100)<br>De la Beche (də lā besh'; 103) |

Fig. 2. Vocabulary Introduced Before Story in Teacher's Edition

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George Washington. What does George Washington have to do with Mary Anning in England? Could this reference relate to the previous selection?

Publisher B does provide an explanation of the cliffs, a key concept for understanding the rest of the story; the other two publishers do not. Have they aided student comprehension or left out essential background information? You'll have to read the entire selection to find out, then compare it with the other two.

And why did publisher B delete references to Mary's father? Does this omission help students comprehend Mary's determination, or will it confuse them? Again, read and compare.

In Figure 2 the story-sort technique is used to compare the identification of vocabulary words for this story by the same three publishers. How can you account for the selection of such different words from the same story? Which of these words would your students need to know before reading this chapter? If publisher C's list is most representative of the words in the story, publishers A and B may have shortened their lists to avoid the "difficult-to-use" label. Or does publisher C have a no-editing policy while the other two stories are edited?

At this point you may choose to complete a side-by-side layout to compare vocabulary practice exercises. Then you will see whether the words from the list are actually used in the exercises. Using this technique, you can compare all elements of instruction: comprehension questions, comprehension instruction, decoding and study skills, writing and speaking activities, workbook pages—everything related to the common story.

### Suggestions for the Evaluation Process

Once you decide to try the story-sort, how can you make the best use of the information? Your objective is to select the program that best meets the needs of the students in your district—or is easiest to fix. Therefore, to begin, do a cut-and-paste layout of the story to determine editorial differences from

the pupil text. Next, create the ideal program needed by your district. Which vocabulary words, for example, will your students need to know? How should they be introduced? What comprehension questions should be asked? When and where should they be found? Continue creating your ideal program for the essential components of the lesson. Last, compare the other elements of the program, usually found in the teacher's edition. Then, determine which program most closely matches your ideal—or is easiest to fix.

Plan lots of time for discussion of what should happen in the ideal program, after you first read the story and again after you see what the publishers actually do. It is through these discussions that everyone is educated by everyone else. The result is that teachers will conclude their ideal is far superior to any textbook offering. By focusing on ways to fix any program, teachers learn not to rely on textbooks but on what they can do to make the program work for their students. In these discussions, everyone will make valuable contributions—especially your students.

Yes, the crème de la crème is involving students and listening to their "kid-rating." Simply take your story-sorts into your classrooms, and repeat the activities described above with your students. Then listen, hear, and learn. □

**Author's note:** If you want to try a story-sort comparison, you may select from the following list. Three different treatments should be adequate for your layouts; more may prove too time-consuming.

(1) "The Rats of NIMH" appears in sixth-grade texts published by Houghton-Mifflin, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Macmillan, and Scribner's.

(2) "Old Blue" appears in second-grade texts published by Scribner's and Riverside and in third-grade texts published by Economy, Houghton-Mifflin, and Scott-Foresman.

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