



PUTTING PERITEXT ON READERS' RADAR

Overlooked Text Elements Offer Pathways to Comprehension

There's no doubt that generations of young readers have been admonished by teachers, librarians, parents, and other adults: *Don't judge a book by its cover.* Time and time and time again.

But according to Florida State University's Melissa Gross and Don Latham and their former colleague Shelbie Witte, now of Oklahoma State University (and currently co-editor of *Voices from the Middle*), it turns out that there are plenty of reasons to judge a book not only by its cover, but also by other text elements that are often overlooked.

Think not only book cover design, but tables of contents, glossaries, dedications, source notes, afterwords, and more. These are all considered *peritext*—the elements of a work surrounding the main content that help to facilitate understanding between the work and its readers.

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The PLF tool breaks down elements into six categories, providing examples and critical questions for educators and students. Part of the framework is excerpted below:

PERITEXT TYPE	EXAMPLES OF PERITEXT	CONSIDER
Production	Publisher, copyright, ISBN	What uses are there for these elements?
Promotional	Advertisements, endorsements	How do these elements affect your view of the work?
Navigational	Table of contents, index	How is the information organized?
Intratextual	Acknowledgements, preface	Do these make clear the origin or purpose of the work?
Supplemental	Pictures, captions, glossary	How do these elements help the author make his or her point?
Documentary	Bibliography, source notes, suggested reading	Is it clear where the information came from?

A more complete version of the PLF tool is available as an appendix to Chapter 1, pp. 14-15.

Assessing peritext offers countless pathways to deeper understanding of a text's purpose, quality, usefulness, and how to best navigate both fiction and nonfiction, among other avenues for critique. In 2017, Gross and Latham created The Peritextual Literacy Framework (PLF), a tool to help educators and students do just that.

"I think the word *peritext* isn't commonly used in teacher preparation—it's a fairly new concept," Witte says.

Providing a whole new set of vocabulary for analysis empowers students, both Gross and Latham say.

"These young people really enjoyed learning about this and one thing they loved was the language. It still just cracks me up how they love to say things like, 'Oh, I'm talking about the navigational peritext now,'" Gross says. "The students immediately understood the ideas."

"I think having that vocabulary is really important because we often talk to students about how it's really

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But as we all browse through books, looking at covers, we're noticing peritexts and starting to ask questions in our heads, she adds. The PLF allows for "recognition of what the term is" and gives language to some of the processes that we use—or should use—when analyzing and choosing texts, she adds.

important to evaluate your sources, but what do we really mean by that?" Latham adds.

The possibilities for analysis are seemingly endless. Gross, Latham, and Witte recently partnered to edit *Literacy Engagement Through Peritextual Analysis*, published in 2019 by ALA Editions in conjunction with

NCTE. The book contains wide-ranging examples for educators to apply the PLF in contexts from primary school to higher education.

Teachers and students might examine young adult promotional elements through the lens of critical literacy, for instance. Based on advertisements and endorsements, for example, for whom is this text written? Whose perspective is left out?

Or how might an author's note influence the reading of a text? *Dreamland Burning*, by Jennifer Latham, is a murder mystery set in Tulsa, Oklahoma during both the present day and 1921. Latham's author's note appears at the end of the book, and it highlights stark realities of the Tulsa Race Riot, inviting readers to continue learning about the historical context of the event.

And with nonfiction texts—which often have more peritextual components than fiction, both online and off—the PLF is particularly relevant in this era of alternative facts, fake news, and competing versions of reality. Educators can help students identify the peritextual elements of online news sources. By discussing the relevance and validity of hyperlinks and accompanying images and video, for instance, students and teachers can determine the veracity and potential bias of news sources.

But applying PLF isn't just limited to traditional texts, the editors say. "We think it really will be an aid to teaching critical thinking and media literacy because it's not only looking at books, it's film, it's websites. It's [applicable] with any kind of media you can think of," Gross says.

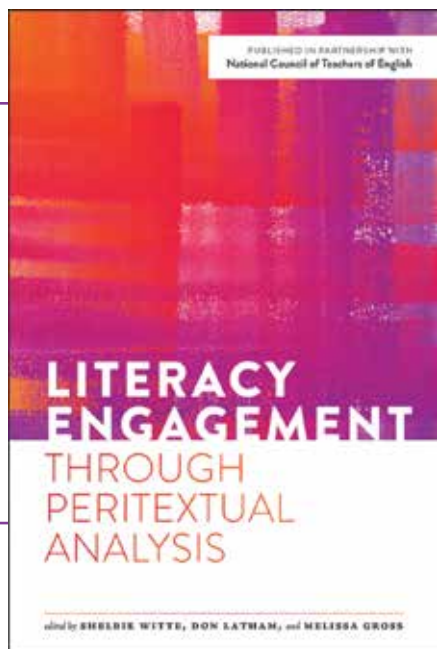
The editors all agree that each PLF category is ripe for critical thinking and analysis, even the categories often times skimmed over by readers.

"I think that the things that we typically don't pay attention to have been the most interesting because you can really mine them for clues or additional information that we may not have considered when reading the text initially," Witte says.

For educators who hope to get started with the PLF, the editors all note that there's no need to dramatically change classroom practice.

"It's very hard to find a piece of text that has all of the parts available, so introducing it over time is a good idea," Witte says, "And starting with what one is already teaching seems to be a good approach because the teacher probably intimately knows that text and won't feel as intimidated in introducing a new concept or framework."

PAUL BARNWELL IS A VETERAN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER NOW WORKING AS A FREELANCE WRITER. HE HAS WRITTEN FOR *EDUCATION WEEK* AND *THE ATLANTIC*. HE CAN BE REACHED AT PSBARNWELL@GMAIL.COM.



Learn more about *Literacy Engagement through Peritextual Analysis*. Read a sample chapter or order the book—at <http://bit.ly/NCTE-peritext>

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