

Subjects Matter

Every Teacher's Guide to Content-Area Reading

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CHAPTER ONE

Reading for Real

A McDonald's restaurant in downtown Chicago, Wednesday, lunchtime. On the street out front, a sidewalk preacher testifies to passersby with the aid of a portable P.A. system. Inside, the store is filled with shoppers, tourists, well-pierced students from the Art Institute, and traders from the nearby commodities exchange wearing their distinctive yellow-numbered vests. Customers contentedly chew their Big Macs and chicken nuggets. The air is thick with conversation and the smell of french fries.

The door swings open and two teenage boys walk in. They're big kids, about 17 or 18 years old, one Hispanic and one African American. They weave through the tables and up to the crowded window where people are ordering. Michael is carrying a stack of blue flyers, which he quietly places on the counter, so customers can easily pick one up while waiting for their food.

The flyer is headlined "What's in the Meat We Love?" and depicts the headless carcass of a steer, hanging upside down, just as it would in a slaughterhouse. Below is a grinning likeness of Ronald McDonald, swinging a butcher knife high over his head, with a caption underneath asking "Who profits from the killing floor?" The text warns readers of the prevalence of food-borne illnesses, especially those carried by the beef served in fast-food restaurants. As its source, the flyer cites the book *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by Eric Schlosser.

Customers waiting for their burgers gradually become aware of the handout, and a few idly pick one up. Reactions differ: some look disgusted, some annoyed, some amused. There is a growing audience now, as the boys begin walking from table to table. Antonio approaches a middle-aged white woman who's eating alone, reading a book. He asks if she is familiar with *e coli* poisoning. Has she heard about the notorious cases of fast food restaurants sickening their customers? "No," she patiently replies, looking down at her lunch, spread out on its yellow paper wrapping. Does she know that every day in America, 200 people are sickened—and 14 die—from bacteria commonly found in hamburger meat? From his back pocket, Antonio pulls out his copy

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of *Fast Food Nation* and points out some key statistics on page 195. She leans down to read the page, heavily over-lined in yellow, with cryptic annotations in the margins.

“See,” he concludes, gesturing at her lunch, “it tastes good and it’s quick to get, but it could be a manure sandwich, is what I’m saying.”

The woman nods, but seems a little stunned by all this passionate attention to her health. Or perhaps she’s put off by Antonio’s barnyard analogies.

Meanwhile, the 30-ish manager has been alerted to the disturbance by his counter crew. He scoops up the leftover flyers and walks up behind Antonio, tapping him on the shoulder.

“You can’t bother my customers like this,” he says firmly, “and you can’t hand these out either.” He calmly dumps the sheaf of blue flyers into a nearby wastebasket, right on top of the ketchup-soaked napkins and empty soda cups. Antonio and Michael look at each other, silently deciding whether to raise the ante.

Discretion rules, and they shrug as the manager points to the way out. They go, but not quickly and not quietly. All the way to the door, as the manager herds him along, Antonio half-playfully hollers health warnings over his shoulder:

“Listen up, listen up people!”

“Coming soon—the new truth about McDonald’s!”

“You gotta know what your food contains!”

“You might be having an *e coli* sandwich for lunch up in here!”

And finally, at the door, he gives the manager one for the road: “You gonna put me out because I’m tellin’ the truth?”



Michael and Antonio are students at Best Practice, a small public high school we helped to design and open in Chicago in 1996. At BPHS, we believe in reading—real reading—in all content areas, across the curriculum. The boys’ truth-squad assault on the McDonald’s at State and Jackson happened after they had spent a month reading about the fast food industry and how it affects our health, agriculture, values, laws, economy, and society. The unit was designed by a cross-disciplinary team of senior teachers representing science, social studies, English, and special education, with help from faculty in math, technology, art, and ourselves, the university partners.

Like other lessons at Best Practice High School, the fast food project was built on the assumption that teenagers should not be “getting ready” to be life-long learners—but should be acting like them **right now**. The school’s faculty

believe that feeding students a steady stream of textbook chapters is not a healthy reading diet—or a grownup one. So they supplement kids' intake with generous servings of newspapers, magazines, websites, and nonfiction trade books—the same range of texts that thoughtful, curious members of the adult community around them might read.

In the fast food unit, the kids read widely and dug deep. First, each student received the paperback edition of *Fast Food Nation*. Reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, but ranging even more widely, Schlosser's book is an old-fashioned muckraking exposé which lambastes every link in the chain of industrialized agriculture, up to its ultimate crudescence in fast food restaurants. We used some grant funds to buy every student their own copy for two reasons: first, we simply wanted them to own the book, since our kids generally don't own a lot of books; and second, because we planned to use some reading strategies that required kids to actively mark up, overline, and annotate the text.

But the book was just the start. For scientific background (and also because it is mandated in the citywide curriculum), the kids read the biology textbook's chapters on nutrition, digestion, viruses, and bacteria. Each student also read several magazine articles, including a *Fortune* magazine piece about lawsuits brought (and dismissed) against fast food restaurants for causing obesity, one from *Science* magazine debunking the "fat myth" and arguing that fat may actually be good for you, and another from *Harper's* about how fast food companies intentionally target poor urban neighborhoods. Students also chose from six articles about animal cruelty downloaded from the PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) website, sparking lively discussion about whether, for example, harvesting eggs or milking cows is really animal abuse. The more the kids and teachers dug into the topic, the more relevant sources seemed to pop up—in books, articles, and websites everywhere. One juicy favorite was the American Restaurant Association's stinging rebuttal called "The Truth About Fast Food Nation," a Web-based press release quoting the book's few negative reviews and pounding home the point that Schlosser wanted to deny people "the food they love."

The faculty didn't just assign all these readings and hope that kids would comprehend them. All year long, they had been teaching specific, practical **thinking strategies** that help kids to dig meaning out of a document in any content field. As a result, these kids knew how to:

- Visualize ideas and situations in the text
- Make connections
- Ask questions

Draw inferences
Evaluate and determine what's important
Notice and analyze the author's craft
Recall ideas
Self-monitor while reading

Further, the teachers embodied these thinking strategies in concrete tools that helped students understand and remember what they read. In this unit, for example, the teachers made use of text coding tools, book clubs, dialogue journals, bookmarks, post-it notes, text annotation, admit slips, and exit slips, among others. With these kinds of scaffolding, students were able to enter some very challenging texts, make sense of them, monitor their thinking, bring ideas back to discussions, and apply what they had read to their own lives.

And, of course, there were lots of classroom and community-based activities that grew out of and extended the readings. Kids made anthropological observations at fast food joints, interviewed restaurant workers, kept personal diet journals, searched the Web for nutrition information, and joined in two elaborate simulations, one about life as a teenage employee in a fast food restaurant and another that dramatized the unionization of a slaughterhouse. The outcome of all this reading and experience was 80 kids with a lot of questions, concerns, and opinions. And that made things pretty easy when it came to the culminating experience—finding a public audience with whom to share ideas and concerns about the fast food industry.

Not all the kids chose “in-your-face” actions like Michael and Antonio. Jaisy, who was upset by the working conditions of immigrant employees in modern meat-packing plants, very diplomatically wrote her Congressman:

Dear Representative Davis,

My class and I are reading Fast Food Nation. This book addresses a lot of issues, however, the one I find to be most disturbing is the conditions of slaughterhouses, especially for the cleanup crews. That portion of the book was really hard for me to read. The descriptions were way too vivid for my liking! I am writing you because I want to know what the average person can do to increase the chances of workers having good working conditions in slaughterhouses. . . . I plan to make every effort to convince you to take action to better the conditions in the slaughterhouses. If you haven't read Fast Food Nation, I strongly urge you to; that will be the strongest influence over you.

Sincerely,

Jaisy R. Geans