

Utilizing Thematic Collections and Informational Text Sets To Boost Student Reading Achievement



“The importance of reading as an avenue to improved reading has been stressed by theorists, researchers, and practitioners alike, no matter what their perspectives. There are few ideas more widely accepted than that reading is learned through reading.”

—National Reading Panel

“Simply put, students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become independent, proficient readers.”

—Dr. Richard Allington

“Quantity of independent reading is linked to growth in reading vocabulary and reading proficiency.”

—Dr. Richard Anderson

Research study after research study demonstrates that student reading ability directly translates into academic success. Students are expected to gain the foundational building blocks of reading—phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—in the early grades. Educators look closely at fourth grade reading proficiency, knowing that such ability is necessary for students to learn and achieve not only in language arts classes, but also in social studies and science classes offered during the middle and high school years.

For students to remain reading proficient throughout their K–12 education experience, they need ongoing and continuous access to a wide and diverse collection of books. Schools across the nation are now discovering that the traditional classroom textbook is not sufficient to provide a high-quality collection of readings to motivate all students and improve student achievement. As a result, schools are now supplementing textbooks (or replacing them all together) with thematic collections and informational text sets.

As an effective instructional tool, these thematic collections use fiction, nonfiction, and poetry selections to develop student skills in

- reading comprehension
- literary response and analysis
- vocabulary
- writing
- listening and speaking

By focusing on these skills, along with student reading levels and content appropriateness, effective text sets are designed to serve students across the K–12 education continuum. Integrated throughout the school day, text sets have been proven to be particularly useful in helping boost student reading in both English/language arts and other academic courses such as social studies. These classroom libraries are particularly useful in empowering low-reading-level middle and high school learners to build reading ability while pursuing topics and books that are of particular interest to the individual reader.

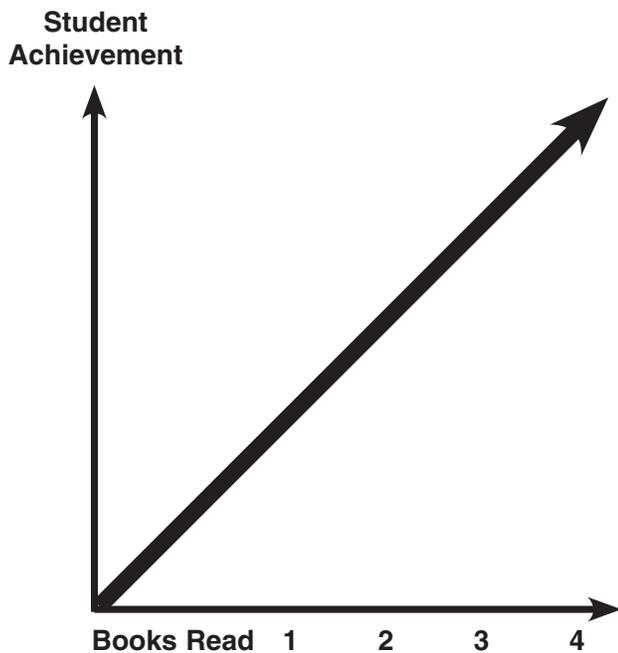
Based on a compendium of research conducted over the past few decades, effective thematic collections and text sets are built on three guiding principles. High-quality classroom collections are designed to

- boost student reading skills
- empower diverse learners with interesting and appropriate books
- improve student reading and learning motivation

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Boosting Student Reading Skills



“Reading volume predicted reading comprehension in third-, fifth-, eighth- and tenth-grade students, even when pupil factors such as past reading achievement, prior knowledge and motivation were controlled statistically.”

—Dr. John T. Guthrie and Dr. Alan Wigfield

“Not only does having access to trade books motivate students to read, it also increases their reading achievement.”

—Dr. John T. Guthrie et al

Decades worth of academic research demonstrate the impact of text sets and independent reading on student achievement. Thematic collections and informational text sets provide all students

- access to a diversity of books
- additional independent reading time
- reading content relevant and interesting to all students
- books that are both skill and age appropriate for the classroom
- additional opportunities to develop vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension skills

In 2000, researchers Caldwell and Gaine found “reading good books improves students’ reading performance.” Such findings have been similarly cited by the National Reading Panel and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). With a greater focus in recent years on student assessments, **thematic collections and informational text sets have never been more important to student achievement than they are today.**

Why? Virtually all state reading proficiency exams are “cold” reads, meaning students are provided with an unfamiliar text and are asked to read it independently and answer questions to gauge their understanding of the text. This skill is the foundation that thematic collections are built on, allowing students to select and read their own books independently, and then demonstrate comprehension of the selected book. As a result, **students with access to a diversity of books—such as those provided through thematic collections and informational text sets—are better prepared** for the process by which their reading proficiency is measured. That preparedness directly impacts student achievement and student success.

Designed to either supplement or replace traditional classroom textbooks, research-based text sets provide schools the opportunity to boost student achievement. This is most effectively done when such text sets include the following characteristics:

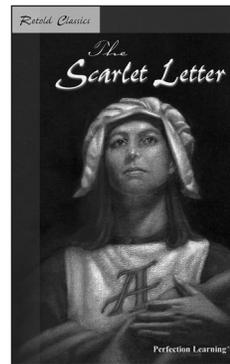
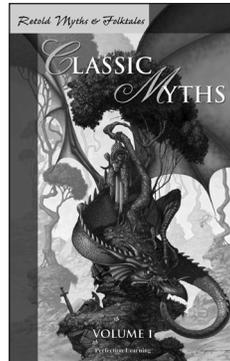
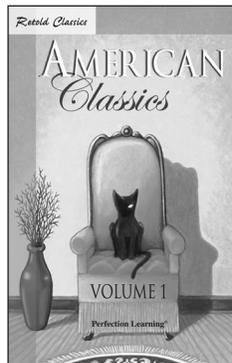
- a questioning strategy that helps students learn to use higher-order thinking skills
- a wide and deep selection of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by well-known authors
- an array of relevant themes that easily blend into a current language arts or literature program
- specific vocabulary, writing, and discussion activities
- proven teacher supports centered around essential information to plan a unit, model and teach critical thinking skills, build student vocabulary, and develop writing skills

Organizations such as Perfection Learning have applied these principles to develop middle and high school text sets proven to improve student reading skills. Through its *Literature & Thought* series, Perfection Learning provides grades 6–12 classrooms with a highly-focused, thematic literature program that teaches students to be critical readers and thinkers.

By focusing on the reading skills students need to demonstrate on state assessments, *Literature & Thought* empowers teachers and students.

- Each anthology begins with an essential question and a set of related cluster questions. Students explore these questions through reading relevant and challenging fiction and nonfiction selections.
- As students read, they analyze, interpret, compare, and synthesize information from the selections, always focusing on the essential question. In addition, they identify, practice, and apply specific critical thinking skills throughout their reading.
- Students react to the cluster questions through writing prompts, group discussions, and independent projects as they read.
- At the end of the reading experience, students respond to the essential question based on what they have learned.

Empowering Diverse Learners



“Because trade books offer a wide variety of reading levels, interest, content areas, and cultures, they are one of the most powerful tools for meeting the needs of a variety of students with special learning.”

—Dr. Kay E. Vandergrift

Through classroom collections, educators are empowered to provide their students with a diversity of reading content, ensuring that all students have access to books that are both skill and age appropriate. Equally important, text sets offer students interesting and relevant books. As a result, **text sets serve as a research-based solution to meet the challenges of virtually all students in the classroom, including low-level readers, English language learners, special education, and even gifted and talented students.**

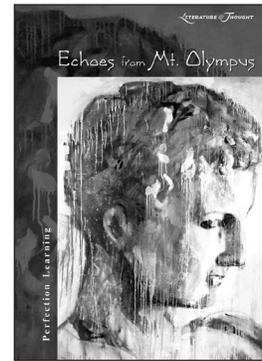
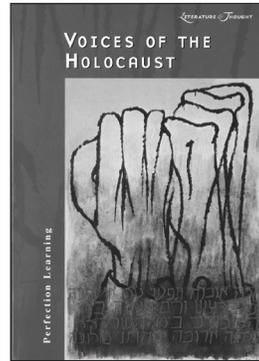
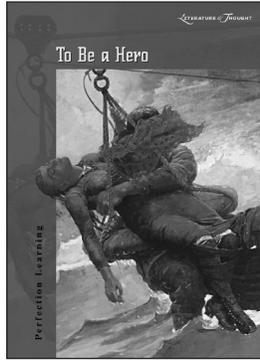
English/language arts teachers have found thematic collections and informational text sets particularly useful in moving beyond the traditional classroom anthology, providing students literature that directly relates to student interests, culture, and community. Through collections that teach students about myths and folktales, for instance, ELA educators can help students

- read the entire work
- experience the voice and style of the original work
- access classic literature at an appropriate reading skill level
- gain exposure to the oral tradition of storytelling
- learn about the cultural groups represented in traditional folktales and stories

Such an approach has been adopted by Perfection Learning, an industry leader whose *Retold Program* provides middle and high school language arts classes with a rich portfolio of myth and folktale collections. Utilized by urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the nation, *Retold* boosts relevancy and interest for a diversity of readers, providing collections adapted specifically for students in grades 6–12, and written at a sixth grade reading level.

Similarly, Perfection Learning’s *Literature & Thought* theme libraries provide educators a comprehensive Historic Events and Eras collection designed to supplement both ELA and social studies courses. Carefully-selected titles in areas such as the Civil War and Westward Expansion provide relevant reading opportunities to supplement classroom instruction, allowing students to read about events that are of specific interest.

Improving Student Motivation



“Analyses of the research suggest that the amount children read contributes significantly to the development of other aspects of their verbal intelligence, such as vocabulary knowledge, spelling and verbal fluency. Reading volume also builds students’ background knowledge, an important contributor to reading comprehension.”

—Dr. Anne Cunningham and Dr. Keith Stanovich

“From the interest perspective, students’ preferences must be addressed in order to capture their attention and engagement and, thus, to foster conditions for learning.”

—Dr. Jo Worthy et al.

According to the National Endowment for the Arts, as students grow older, they read less. NEA’s 2007 “To Read or Not to Read” study found that less than one-third of 13 year olds are daily readers (down 14 percent from a 1987 study). The percentage of non-reading 17 year olds has doubled over the same time period. All of this at a time when the data shows that less approximately 40 percent of fourth graders are unable to read at grade level.

The correlation between the two sets of data is clear. Struggling readers need more opportunities to read in order to develop their skill sets, but they lack the motivation to pursue additional reading. To many of these students, reading is a chore. Students and teachers alike cite relevance, subject matter, and lack of reading confidence as roadblocks to boosting student motivation.

Thematic collections and informational text sets are specifically designed to overcome these roadblocks and boost reading interest and confidence for all readers. According to a large-scale study conducted by Dr. Susan Neuman, placing thematic collections and informational text sets in the classrooms of economically disadvantaged students was one of the first steps to boosting student reading achievement, evidenced by improved student reading skills in a matter of months.

Effectively-developed collections are designed to address student reading levels, age appropriateness, and interesting content. Such collections provide a diversity of titles, allowing even the most unmotivated of students to find a title or a subject that interests them. This self-selection has been proven to directly boost student reading motivation, empowering all students—regardless of reading level—to effectively use independent reading time.

Through Perfection Learning’s *Literature & Thought* collections, for instance, schools are provided with 22 available titles. Such a range of titles provides teachers with high-quality books that relate to lessons throughout the school year, while providing students the choices they seek.

“We must build critically needed reading environments for all our learners—book by book.”

—Dr. Stephen Krashen

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