

APPROACHES
TO LITERATURE
THROUGH
SUBJECT

PAULA KAY MONTGOMERY

Approaches to Literature through Subject

The Oryx Reading
Motivation Series

by Paula Kay Montgomery

ORYX PRESS
1993

The rare Arabian Oryx is believed to have inspired the myth of the unicorn. This desert antelope became virtually extinct in the early 1960s. At that time several groups of international conservationists arranged to have 9 animals sent to the Phoenix Zoo to be the nucleus of a captive breeding herd. Today the Oryx population is nearly 800, and over 400 have been returned to reserves in the Middle East.

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Published by The Oryx Press
4041 North Central at Indian School Road
Phoenix, Arizona 85012-3397

Published simultaneously in Canada
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Printed and Bound in the United States of America

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Science—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48, 1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Montgomery, Paula Kay.

Approaches to literature through subject / Paula Kay
Montgomery.

p. cm. —(The Oryx reading motivation series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-89774-774-7

1. Literature—Study and teaching (Elementary) 2. Literature-
-Study and teaching (Secondary) 3. Children—Books and reading.

I. Title. II. Series

LB1575.M66 1993

820'.71'2—dc20

93-967

CIP



Series Statement

What makes an individual want to turn the page and read more? That question has puzzled many in the field of education. The answer is not always forthcoming. And, the answer is not the same for every individual. However, that is the question that prompted this series of books about getting students to read. The Oryx Reading Motivation Series focuses on the materials and approaches that seem to be prominent for grouping literature. The prime purpose for the investigation is to identify promising methods, techniques, and strategies that might motivate students or get students in grades five through nine to turn the page.

Each book in the series examines a particular approach to grouping literature: thematic, subject, genre, literary form, chronological, author, and comprehension skills. In each case, the literature is grouped for presentation in a different way to meet a specific purpose. For example, the comprehension-skills approach groups literature useful for teaching the same skill. That skill might be comparison: literature of all types that might be grouped together to exemplify the pattern of comparison. Literary form examines the structure of the literary work, such as the diary, novel, short story, and so forth, with an emphasis on the elements of those structures, including plot, characterization, etc. An author approach provides a study of the works of one author that might allow students to examine style, growth, and changes a writer has undergone. Works written over a given period of time or at the same time might be grouped for a chronological approach. Such an approach allows the reader to examine interrelationships between writers and their society. The interest of students in a particular subject makes the subject approach useful for grouping different literary formats and forms about the same subject. The genre approach capitalizes on particular student interests or skills, such as problem solving or

history, and combines this with works of similar literary form and subject patterns. And, finally, the thematic approach groups materials around a common theme that may be investigated in depth by students.

Each book in the series is written for the classroom teacher and library media specialist. This partnership offers rich possibilities for combining the knowledge of teaching and literary content with the multiple resources of two professions that have long studied literature and searched for ways to make students want to turn the pages. Although the approaches, methods, strategies, and techniques may be used at any level, the materials have been selected for use by students in grades five through nine and are so noted in interest and reading levels. The titles may, in fact, be appropriate for older readers as well. Grades five through nine represent a period of development during which many students become lost and begin to lose faith in reading as a way of finding answers and gaining satisfaction.


Each book in the series is meant to provide one method for beginning an exploration with students. One would not expect every approach to work with every individual. Nor would one expect every teacher and library media specialist to enjoy or feel comfortable with every approach. Each approach is an option.

Finally, the sources and materials suggested in the series were selected given a number of criteria:

- General literary quality and accuracy;
- Availability;
- Readability and interest levels;
- Ethnic, racial, and sex-role representation;
- Availability of media support materials; and
- Recommendations in selected journals and guides.

It is the hope of the author that the suggested books and materials will serve as stimuli for grouping literature in attractive packages. Perhaps each package will tempt some reader to open the book and turn the page.

—Paula Kay Montgomery



Preface

How can we move from the testing and evaluation mode in reading and education to a more intellectually relaxed and stimulating way of modeling the rewards of learning? Perhaps if, as adults, we moved toward more subtle approaches that include doing more reading ourselves, we might instill that value in those younger. This notion is part of what motivated the present look at a subject approach to reading. Most adults who read for pleasure, as opposed to work, select materials related to their own interests. Isn't this equally important for young people? Isn't it important to let young people know that learning about what interests them is part of a quality of life that would be wished for all? Among all of the many subject area pursuits, there is room for students to find those they prefer.

With so many topics available that they might find interesting, how can it be possible that students might be turned off by reading? A subject approach can allow students the freedom to read without feeling pressure or fearing they will be penalized if a particular topic does not appeal. This book represents a concerted effort to look at available literature in combination with students' interests. By structuring opportunities, teachers may help students become aware of the many nurturing subjects they can read about. Students may then move from an awareness level to a position in which they develop their own abilities to select what will become their own preferences. In the process of practicing reading, they may become better readers and more involved citizens.

There are other approaches available; for example, a classroom teacher or library media specialist might try thematic, genre, author, chronological, literary forms and elements, or comprehension skills approaches as well. It would be a mistake to try only the subject approach with students. However, the advantage of this

approach is that it emphasizes self-selection in many different areas, including practice reading in quantity, and the freedom to be in control of reading choices. In a well-rounded reading program, the subject approach would be used in connection with all of the others. It would also be hoped that parents and other reading volunteers might be called upon to help in this endeavor.

Several terms are used throughout this book that should be clarified for the reader. In the professional education literature, the terms *approaches*, *methods*, *strategies*, and *techniques* often are used interchangeably. Rather than further confusing the reader, for the purposes of this book, *approach* is defined as a categorization of the literature itself. Of the seven approaches to literature outlined previously (thematic, genre, author, chronological, literary forms and elements, comprehension skills, and subject), the subject approach offers one of the most enjoyable for motivating reading in quantity. Perhaps it is the satisfaction students feel when they find an interesting subject with which they are familiar or comfortable. It is a common experience for many library media specialists to have students request more materials about monsters, dinosaurs, motorcycles, stars, drawing, baseball, and so forth, because their imagination or their curiosity has been snared by encounters with these topics.

The term *method*, in the context of motivating literature appreciation, differs from the term *approach* in that it concentrates on the behavior of the individual using the literature. In the classroom situation, methods are most often seen as ways that teachers introduce information or instruction. However, methods are actually those behaviors of students and teachers that are generalizable for structured learning. They are represented by the general term *method* and refer to the application of principles, practices, and procedures that can be transferred, often to more than one area of interest or study. Methods discussed in this book, such as lecture, discussion, and brainstorming, are identified in the master chart presented in Chapter 1.

Techniques are more specific ways of presenting instructional material or conducting instructional activities. For example, there may be generalized ways of leading a discussion, but there are more detailed techniques for setting up and developing a panel discussion. *Techniques*, then, refers to the specific skills embedded within a method, such as pacing.

Finally, a *strategy* is the plan or the means by which a method might be used. The strategy includes the many considerations necessary for successful use of a method. For example, how students might be grouped, the arrangement of the learning area for using the method, or the use of specific behaviors to elicit response might be included in the strategy for using a method to motivate reading. A discussion technique might be used with a plan to provide plenty of “wait time” during certain types of discussions involving open-ended questions. This might be part of a strategy designed to help students think about the material they read.

The hope in a subject approach is that emphasis on variety and quantity will help some students to “click” with a particular topic and devour anything and everything they can get their hands on related to that topic. Therefore, the lists presented in the chapters of this volume encompass television programs, films, videotapes, books, articles, and so on. These lists may include topics generally considered outside the realm of educational materials, but they are suggested because, in fact, students are learning outside the “educational setting.” Movies and television are at least as powerful motivators as what students see and hear in classrooms. Many films and television programs form the basis of conversations among peers at this age.

Therefore, the book is organized around the subject approach. The first two chapters offer some advice on investigating the approach and locating materials in certain subject areas. The following four chapters are devoted to subjects classified traditionally as people, places, things, and events. In each of these chapters, sample topics are investigated, providing sample methods and strategies and lists of materials or resources related to those topics and methods. These samples do not represent all possible methods, of course; they are presented only as examples.

Before I invite readers to browse these chapters, some special thanks are in order. First, thanks go to the professionals in libraries and library media centers in Maryland. Under the leadership of Maurice Travillian, assistant state superintendent for library development and services, Maryland’s libraries have amassed accessible holdings connected through the Maryland Interlibrary Loan Agency. Titles and materials were located using the computerized tool of the network, Microcat. Also, a special thank you goes to H. Thomas Walker, Joseph Duckworth, Ron Martin, and Debbie

Chambers of the Howard County Public Schools, for their help in obtaining professional resources and hints about other resources.

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Approaches to Literature through Subject

1

What Is a Subject Approach?

Samuel Johnson stated, "Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it." The subject approach to motivating students to love and share literature incorporates both of these kinds of knowledge. A student may know or have an interest in a topic as well as want to find out more about that topic. The subject is the center of the approach, with reading a means to obtaining more knowledge about it.

A major assumption of many educators and teachers is that interests are primary sources of motivation. Cooper and Burger (1980) noted in their studies of causes of students' and teachers' academic success that interest in the subject matter is a major category of causes for success. Students who believe their efforts influence their achievements are more likely to learn than are students who believe that learning depends on teachers or other people (Wang and Stiles, 1976). This suggests that students who select their own subjects of interest may feel more control over learning, or that the learning locus of control is with the students rather than the teachers or adults.

An approach that takes advantage of the interests of students inherently will motivate students to read more. Such an approach would require the classroom teacher to balance students' pursuits of their present interests while stimulating new ones. The subject approach is one in which the interest of the student is of primary importance. A student identifies his or her interests and explores those areas of interest in order to satiate

curiosity. In many instances, it may be the quantity of materials rather than their depth that interests a student. For example, the student interested in racing cars may not require all materials to be completely different. He or she may just want more and more about races. In other instances the student may want more in-depth information and knowledge about a topic, such as how a given car was developed. In that case, the student looks for more detailed, accurate, and specific information. The purpose for reading and the literary form of materials are different, but the main topic stays the same. Such an approach allows for both breadth and depth in reading.

The subject approach is slightly different from the thematic approach because a student might or might not delve into the deeper meaning of the subject. Nor are students necessarily required to make comparisons, synthesize, analyze, judge, or find the "true meaning of life." The subject is of value in and of itself. It is legitimate to read as much as possible about dinosaurs, stars, automobiles, UFOs, or whatever. Thus, it is likely that the subject approach may cause less pressure for the student than the thematic approach. There is an ease to the reading and, one hopes, a sense of plain fun.

This is not to say that critical thinking skills are not required. Although the student may not be *required* to think critically, often the amount of information absorbed about a subject combined with the motivation to find out more will cause the student to develop his or her own questions, which require higher-order thinking skills. The student capitalizes on those innate learning abilities and begins to practice control over what he or she remembers or chooses to synthesize, analyze, and so forth.

The subject approach provides practice, with the emphasis on quantity and variety of literary forms. The subject approach differs from the genre approach in that the subject alone rather than the literary pattern combined with the subject is dominant.

Given the many ages and levels of students, obviously their interests vary. Also, students' sex, maturity, and intelligence levels affect their interests (Gray, 1955). One might not expect female sixth graders to have the same interests as male eighth graders. Equally, young adults mature at different rates, and the varying levels of maturity within groups of young people result in many different interests among them. When maturity level is combined

with level of intelligence, one might expect differences not only in interests, but also in the level of interest in any given subject.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF A SUBJECT APPROACH

A subject approach is cognitively and affectively advantageous for introducing adolescents to the multitude of possible reading topics. By providing students with global overviews of subject areas and opportunities to discover how much there is to assimilate when looking into any particular subject, teachers can help students to begin to appreciate the enormity of our knowledge base. Students' realization of the vast number of subjects that can be read about and explored reinforces their understanding of how comparatively short is any one human being's investigation time on earth.

Appreciation

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages to working with a subject approach is the actual practice time invested in reading. When a student finds a subject of interest, he or she has a built-in motivation to pursue that interest without thinking much about the reading act. Reading is the means to the end. It is almost recreational, in the sense that it provides a form of mental play. Reading can be considered a normal solution to finding out about a topic.

Such practice and exploration of subjects allows for self-selection. Students begin to exercise some needed control over what they want to know. They may feel the compulsion or drive to use reading as a method for creative problem solving. The satisfaction to be found in answering a question or learning something one never knew before should not be undervalued.

Other positive attitudes may be developed from a subject approach. Given the opportunity for self-selection of topics and materials, students incorporate the value of reading books and other materials and the information that may be gained from them. The relationship of reading to other media formats also is reinforced; it may no longer be enough to see a videotape about a topic. There are so many options for finding out that the student's "mental bag