



Pre-AP[®]: Interdisciplinary Strategies for English and Social Studies

Sample Activity: *Dialectical Notebooks*

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Pre-AP: Interdisciplinary Strategies for English and Social Studies Sample Activity

Dialectical Notebooks

Dialectical notebooks take many forms and the basic concept has many names. The Greek word *dilektos* means "conversation, discussion" in search of the truth. That defines the relationship between readers and text when they use the dialectical notebook. In essence there is a tension between reader and text, so that the student becomes engaged in the content. It is this engagement that creates meaning, regardless of whether the text is fiction or nonfiction. This strategy works well in any subject in which the student has to read and respond to complex texts. In essence, it is a sophisticated note-taking device.

Students divide their notebooks into two columns. One column is labeled **Text**, and here students record chronologically what they consider to be the most important points of the text they are reading. Thus, when they finish, they have a summary of the material. Not only is summarizing a worthwhile skill, but as students discuss their notes in class, they come to agree on the facts. Now the teacher knows they have all read the same text.

The second column is titled **Response**. This column should run parallel with the Text column, and it contains the students' personal reactions, which occur at the moment they are reading the text. Literally it is their part of the conversation. They ask questions, make comments, and record ideas next to that part of the text that has piqued their interest. By the time they have finished, this column represents an intellectual history of their reading experience.

Teachers, however, cannot explain how a dialectical notebook works and expect that students will see the value in this technique and be able to apply it automatically. Young adolescents need a lot of practice before they can use this technique independently. The best way for teachers to introduce the dialectical notebook is to model its use in the classroom.

Advantages for Students

- Taking dialectical notes slows down the reading process, forcing the reader to take notice of and reflect on details that would otherwise have been lost.
- Taking dialectical notes helps readers keep track of their thought processes while reading. This is important because thoughts and reactions come and go very quickly, but may be important for discussions, essays, or standardized test questions later on.
- **All** students can do this. It is the perfect tool for individualized instruction. The quality and depth of responses will vary greatly, but every student will be able to access every text in some way. This builds confidence for insecure readers, and takes good readers to new levels of interpretation.

Advantages for Teachers

- Once students understand the basic how-tos of taking dialectical notes, teachers can focus and refocus assignments depending on goals and objectives. For example, if the next lesson plan includes a class discussion on foreshadowing, the previous night's homework can direct students to find and respond to three examples of foreshadowing in their dialectical notes.
- The kinds of responses students learn to make are perfect preparation for the reading comprehension portion of most state assessments.
- Students practice higher levels of thinking as directed by the teacher. For example, the teacher can leave the type of questions open-ended, or can define different types of questions and ask that students include some of each.
- Class discussions will expand to include more students and more meaningful, insightful comments. Students will be more likely to listen critically to their peers and respond with evidence of their own.

Categories

Categorizing is an essential skill that many young adolescents have had little opportunity to practice. Often teachers assume that students should have this skill by the time they reach the middle grades, an assumption about students' prior knowledge that is not always accurate. Practicing this skill enables students to begin the work of comparing and contrasting information in order to become more effective readers and writers.

Using this strategy, students organize their responses to any text through the use of symbols, such as the following, that help them solidly establish four main categories. This strategy, particularly as it relates to social studies, enables young adolescents to develop the abstract notion that history is the past "studied with all the critical and interpretive power that the present can bring to the task" (Turner, 1956, p. 201). It teaches students to monitor their own understanding while they are reading, and helps them see how their own preconceptions (or those of the author) might affect their interpretation of the text. Finally, it forces students to draw on prior knowledge and to relate the reading to what is already known. Students should be encouraged to question whether their own prior knowledge should be changed or modified based on this new reading (Chapman, 1993).

Question	?
Comment on the text itself	↘
Connection to my own life	□
Connection to other texts (stories, poems, essays, textbooks, primary documents, political cartoons, etc.)	○

To teach this skill, teachers should use the following steps.

1. Use the overhead and have the class learn and participate as one group. This shared experience builds skill as well as confidence, and enables students to learn from each other.

2. Provide the students with practice exercises in which the text has been entered in the right column and the left is left blank for their responses. Cooperative groups might work together to discuss and respond to the text.
3. Have the students practice with a textbook or novel of their choosing, where they **refer** to the passage on the left side of the notebook, and **respond** on the right.
4. Try to have the students use their notebooks at least once a week to keep the skill fresh. Encourage them to try this technique in other subject areas.

A Practice Exercise in Categorizing Using Paste-In Text

"There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do" by Sandra Cisneros, in *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

TEXT	RESPONSE
<p>"Rose Vargas' kids are too many and too much. It's not her fault you know, except she is their mother and only one against so many.</p> <p>"They are bad those Vargases, and how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come.</p> <p>"The kids bend trees and bounce between cars and dangle upside down from knees and almost break like fancy museum vases you can't replace. They think it's funny. They are without respect for all things living, including themselves.</p> <p>"But after a while you get tired of being worried about kids who aren't even yours. One day they are playing chicken on Mr. Benny's roof. Mr. Benny says, Hey ain't you kids know better than to be swinging up there? Come down, you come down right now, and then they just spit.</p> <p>"See. That's what I mean. No wonder everybody gave up. Just stopped looking out when little Efren chipped his buck tooth on a parking meter and didn't even stop Refugia from getting her head stuck between two slats in the back gate and nobody looked up not once the day Angel Vargas learned to fly and</p>	

dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an 'Oh.' "	
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Sample Follow-Up Questions

1. A simile is a comparison using "like" or "as." Find a simile in "There Was an Old Woman..." and say why you think the author used it.
2. Imagine you are Mr. Benny talking to your wife at dinner after Angel Vargas "learned to fly." What might you say? Explain, using examples from the story.
3. Does anyone in the story remind you of someone you know? Use examples from the story to explain.