

# When On-line Learning Becomes Overwhelming, There's Power in a Clear Purpose



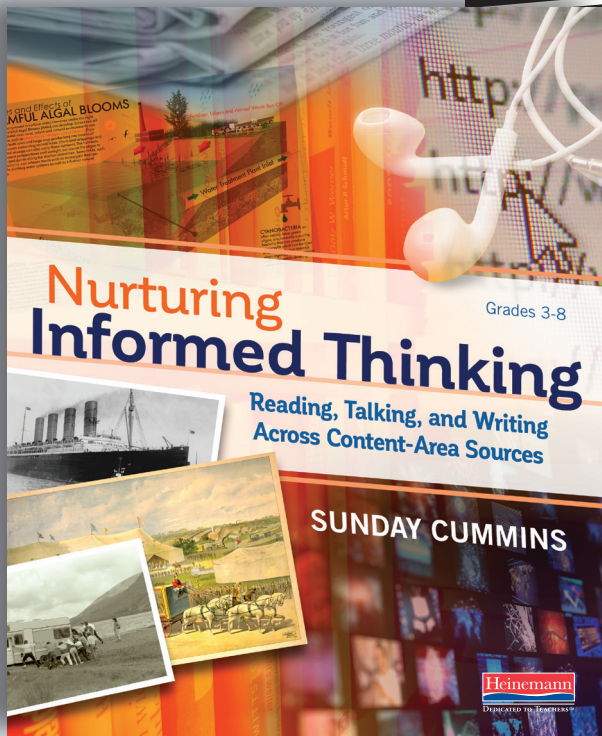
**From Sunday Cummins, author of *Nurturing Informed Thinking: Reading, Writing, and Talking Across Content-Area Sources***

## A Note from Sunday Cummins

**Virtual learning offers us opportunities** to use a wealth of online sources with our students—high-interest texts, videos, audio clips, and images. However, with so much to navigate online this fall, our students may become overwhelmed by the task of strategically analyzing multiple content-area sources. A clearly stated purpose can make the difference between productive and unproductive reading-viewing-listening in this daunting learning environment. A purpose, stated as a question like “How did this person contribute to our state’s history?” or “How are robots being used in new ways in hospitals?” can create a clearer pathway for determining what is important.

The lesson that follows demonstrates the power of a clear purpose. This lesson can be adapted to an on-line learning environment with a few adjustments including the following:

- Create access to the sources that makes it possible for students to annotate using digital tools.
- Teach students to create a virtual “sticky note” with the purpose for reading (stated as a question) that they can keep open on their desktop as a reminder or provide a student-friendly file they can download and open.
- During synchronous lessons, think aloud for students the same way you would during in-person lessons, using digital tools to underline or highlight and annotate the source.
- Invite a small group to have a conversation about how they would respond to the question (purpose) while their peers observe. Coach the group on how to use the artifacts from their learning as reference points during their conversations, returning to their annotated notes, sharing screens, using annotation tools to highlight text evidence that supports their point, and toggling back and forth as needed.



## Lesson Idea 7

# Use a Thematic or Main Idea Question as a Guide

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### TYPE OF SOURCE

Two or more sources (primary or secondary) that narrate or provide information about the experiences of individual figures or groups (including short video clips)

### TIME

Two to three 40-minute lessons

### STRATEGY

Students use a big question like “How was this person *innovative*?”

### GETTING READY

1. **Select sources:** Select sources that would be helpful in answering a higher-level-thinking question you develop in advance. The text examples in this lesson were part of a middle school unit in a social studies class. The

essential question the students pondered while reading these two texts as well as others was *During the Middle Ages, were the knights honorable or not? Why do you think so?*

Examples of questions related to other content areas include:

- How were members of the Jewish resistance courageous?
- How were the civil rights activists strategic?
- How did the actions of multiple members of the community help solve this problem?

- What were the effects of removing the wolves from Yellowstone National Park?
2. **Study the sources:**
    - What sections of the sources might help students answer the question?
    - What is one section of the source you might think aloud about regarding details that help you answer the question?
    - In the second source, for what information might you model thinking about how it connects to the first source?
  3. **Prepare materials:** Create hard copies of the texts for students to mark on and annotate. Post the essential question for all students to view. This might be on a piece of chart paper or on a whiteboard. Figure 3.15 is an example of a question that was posted when seventh-grade students were reading multiple texts about knights in the Middle Ages.

If the question has a key vocabulary word (e.g., *honorable, courageous, perseverant, extraordinary*), post a definition for that word as well (see Figure 3.16).

### BEGINNING THE LESSON

*When we read more than one text on a topic, keeping an important question in mind can help us determine what is important for us to remember or think about as we read.*

During the Middle Ages, were the knights honorable or not? Why do you think so?

honorable - deserving honor or respect or a feeling of deep admiration for this person's abilities, qualities, or achievements

can do physically or mentally

kind of person you are

What you do

depends on context - who, what, when, where, why

**Figure 3.15 (top)** An Essential Question Posted in a Classroom

**Figure 3.16 (bottom)** An Annotated Definition for a Key Word in the Essential Question

## Teaching with Source 1

Today we are going to think about this question while we read two texts on the topic. (Refer to the posted question.) This question can help us determine what information in a text is important for us to remember or think about as we read. Let's read this whole excerpt of this first text and then we will reread and underline details that help us answer this question. We can also jot notes about what we are thinking about the details we underline.

After students read, demonstrate how you would think through a chunk of text, deciding what details to underline and what notes to jot. The text excerpt in Figure 3.17 includes annotations a teacher might make during a think-aloud or that students might make on their own.

Thinking aloud with this piece might sound like this: *I just learned that the Catholic Church tried to help the knights think about what it meant to be honorable by creating a list of rules called the "code of chivalry." I'm going to put a box around that phrase and I'm going to jot a note in the margin to remind me. The author also tells us the knights behaved "poorly," so I know these rules were broken. I'm thinking the Church's rules were what it wanted the knights to achieve to be considered honorable, and some of the knights did not achieve these goals.*

**Figure 3.17**  
Excerpt from *Medieval Lives: Knight* (Butterfield 2009, 15) with examples of annotations

**CODE OF CHIVALRY**

Note: This book is written about a fictional English knight and in the present tense.

The Ideal Knight → HONORABLE

As a squire, he learns about the code of chivalry. This is a list of rules set out by the Catholic Church that explain what it means to be a good and noble knight. The ideal knight is supposed to protect the church, women and children, and the poor and the weak. On the battlefield, he is expected to play fair and accept the surrender of an enemy knight. He is not to kill an unarmed opponent. In reality, though, knights often behave poorly. Some are extremely violent and rob whomever they come across. The code is designed to try to keep the violent tendencies of knights in check.

→ Church wrote rules for how knights can be honorable-deserve respect

→ RULES BROKEN!

→ how some knights broke rules and were not honorable

→ But did it?

← examples of rules or code

SOURCE 1

## Teaching with Source 2

Now we are going to read a second text. As we read, let's think about details that help us answer this same question. These details may be similar to those in the first text, or they may build on what we learned in the first text.

For the example in Figure 3.18, the teacher briefly introduced the second text and then asked the students to annotate their thinking in response to the essential question. This model includes sample annotations—similar to those students might make or a teacher might step in and make during a think-aloud if needed.

Notice in this second text that the author starts with a discussion of the “vows” knights took and examples of those vows. These details are very similar to the “code of chivalry” or “rules” the students read about in the first text, so they have some background knowledge to bring to this text; they might acknowledge this in their annotations. Based on their reading of the first text, the students are probably also thinking, “The vows are honorable, but not necessarily the knights who took them.”

Close by asking students to revisit the guiding question in small groups. Remind them to use their annotations and the text to help them think about what to say or support what they are saying.

**Figure 3.18**  
Excerpt from *Le Morte d'Arthur*  
(Malory 2015)  
with examples of  
annotations

Note: This is an excerpt from a story written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century about the fictitious King Arthur and his famous Round Table of knights.

With great ceremony each [knight] took the vows of true knighthood, solemnly promising to do no wicked deed, to be loyal to the King, to give mercy to those asking it, always to be courteous and helpful to ladies, and to fight in no wrongful quarrel for worldly gain, upon pain of death or forfeiture [loss] of knighthood and King Arthur's favour. Unto this were all the knights of the Round Table sworn, both old and young. To dishonour knighthood was the greatest disgrace; to prove themselves worthy of knightly honour by strong, brave, courteous, loyal bearing under great difficulties was the highest end [goal] of living.

*Examples of how to be honorable*

*→ a promise to be honorable*

*like in rules or code of chivalry*

*effect*

*how*

*fictional but there really were knights in this period and a code for how they should act*

*even when it was hard they had to act honorably OR THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO!*

*meaning? Do something that is hard or difficult*

*1 doing something that is difficult*

**SOURCE 2**



## Questions to Push Kids' Thinking

- *What part of this source did you just look at closely? What did you learn? How does that help you think about our question or purpose for reading?*
- *How does what you just learned in this second source compare with what you learned in the first source?*
- *If we are thinking about the question, how does the author of this second text add to what you learned in the first text?*

## When Texts Are Tricky

Sometimes there are parts of a text that do not include details relevant to the guiding question or purpose for reading. You may need to think aloud about how you decided *not* to underline particular details. In this case, a think-aloud might sound like, *When I read this section I learned some information, but I did not notice any information that was really helpful to me in answering my question, so I moved on to think about the next part of the text.*