

How Good Are Your School's Language Arts Textbooks? NCTE Offers Guidelines for Evaluation

Language arts textbooks for elementary schools are currently the focus of much debate among educators. To help teachers, school boards, and curriculum planners bring more critical attention to bear on textbooks, the National Council of Teachers of English has issued Guidelines for Judging and Selecting Elementary Language Arts Textbooks. It lists eight criteria these language arts materials should meet if they are to meet the language learning needs of children.

Books are widely used to teach grammar, usage, and punctuation. But they have also been widely criticized for limiting students' opportunities to learn about language by reading, writing, speaking, and listening, said former NCTE president Sheila Fitzgerald of Michigan State University, who chaired the NCTE committee developing the new guidelines. "School districts spend a lot of money on textbooks, so teachers feel an obligation to use them. Yet many authorities in language arts recognize that children develop their language abilities not through grammar skills using isolated sentences, but through reading and listening to stories that interest them, and through talking and writing about subjects connected to their lives. Through these activities, children learn and practice skills in meaningful contexts."

If a textbook consumes the time available for language arts, the teacher has too little time to spend creating real language situations. Many of today's textbooks merely have students read about listening and speaking. They concentrate on getting children ready to write but leave little chance to use writing to express their thoughts and interests.

"Our purpose is not to attack textbooks," Fitzgerald insisted. "We recognize they are and will be with us, and we want them to be the best they can possibly be. We want teachers and selection committees to make some hard judgments to the materials they examine."

In pamphlet form, Guidelines for Judging and Selecting Elementary Language Arts Textbooks offers eight criteria, derived from current theory and research on language learning, which such textbooks should meet and explains the basis for each. Guidelines are as follows:

Language arts textbooks should center on children's own language.

2. Language arts textbooks should emphasize activities that focus on social uses of language.
3. Language arts textbooks should reflect the integrated nature of listening, speaking, writing, and reading.
4. Language arts textbooks should recognize broad patterns of developmental language growth.
5. Language arts textbooks should help teachers assess students' use of language.
6. Language arts textbooks should stimulate children's and teachers' thinking.
7. Language arts textbooks should be equity balanced.
8. Language arts textbooks should reflect the centrality of listening, speaking, writing, and reading for learning in all subject areas.

Free single copies of "Guidelines for Judging and Selecting Elementary Language Arts Textbooks" are available from the Membership Service Representative, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. Send a business-sized, stamped, self-addressed envelope with your request.