

Example Lesson Plan: Activating Background Knowledge

For Middle School Students

Background knowledge describes the information that students know about a topic prior to reading a related text. Background knowledge is a vital part of reading comprehension, as it allows students to understand texts more deeply and to make connections between a text and the real world. As different students enter the classroom with a varying range of background knowledge on different subjects, it is often up to educators to provide just enough background information that readers are equipped to successfully comprehend and engage with a new text. For more information on building background knowledge, see our blog post [“The Journey Is the Treasure: Providing Just the Right Amount of Background Knowledge to Support Reading Comprehension”](#) by Deborah K. Reed, Ph.D. and Jennifer Knight, Ph.D.

This example lesson plan models teaching students strategies for using graphic organizers to activate background knowledge and make connections while reading.

The text of this lesson plan is intended to serve as an example of what a lesson on this topic might look like. It is not intended to be read to students verbatim. Rather, teachers should feel empowered to use the example plan as an outline for building their own unique lesson. That said, scripted explanations of terms, concepts, and activities can be used as desired.

Activating Background Knowledge Middle School Example Lesson

Materials: lesson plan; teacher and student copies of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s [“I Have A Dream”](#) speech; [t-chart graphic organizers](#) for teacher and students; paper and pencils

Optional materials: whiteboard, markers, and projector

Additional Resource: For more on activating background knowledge, read the Iowa Reading Research Center blog post [“The Journey Is the Treasure: Providing Just the Right Amount of Background Knowledge to Support Reading Comprehension”](#) by Jen Knight, Ph.D., and Deborah K. Reed, Ph.D.

Set Goal and Purpose

We are going to learn a strategy that will help us understand what we read. Good readers use what they already know about a topic to help them make sense of new information. Today we are going to practice doing that before we read and while we are reading a book. We are going to activate our background knowledge or think about what we already know about a topic. This will help us make connections and understand what we are reading.

Review

First, let’s review what it means to make connections.

My turn: *A connection is a link between the text you are reading and something you already know or have experienced. It could be from your personal life, another text, or something else you learned.*

Say it with me: *A connection is a link between the text you are reading and something you already know or have experienced.*

Now it’s your turn: *[Child’s name], what is a connection?*

If correct: *Excellent, you know what a connection is.*

If incorrect: *Stop. My turn. A connection is a link between the text you are reading and something you already know or have experienced. It could be personal, another text, or something else. Say it with me. What is a connection?*

New Instruction

Great, we know what connections are. Today we are going to use connections to help us activate our background knowledge. This is something good readers do before they start reading and while they read.

My turn: Activating your background knowledge means you think about what you already know about the topic that will be in the book you are going to read.

Say it with me: Activating your background knowledge means you think about what you already know about the topic that will be in the book you are going to read.

Now it's your turn: What does it mean to activate your background knowledge?

If we can activate our background knowledge and make connections from what we know about a topic in a book, we will have an idea what to expect and a way to help ourselves better understand the passage. Why is it helpful to activate our background knowledge before and while we read?

If correct: Excellent! You know what it means to activate your background knowledge.

If incorrect: Stop. My turn. Activating your background knowledge means you think about what you already know about the topic that will be in the book you are going to read. Say it with me. What does it mean to activate your background knowledge?

General response: It helps us know what to expect in the book so we can understand it better

Demonstrate Using Strategy

Great! Now that we know what it means to activate our background knowledge, we are ready to try it out during reading time. Today we are going to read a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Before we start reading, we need to activate our background knowledge. Take a minute and think about what you know about Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights movement, and racial equality in the United States. Don't say anything yet; just make a list in your head of what you know. What was like in the U.S. like when Dr. King was alive? Why was he fighting for equality?

My turn: I've thought about what I know about Dr. King and civil rights. I've started making a list in my mind about the marches and non-violent protests. I can recall pictures I have seen and what I have read about racial integration during the 1960s.

[There is no specific error correction here because students are creating a list of ideas in their minds. If they have difficulty generating ideas or have no prior knowledge of Dr. King and the civil rights movement, show a two- to three-minute video about his life or the civil rights era. Do **not** show video of the speech they will read.]

<p>Your turn: Without saying or writing anything, make a list in your mind of a few things you know about Dr. King, the civil rights movement, and racial equality in the U.S. Where did events take place? What was the reaction of different people? Why was change needed?</p>	
<p>Now we are ready to write down our ideas on our graphic organizer. There are two sections on the graphic organizer. Let's label the first section "Dr. King" and the second section "Equality." The second label will cover things about the civil rights movement and racial equality. We are going to record some of the ideas that we listed in our minds to get us ready to learn more about what Dr. King said and did to improve equality in the U.S. This will help us as we read today because we can check what we have written to make sure it is correct. If we learn any new things about Dr. King or equality, we can change or add to our graphic organizer.</p> <p>[Use a projector to share your graphic organizer and hand out student copies.]</p> <p>My turn: Under "Dr. King," I'm going to write that he was a minister. Under "Equality," I'm going to write that there are not separate facilities for different races.</p> <p>Let's try this together: You can write my ideas on your graphic organizer if that helps you, but you probably thought of other things you could list about Dr. King or equality. Tell me something you already know about our topics.</p> <p>[Ask students to offer at least one more idea for each side of the organizer.]</p> <p>Your turn: Keep adding all of the ideas you listed in your head. You need at least three things on each side that you already know about Dr. King and equality. What did Dr. King do? Were other people working with Dr. King? What were some major events in the struggle for racial equality? [Monitor students' graphic organizers to make sure they have accurate information written down.]</p>	<p>Possible responses for "Dr. King" include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference • led peaceful protests against segregation in the South • assassinated by someone opposed to his beliefs <p>Possible responses for "Equality" include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • everyone has the same options or chances • equal treatment under the law • voting rights <p>[There is no specific error correction here because students are sharing their ideas about Dr. King, the civil rights movement, and racial equality. Monitor students as they complete their graphic organizers. If they make incorrect suggestions, such as confusing the time period of Dr. King with another struggle for equality, ask clarifying questions. For example, maybe a student is thinking of the women's rights movement or the treatment of immigrants in the U.S. It will be important to help the student distinguish this.]</p>

Practice

Now that we have some ideas down about Dr. King and equality on our graphic organizer, we are ready to start reading the speech "I Have A Dream" delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Washington, D.C., as part of a large march. As you read, make sure you are adding new ideas that you are learning about Dr. King and equality to your graphic organizer. Let's start reading. [As you read, stop periodically and ask students if what they knew about Dr. King or equality has changed. Fill in new information from the text on the graphic organizers. Continue to monitor students' graphic organizers to make sure they have accurate information written down.]

References

King, M.L. (1963). I have a dream... [Speech transcript]. <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

I Have a Dream

Speech by Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr.	Equality
<i>A minister</i>	<i>Not separate facilities for different races</i>

I Have a Dream

Speech by Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr.	Equality

Blank T-Chart
