

Textbook guide - Advantages and disadvantages

As you visit classrooms, you probably notice that most, if not all, of those classrooms, use a standard textbook series. The reasons for this are many, depending on the design and focus of the curriculum, the mandates of the administration, and/or the level of expertise on the part of classroom teachers.

Textbooks provide you with several advantages in the classroom:

- Textbooks are especially helpful for beginning teachers. The material to be covered and the design of each lesson are carefully spelt out in detail.
- Textbooks provide organized units of work. A textbook gives you all the plans and lessons you need to cover a topic in some detail.
- A textbook series provides you with a balanced, chronological presentation of information.
- Textbooks are a detailed sequence of teaching procedures that tell you what to do and when to do it. There are no surprises everything is carefully spelt out.
- Textbooks provide administrators and teachers with a complete program. The series is typically based on the latest research and teaching strategies.
- Good textbooks are excellent teaching aids. They're a resource for both teachers and students.

Use textbooks wisely

A textbook is only as good as the teacher who uses it. And it's important to remember that a textbook is just one tool, perhaps a very important tool, in your teaching arsenal. Sometimes, teachers over-rely on textbooks and don't consider other aids or other materials for the classroom. Some teachers reject a textbook approach to learning because the textbook is outdated or insufficiently covers a topic or subject area.

As a teacher, you'll need to make many decisions, and one of those is how you want to use the textbook. As good as they may appear on the surface, textbooks do have some limitations. The following table lists some of the most common weaknesses of textbooks, along with ways of overcoming those difficulties.

Weakness	Student difficulty	Ways of overcoming the problem
The textbook is designed as a sole source of information.	Students only see one perspective on a concept or issue.	Provide students with lots of information sources such as trade books, CD-ROMS, websites, encyclopedias, etc.
The textbook is old or outdated.	Information shared with students is not current or relevant.	Use textbook sparingly or supplement with other materials.
Textbook questions tend to be low level or fact-based.	Students assume that learning is simply a collection of facts and figures.	Ask higher-level questions and provide creative thinking and problem-solving activities.
The textbook doesn't take students' backgrounds knowledge into account.	A teacher does not tailor lessons to the specific attributes and interests of students.	Discover what students know about a topic prior to teaching. Design the lesson based on that knowledge.
The reading level of the textbook is too difficult.	Students cannot read or understand important concepts.	Use lots of supplemental materials such as library books, Internet, CD-ROMs, etc.
The textbook has all the answers to all the questions.	Students tend to see learning as an accumulation of correct answers.	Involve students in problem-solving activities, higher-level thinking questions, and extending activities.

Think of a textbook as a tool. Think of textbooks as tools they are only as good as the person using them. A hammer in the hands of a competent carpenter can be used to create a great cathedral or an exquisite piece of furniture. In the hands of someone else, the result may be a rundown shack or a rickety bench. How you decide to use textbooks will depend on many factors.

We would like to add a personal note of caution here do not make the mistake of basing your entire classroom curriculum on a single textbook. The textbook needs to be used judiciously. A carpenter, for example, doesn't use only a hammer to build a magnificent oak chest. She may use a plane, chisel, saw sander, or any number of tools to create the masterpiece she wishes to build. A great classroom program, just like a great piece of furniture, needs many tools in its construction.

When thinking about how you want to use textbooks, consider the following:

- Use the textbook as a resource for students, but not the only resource.
- Use a textbook as a guide, not a mandate, for instruction.
- Be free to modify, change, eliminate, or add to the material in the textbook.
- Supplement the textbook with lots of outside readings.
- Supplement teacher information in the textbook with teacher resource books; attendance at local, regional, or national conferences; articles in professional periodicals; and conversations with experienced teachers.

Standards

One of the major movements in schools everywhere is standards-based education. Generally speaking, a standard is a description of what students should know and be able to do.

An expert's opinion

A mathematics standard for students in grades 6 through 8 is to “compare and order fractions, decimals, and percents efficiently and find their approximate locations on a number line.” An example of a writing standard for students in grade 11 is to “write a

persuasive piece that includes a clearly stated position or opinion along with convincing, elaborated and properly cited evidence.”

By definition, educational standards let everyone students, teachers, parents, administrators know what students are expected to learn. Educational standards have been developed by a number of professional organizations in addition to those created by state departments of education and local school districts. Standards are designed to answer four questions:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?
- How well do we want them to know/do those things?
- How will we know if students know and can do those things?
- How can we redesign schooling to ensure that we get the results we want?

Let's take a look at each of these questions in a little more detail.

Learning to earn

Standards make clear to everyone, including students, the expectations for learning. They are designed to help students be responsible for their own learning, become a good thinker and problem-solver, and know what quality work looks like. They are based on three primary concepts:

- Content standards. These describe what students should know or be able to do in 10 content areas: language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, fine arts, health, physical education, world languages, career and life skills, and educational technology.
- Benchmarks. These make clear what students should know and be able to do at grade levels 3, 4 to 5, 6 to 8, and 9 to 12.
- Performance standards. These answer the questions, “What does good performance look like?” and “How good is good enough?”

Higher and higher

Standards-based education engages students, not only in the learning process but also in knowing what is expected of them. Students know, before a lesson begins, what they should do to achieve competence. They also know that you, as their teacher, will do whatever it takes to help them achieve the standards of a lesson or unit.

Accountability counts

In a standards-based school, everyone is accountable. Students are responsible for their own learning, parents know what is expected of their children, teachers provide a positive learning environment, administrators provide the necessary leadership, and community members work to support the learning. Everybody has a role, and everybody is responsible for learning to happen.

Teach them, and they will come

Standards-based teaching is different from some of the more traditional forms of teaching with which you may be familiar. It is a sequential and developmental process in which academic standards become the focus, or pillars, around which all instruction revolves. Here is how you would develop a standards-based lesson:

Jabberwocky

Standards-based teaching is when teachers use activities and lessons to ensure that students master a predetermined set of requirements or standards.

1. Define the content standards and the accompanying benchmarks.
2. Write the learning objectives.
3. Develop the appropriate assessments.
4. Establish the performance standards or levels.
5. Design the lesson.
6. Plan the instructional strategies and/or activities.
7. Implement the instruction (teach).
8. Assess students.
9. Evaluate and refine the teaching/learning process.

What is the difference?

There are two major differences between standards-based teaching and traditional forms of teaching. In standards-based education ...

- Teachers identify key knowledge and skills first and use them to focus all instructional and assessment activities.
- Teachers determine performance standards and share these with students before instruction begins.

It is important to note that standards-based reforms have met with both success and controversy. Many school districts across the United States report that standards-based efforts have resulted in higher overall achievement test results. Another benefit is that community members are more engaged in the affairs of the school.

There are also some negative views on standards-based education. Teachers have concerns because of the sheer number of standards in place within a single content area or at a single grade level. Some teachers feel as though they have to “teach for the test” so their students will have higher test scores. There are also concerns about the lack of emphasis on problem-solving skills and critical-thinking abilities. Some communities are concerned that their urban schools are not being treated fairly and that the higher standards are causing higher failure rates.

Standards, whether those from professional organizations, your state, or your school district, are another form of instructional resource for your classroom. They can guide you in developing appropriate lessons and assist you in helping your students achieve academically. However, just as with any other resource, they are teaching tools. Just as you would select one set of tools to build a log cabin, so, too, would you select another set of tools to build a condominium. The same is true of the teaching tools at your disposal.