The word core has special meaning for educators. Core suggests what is essential, what is at the heart of teaching and learning. Whether designing curriculum units or laying out instructional plans, teachers make decisions about what to emphasize and what must sit by the wayside. How do we make cogent and meaningful choices about what is core for our learners? How can we have confidence in our instructional sequences so that our students forge a pathway to the core?

These questions take on even more significance with the advent of the Common Core State Standards, as schools and districts dive into unwrapping, scaffolding, and integrating these standards directly into their practice. While we seek guidance on how to address these new standards, we simultaneously wish to adhere to what we know works—the finest of proven teaching methodology.

In your hands, you hold a genuine edu-toolkit loaded with clear, specific strategies to help you and your colleagues address key Common Core-related challenges at all grade levels. Based on years of field experience and action research, Harvey Silver, Thomas Dewing, and Matthew Perini have shaped an eminently practical book focused on six core practices that students need to cultivate to become independent learners. The six strategies clearly address the CCSS, but they do more than that. Given that these Core Six impact lifelong learning, they directly support the mission of the architects of the Common Core to provide the basis for college and career readiness. The Core Six are
1. Reading for Meaning.
2. Compare & Contrast.
3. Inductive Learning.
4. Circle of Knowledge.
5. Write to Learn.
6. Vocabulary’s CODE.

With these Core Six, the authors have taken the candid and refreshing point of view that you have already steeped yourself in the Common Core State Standards and are fully aware of the importance of this national initiative. Rather than providing a primer on the Common Core, the authors show how six essential strategies can provide a central focus for faculties, a common ground for schoolwide efforts to improve performance and increase student engagement.

Each core strategy is unpacked and revealed through examples for classroom practice with suggested phases, questions, and activities to assist any teacher in any subject. The book is loaded with charts, activity excerpts, images, and text features that make it easy for all teachers to implement the strategies. At the same time, creative teachers will be able to tweak and build on these numerous examples for adaptation in the classroom.

Most important, these Core Six are for our learners. The only person who can improve his or her performance is the individual student. We cannot do it for our students. Our task is to coach them, direct them, and support them so that they know how to assess and improve their own work. To do this well, students need strategies. I believe that these Core Six can easily be translated from teaching strategies to learning strategies for today’s students—learning strategies that can be directly fused with 21st century tools and contexts. With the Core Six under their belts, students will be better equipped to tackle the challenges of the future.

Silver, Dewing, and Perini have a spectacular track record of giving educators throughout the world approaches, strategies, and ways of thinking to reach learners and collaborate effectively. With The Core Six, the authors have generated another rich contribution to the field, helping us to make astute and critical choices about what should be core in our classrooms.
Introducing the Core Six

Let’s begin with what this book is not. This book is not a guide to the Common Core State Standards. In it, you will not find the story of how the Common Core emerged, a detailed description of what the standards cover, or an explanation of how the standards are organized. For this information, we recommend visiting the Common Core website (www.corestandards.org) or, for a deeper look, reading John Kendall’s (2011) *Understanding Common Core State Standards*.

*The Core Six* is for educators who already have a strong grasp on the Common Core and are eager to do something about it. In this book, we offer a collection of research-based strategies that will help teachers and students respond to the demands of the Common Core, particularly the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, which are a “shared responsibility within the school” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center], Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a, p. 4) and affect every subject area and grade level.

Regular use of the strategies in this book will help students become better at

- Reading and understanding rigorous texts.
- Evaluating evidence and using it to support positions.
- Conducting comparative analyses.
- Finding important patterns and structures built into content.
- Mastering academic vocabulary and integrating it into speech and writing.
• Understanding and contributing to meaningful discussions about content.
• Using writing to advance learning and clarify thinking.
• Writing comfortably in the key Common Core text types: arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives.

Figure I.1 describes each of the six strategies offered in this book and highlights some of the Common Core skills that each strategy builds.

Making Research Work
Thanks to more than 40 years of research on classroom practice, we know better than ever what works. We know which strategies are likely to increase engagement and raise student achievement, and we know which are not worthy of instructional time. Every strategy in this book is backed by a strong research base.

But research is only part of the story. There is a real gap between research and practice, and any strategy can fall flat in the classroom. Take Compare & Contrast, a strategy that extensive research has found correlates with sizeable gains in student achievement. Ask a few hundred teachers about Compare & Contrast, however, and you will likely get a different take. We actually did ask a few hundred teachers about their experiences with Compare & Contrast and learned why a strategy with such a rich research base often fails and how to make classroom comparisons powerful and effective. Here’s the gist: if you want to get results, you need to treat Compare & Contrast as a learning strategy rather than an end-of-learning assessment; make sure students have clear criteria for comparing items; and guide students to deeper thinking in phases.

When teachers make moves like these, student learning takes off. The promise of the research is realized. That’s why, during the last 35 years, we have worked with thousands of teachers who have helped us test and refine strategies so that they are not only research-based but also classroom-proven. This holds true for every strategy in this book: all of them have been refined over time with the intent of making research come to life in the classroom.
Reading for Meaning helps students develop the skills that proficient readers use to make sense of rigorous texts. The strategy helps build these Common Core skills:
- Managing text complexity.
- Evaluating and using evidence.
- Developing the core skills of reading (e.g., finding main ideas, making inferences, and analyzing characters and content).

Compare & Contrast teaches students to conduct a thorough comparative analysis. The strategy helps build these Common Core skills:
- Conducting comparative analyses of academic content (e.g., renewable versus nonrenewable energy).
- Conducting comparative readings of two or more texts.
- Integrating information from multiple sources.

Inductive Learning helps students find patterns and structures built into content through an inductive process (analyzing specifics to form generalizations). The strategy helps build these Common Core skills:
- Finding patterns and making logical inferences.
- Supporting thinking with evidence.
- Mastering academic vocabulary.

Circle of Knowledge is a strategic framework for planning and conducting classroom discussions that engage all students in deeper thinking and thoughtful communication. The strategy helps build these Common Core skills:
- Speaking, listening, and presenting.
- Integrating and evaluating information.
- Collaborating with peers.

Write to Learn helps teachers integrate writing into daily instruction and develop students’ writing skills in the key text types associated with college and career readiness. The strategy helps build these Common Core skills:
- Developing higher-order thinking through writing.
- Writing in the key Common Core text types: arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives.
- Writing for a wide range of tasks, audiences, and purposes.

Vocabulary’s CODE is a strategic approach to vocabulary instruction that improves students’ ability to retain and use crucial vocabulary terms. The strategy helps build these Common Core skills:
- Mastering academic vocabulary.
- Improving literacy across all strands (reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language).
- Building background knowledge as a foundation for success in school, college, and career.
Six Tips for Inspired Instruction

Even a strategy that has been refined through classroom use is not a magic bullet; it won’t increase student engagement or learning on its own. What’s more, if you treat a strategy as a list of steps to follow, then the learning you get back will be similarly prosaic. To ensure that your work in strategic instruction is inspired rather than tired, we offer the following six tips.

1. **Capture students’ interest.** Both common sense and research tell us that when students are engaged in what they are learning, their achievement increases (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Marzano, 2007). Whenever you begin a lesson, you will experience better results if you take the time to design a good “hook.” A hook is a question or an activity that provokes student thinking and activates prior knowledge related to the content to come. A well-designed hook will establish a strong sense of intrigue or curiosity at the lesson’s outset. To design an attention-grabbing hook, try using

   - **Mystery.** On paper, the U.S. Civil War was a mismatch. So why did it last for more than four years? Generate some ideas.

   - **Controversy.** Look at these famous masterpieces of modern art. Some use only basic shapes or a single color. Is this really art? What is art?

   - **Personal experiences.** Have you ever felt so guilty about something that you thought others could tell you did something wrong just by looking at you? How can guilt be like a stain?

   - **“What if” questions.** What if there were no plants? How might the world be different?

Hooks can also focus on the specific strategy you’ll be using. For example, if you’re about to introduce the Compare & Contrast strategy, you might ask students to think about a time they had to compare two or more things to make a good decision.

After students have collected and shared their ideas, bridge the discussion to the lesson: “Good! You have come up with some great examples of how we use comparison in our everyday lives. Now, let’s learn how we can make our comparative thinking even stronger using the Compare & Contrast strategy.”
2. Explain the strategy’s purpose and students’ roles in the strategy. Students don’t come to school with a strategy gene. Strategic thinking does not usually come naturally. Whenever you use a strategy, take the time to tell students its name and explain how it works and why it is important. Most essential, teach students the specific steps in the strategy and explain what you expect them to do at each step. Research (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996) shows that explicitly teaching the steps and making expectations clear enable students to use strategies independently. One highly effective tool for teaching strategies directly to students is a classroom poster. Figure I.2 shows a classroom poster delineating the steps of the Reading for Meaning strategy (Silver, Morris, & Klein, 2010).

![Reading for Meaning Classroom Poster](image-url)
3. **Teach the thinking embedded in the strategy.** For example, collecting and evaluating evidence is one crucial thinking skill embedded in several Core Six strategies. To teach this skill, discuss the concept of evidence with students. What is evidence? When and how is it used? What’s the difference between an argument that uses evidence and one that doesn’t? Model what good evidence sounds like using simple claims like “Taking care of a pet is harder than taking care of a plant.” Whenever students make a claim during a lesson, use it as an opportunity to explore the evidence behind the claim.

4. **Use discussion and questioning techniques to extend student thinking.** To move students from superficial to deep understanding, extend student thinking through questioning and discussion. A simple but powerful technique for improving classroom questioning and discussion is Q-SPACE (Strong, Hanson, & Silver, 1998), a strategy described fully on page 42.

5. **Ask students to synthesize and transfer their learning.** Challenge students to pull together what they have learned and transfer that learning to a new context. For example, after completing a Circle of Knowledge discussion in which 5th grade students debate a local issue (should their small town allow a big-box store to build on a vacant lot?), you might present three more debatable issues for students to discuss in teams, using what they have learned about civil debate and compromise to resolve each issue.

6. **Leave time for reflection.** When using a strategy, students need time to think back not only on the content but also on the process. For example, you might say, “Let’s think back on our use of 3 x 3 Writing Frames [a tool that’s part of the Write to Learn strategy]. How did the 3 x 3 Writing Frame help you plan your essay? What might you do differently next time you use a 3 x 3 Writing Frame?”